



## H-Gram 011: Guadalcanal 1942

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*The heavy cruiser Aoba, the Japan flagship during the Battle for Cape Esperance in October 1942, is shown derelict in Kure harbor in this immediate post-war watercolor by Standish Backus ("The Emperor's Cruiser Aoba," watercolor on paper, 1945) (88-186-AD).*

## 75th Anniversary of World War II

### 1. Guadalcanal: Victory at Cape Esperance (Sort of), 11/12 October 1942

"Bakayaro!" ("dumb ass") were the last words uttered by Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto as he was mortally wounded by American shells crashing into the bridge of his flagship, the heavy cruiser Aoba, just before midnight on 11/12 October 1942. Goto believed to the end that he was being fired upon by another group of Japanese ships. So convinced was he that no American force would dare to challenge the Japanese at night after the debacle of Savo Island (9 August 1942) that he refused to believe his own lookouts, who reported American cruisers crossing his "T." His ship kept flashing her recognition lights and the signal "I am Aoba," guns

trained fore and aft, loaded with shore bombardment ammunition, until it was too late. Goto had some reason for confidence. At the moment that Rear Admiral Norman Scott's cruiser-destroyer force (TF-64) opened fire, ten Allied cruisers had engaged the Japanese navy in surface combat since the start of the war and nine of them were on the bottom of the ocean, with no loss to the Japanese. In the Battle of Cape Esperance, off the northwest coast of Guadalcanal, TF-64 would put one Japanese heavy cruiser (Furutaka) and a destroyer (Fubuki) on the bottom of Ironbottom Sound, for the loss of one destroyer (USS Duncan—DD-485—48 crewmen lost) lost to both enemy and friendly fire during a heroic solo torpedo attack. The light cruiser USS Boise (CL-47) was put out of action by a hit in her 6-inch

magazine, and only through the discipline and heroism of the crew (107 of whom died) and a lot of luck, did the ship not suffer a catastrophic explosion.

The battle went wrong for the U.S. forces from the moment of Scott's first command, but it went worse for the Japanese. Scott's battle plan was a model of the KISS ("keep it simple, stupid") principle; nine ships in a single column, and his first order was a column turn to port to reverse course. Every ship in the formation received and understood the order except his own flagship, the heavy cruiser USS San Francisco (CA-38), fourth in line, which executed a simultaneous turn, throwing the rest of the formation into confusion. Fortunately, the ships behind San Francisco followed the lead of the flagship instead of the admiral's order. As a result, the four U.S. cruisers and two trailing destroyers crossed the Japanese "T." Had the formation executed the order correctly, the inadvertent result would have been that the Japanese could have crossed the American "T," which probably wouldn't have done the Japanese much good given Goto's mindset. Unfortunately, the three U.S. destroyers in the lead steamed off into the darkness, and Scott spent most of the rest of the battle trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to get his ships to cease fire because he was not certain they were not firing on their own destroyers (and sometimes they were: Both USS Farenholt (DD-491)—and Duncan were hit by friendly fire, Duncan seriously). Because of uncertainty regarding the location of his own lead destroyers, Scott withheld giving the order to open fire until the opposing forces were within such close range that the junior radar officer on USS Helena (CL-50) commented, "What are we going to do, board them?"

The Japanese, however, were pummeled by numerous U.S. shells, many from what the Japanese subsequently would call the "machine-gun cruisers," Boise and Helena (CL-50), each with 15 6-inch/47-caliber guns in five triple turrets, which could put out a prodigious rate of fire (and the near-continuous gun flashes also made for good targets). The Aoba was severely mauled and nearly sunk. The second heavy cruiser in the Japanese line, the Furutaka, seeing the flagship in severe distress, valiantly maneuvered to interpose herself between Aoba and the American cruisers, and for her valor was hit over

90 times and sunk. The third (and last) Japanese heavy cruiser, the Kinugasa, took a less gallant course and turned opposite to the American course and disappeared into the darkness, whereupon she succeeded in scoring several effective hits on several U.S. ships, including the one that nearly sank the Boise, before she beat a retreat with one destroyer and the mangled Aoba.

At a cost of 163 lives and one destroyer, Scott had inflicted some degree of revenge for the defeat at Savo Island (Aoba, Furutaka, and Kinugasa had comprised three of the five Japanese heavy cruisers at Savo). The results of the battle came as an enormous shock to the Japanese, which was followed by much recrimination; Goto was probably lucky he was dead. The fact that the Japanese were so uncharacteristically taken completely by surprise caused the U.S. to learn some bad lessons about Japanese night-fighting capability, as well as the proper use of radar and tactical formations (particularly torpedo tactics), which would cost the U.S. in later battles. As one U.S. officer at the battle would later comment, Cape Esperance was a three-way battle in which chance was the major victor. Nevertheless, the victory was a huge morale booster for U.S. naval forces in the vicinity of Guadalcanal and for the Marines ashore, which would be short-lived, however. (For more on the Battle of Cape Esperance, please see attachment H-011-1.)

## **2. Guadalcanal: All Hell's Eve, 13/14 October 1942**

The good news from the Battle of Cape Esperance was that, although he didn't know it, Rear Admiral Scott had prevented the Japanese "bombardment group" from bombarding Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. The bad news was that the "reinforcement group," which was Scott's real intended target, had already gone past Cape Esperance and during the night successfully off-loaded hundreds of troops and the first Japanese heavy artillery to reach the island, and then successfully escaped. The even worse news was the Japanese didn't know how to quit and, on the night of 13/14 October, two Japanese battleships (Kongo and Haruna) arrived off Guadalcanal, completely by

surprise, and fired almost 1,000 14-inch shells into Henderson Field in the most devastating battleship bombardment experienced by any ground troops up to that point in history. Opposed by only four U.S. PT-boats (ineffectively) and concentrating their fire on the airfield, the battleships killed 41 Marines (many aviation and aircraft maintenance personnel) and at one point even blew Major General Alexander Vandegrift, USMC, to the ground inside the command bunker. More than half the aircraft at Henderson Field were destroyed and many of the rest were damaged to various degrees, and most stores of aviation fuel were destroyed. Although 24 of 42 Wildcats were flyable, only 7 of 39 SBD dive bombers and none of the six TBF torpedo bombers were airworthy.

The psychological shock of "The Bombardment" was profound, and is the real origin of the "Navy abandoning the Marines at Guadalcanal" narrative. The next day—as Brigadier General Roy Geiger, USMC, commander of U.S. aviation forces at Guadalcanal, was noted to exclaim, "I don't think we have a g\*\*damn navy!"—the destroyer USS Meredith (DD-434) and fleet tug Vireo (AT-144) were caught alone by 38 aircraft from the Japanese carrier Zuikaku while attempting to tow a barge with critical aviation fuel to Guadalcanal. Meredith knocked down three Japanese aircraft, but was hit by 14 bombs and at least three torpedoes, sinking in less than ten minutes; 237 U.S. Sailors from Meredith and Vireo lost their lives as they drifted three days in shark-infested waters before the approximately 100 survivors were rescued.

Although there is little Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, Commander of U.S. Forces in the South Pacific Area, could have done to stop the battleship bombardment, it effectively served as the last straw for both U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Chester Nimitz, and CNO Admiral Ernest J. King. Both were profoundly dissatisfied by the overall lack of aggressive U.S. Navy action in challenging the frequent runs by the Japanese "Tokyo Express," which were getting ever more troops and supplies (although not nearly enough of both) onto Guadalcanal, representing a growing threat to the U.S. Marines on the island. So concerned was Nimitz with the tenuous situation on the island that he had

personally visited Ghormley at South Pacific headquarters aboard the flagship USS Argonne (AG-31) in Noumea, French New Caledonia, on 28 September. Nimitz then flew to Guadalcanal (where Ghormley had yet to go), met with Vandegrift, saw the appalling conditions on the island, and then went back to see Ghormley with a long list of deficiencies that needed to be corrected. (Nimitz' aircraft got lost on its way to Guadalcanal and then nearly crashed on takeoff from Henderson Field with Nimitz aboard for both events.) It was in response to pressure from Nimitz that caused Ghormley to issue the order on 5 October for Scott's cruiser-destroyer task group to engage the next "Tokyo Express" run, which resulted in the Battle of Cape Esperance on 11–12 October.

Nimitz was increasingly concerned with Ghormley's pessimistic view of the situation (which was not necessarily unwarranted), his erratic "bipolar" leadership, and apparent fatigue (which wasn't helped by abscessed teeth). Nimitz agonized over what to do because Ghormley was a highly regarded flag officer (and had been Nimitz's choice for the job) and was a close friend. On 16 October, Nimitz sent a message to CNO King that he was considering relieving Ghormley and asked King's advice. King's one word reply: "Affirmative." As a result, Vice Admiral William F. "Bill" Halsey ("Bull" was a press invention that he never liked), recovered from his bout of debilitating skin rash, arrived at Noumea on 18 October expecting to take over command of the carrier task force (TF-61,) was instead handed a sealed envelope that ordered him to relieve Ghormley (also a close friend of Halsey) as Commander of the South Pacific Area. "Jesus Christ and General Jackson! This is the hottest potato they ever handed me," was Halsey's reaction. Halsey's arrival was electrifying, and his aggressive fighting spirit was exactly what was needed at that time, although the cost of one of his first orders to the fleet, "Strike. Repeat. Strike," would prove extremely high. (For more on the sacrifice of USS Meredith, please see attachment H-011-2.)

### **3. Guadalcanal: Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands (Japanese Pyrrhic Victory), 26 October 1942**

*The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands on 26 October, northeast of Guadalcanal, was the fourth carrier versus carrier battle of the war, and was a victory for the Japanese at an extremely high cost in planes and aviators. In exchange for sinking the carrier USS Hornet (CV-8) and seriously damaging USS Enterprise (CV-6), the Japanese lost more aircrew than at Coral Sea, Midway, and Eastern Solomons combined, many to the new Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft guns on the repaired/refitted Enterprise and the new battleship USS South Dakota (BB-57). Along with dual-purpose 5-inch/38-caliber guns appearing on more and more U.S. surface ships, the Bofors finally gave the Navy a reliable weapon that could knock down Japanese planes before weapons' release. By the time that Santa Cruz ended, over half the Japanese carrier pilots who had participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor were dead; more would follow in the next months in the skies over Guadalcanal and the central Solomon Islands. As at the Coral Sea, the Japanese fleet carrier Shokaku was seriously damaged and Zuikaku was not, although about half of each carrier's air group was lost. The losses were so severe, particularly amongst senior squadron commanders and flight leaders, that with the exception of the medium carrier Junyo, the Japanese carrier force did not choose to engage again for almost two more years, until June 1944.*

*Despite the great victory at Midway, the U.S. carriers and carrier aircraft were outnumbered by the Japanese at Santa Cruz, thanks to Japanese submarines putting USS Saratoga (CV-3) out of action on 31 August and sinking USS Wasp (CV-7) on 15 September. U.S. naval intelligence and code breakers provided good warning that a major Japanese push to retake Guadalcanal was coming, with a pretty accurate assessment of Japanese forces committed, but were having difficulty pinning down the date (because the Japanese naval offensive was planned to be timed with a major Japanese army attack to capture Guadalcanal's Henderson Field, which kept getting delayed by the army). Vice Admiral Halsey, the new Commander of U.S. Forces in the South Pacific Area, solved this ambiguous*

*intelligence warning timeline by ordering his carriers not to wait for the Japanese to show up, but to go forth, find the Japanese and attack them first.*

*Enterprise (with her damage from the Battle of the Eastern Solomons repaired in the nick of time) and Hornet, with 136 operational aircraft embarked, under the command of Rear Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, faced off against four Japanese carriers, with 199 operational aircraft embarked, still under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, flying his flag on Shokaku. The four Japanese carriers were the fleet carriers Shokaku and Zuikaku, the medium carrier Junyo (44 operational aircraft,) and the light carrier Zuiho (26 operational aircraft). It would have been five carriers, but Junyo's sister, the Hiyo, suffered an engine-room fire before the battle and had to withdraw.*

*Both sides recognized Santa Cruz as a "must-win" battle, and there were numerous acts of extreme valor on both sides. Wave after wave of Japanese aircraft threw themselves into greatly improved U.S. shipboard anti-aircraft defenses, yet never wavered despite high losses while executing probably the most effective coordinated dive and torpedo bomber attack of the entire war, with the victim being Hornet. Several damaged Japanese planes chose to crash into U.S. ships, including Hornet. Both sides internalized the primary lesson of Midway, which was to strike first. As at Eastern Solomons, several pairs of U.S. scout aircraft attempted to immediately attack the Japanese carrier force upon first sighting, and two such U.S. scout planes scored a bomb hit on the light carrier Zuiho, which put her out of action at the very start of the battle. Nevertheless, the Japanese got a slight jump, launching their major strike first, with an impressively executed integrated multi-carrier 62-plane strike package, right out of their doctrinal playbook.*

*The first Japanese and American strikes crossed paths en route to each other's carriers, and multiple U.S. TBF Avenger torpedo bombers were downed by Zeros escorting the Japanese strike, but which then left the Japanese strike aircraft more vulnerable to U.S. CAP fighters. But once again, as at Eastern Solomons, problems executing radar-directed CAP resulted in U.S. fighters being too low to engage*

many of the Japanese dive bombers. As the Hornet was being hit by three bombs, two damaged planes and two torpedoes, U.S. dive bombers hit the Shokaku at least four times. However, improvements in Japanese damage control prevented the same kind of catastrophe as at Midway, and Shokaku made good her escape under her own power.

During the attack on Hornet, extreme valor was displayed by the destroyer USS Smith (DD-378), which was hit forward by a damaged Japanese Kate torpedo bomber that deliberately crashed into the ship. As Smith's crew fought the fire, the Kate's torpedo detonated, and the fire went out of control, forcing the bridge to be abandoned. Despite 57 dead and 13 wounded and a raging fire, Smith continued to put up an anti-aircraft barrage from her aft weapons. From the aft control station, Smith's skipper Lieutenant Commander Hunter Wood Jr., ordered Smith into the wake of the battleship South Dakota, which doused the flames, and Smith continued to fight, an inspiration to all who observed it. Wood would be awarded a Navy Cross. On the downside, a damaged U.S. TBF Avenger ditched alongside the destroyer USS Porter (DD-356), jarring the TBF's torpedo loose, which then ran circular and hit Porter, causing such serious damage that the destroyer had to be scuttled, making her the third ship of the war to be lost as a result of a U.S. aerial torpedo.

Multiple attempts to take the damaged Hornet under tow were thwarted by successive waves of Japanese aircraft that hit the carrier with yet more bombs and a torpedo. A Japanese bomb hit the number 1 turret on South Dakota, with minimal damage, although it nearly killed the commanding officer, Captain Thomas Gatch, when a fragment nicked his jugular (the popular skipper felt it was "undignified" for a battleship CO to "duck" during an attack). Another Japanese bomb hit the anti-aircraft cruiser USS San Juan (CL-54), causing damage to her stern. As night and Japanese surface forces approached, Kinkaid gave the order to scuttle Hornet. Yet, after suffering three Japanese torpedo hits, seven bomb hits, two crashed Japanese aircraft, nine U.S. torpedo hits, and over 300 rounds from U.S. destroyer 5-inch guns, Hornet refused to sink, and the abandoned carrier was left behind. After nightfall, Japanese

destroyers approached, close enough to read the "8" on her hull, and after briefly considering trying to tow her themselves, the Japanese put four Type 93 Long Lance torpedoes into the valiant ship, which did the job.

The U.S. lost 263 crewmen and airmen at Santa Cruz, with 118 (including 15 Marines) on Hornet, 44 on Enterprise, and 57 on Smith; 314 were wounded. This price would pale in comparison to the surface battles to follow. With the loss of Hornet and damage to the Enterprise, the U.S. had no operational fleet carriers left in the Pacific, giving the Japanese a window of opportunity for yet another attempt to reinforce their ground forces on Guadalcanal and drive the Marines off. This set the stage for a series of the most brutal and costly surface actions in U.S. naval history. (For more on the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, please see attachment H-011-3.)

Attachment H-011-4 shows USS Hornet at the peak of the Japanese air attack on the morning of 26 October. She has already been hit by three bombs (one is exploding forward of the island,) she is about to be hit by two torpedoes (a Kate torpedo bomber can be seen crossing over her), and the damaged Val dive bomber that can be seen above the ship is about to deliberately crash into the island, bounce off, and crash through the flight deck, all within the space of a few minutes.

## **50th Anniversary of Vietnam War**

### **4. Operation Rolling Thunder: LCDR John S. McCain III Shot Down, 26 October 1967**

Having barely survived the devastating fire aboard USS Forrestal (CVA-59) on 29 July 1967 off Vietnam (see H-Gram 008, attachment H-008-6) and recovering from wounds inflicted by fragments of a Zuni rocket that hit his aircraft (or the one next to him) on the flight deck, Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain III voluntarily sought return to combat status. Reassigned to an A-4 squadron embarked on USS Oriskany (CVA-34), McCain flew 22 strike missions over North Vietnam from the carrier before he was shot down by a surface-to-air missile on 26 October on his 23rd mission. The ejection broke

*both his arms and a leg, and he parachuted into a lake and almost drowned. When pulled from the lake, he was beaten and bayoneted, before being transported to Hoa Lo Prison in Hanoi (later known as the "Hanoi Hilton"), where he was denied adequate medical care, tortured, and interrogated. McCain was transported to another prison that December before being put in solitary confinement, for two years, beginning in March 1968. When McCain's father, Admiral John S. McCain Jr., became Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, in April 1968, the North Vietnamese offered to release McCain as a "humanitarian" (propaganda) gesture due to his status as an admiral's son. However the Code of Conduct (developed after the Korean War) prohibits U.S. prisoners of war from accepting parole or special favors from the enemy. McCain remained true to the code and refused release. He was then subjected to months of extreme torture, before treatment became more tolerable in late 1969. McCain was released with the rest of the surviving 591 POWs in the spring of 1973, after five and a half years in brutal captivity.*

*McCain's experience was hardly unique. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. Navy lost 530 aircraft in combat and 329 additional to accident (195 A-4 Skyhawks like McCain's were lost in combat); 377 naval aviators were killed, 179 captured, and 64 missing. A number of other Navy pilots preceded McCain into captivity, including;*

*—Lieutenant Junior Grade Everett Alvarez Jr., was the first American airman lost over North Vietnam, when his A-4 Skyhawk was shot down on 5 August 1964, shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. For many months he was the only U.S. POW in North Vietnamese hands. Alvarez endured repeated beatings and torture during his eight and a half years of captivity, the second-longest of any U.S. POW in history.*

*—Flying from USS Coral Sea (CVA-43), Lieutenant Commander Robert Shumaker's F-8D Crusader was shot down by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire on 11 February 1965 and he was the second naval aviator to be captured. Shumaker invented the "tap code" that enabled U.S. POWs to secretly*

*communicate with each other, even when in solitary confinement.*

*—Commander Jeremiah Denton was shot down on 18 July 1965 by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft artillery while flying an A-6A Intruder leading a 28-plane strike from USS Independence (CVA-62). Denton and his bombardier-navigator, Lieutenant Junior Grade Bill Tschudy, both ejected and were captured; both spent the first four years in solitary confinement, subject to repeated torture. In 1966, Denton was forced to participate in a televised propaganda press conference, where the North Vietnamese claimed prisoners were being treated humanely. Instead, Denton blinked his eyes in morse code, spelling T-O-R-T-U-R-E. He was tortured some more when the Vietnamese figured it out. Denton was placed in a group known as the "Alcatraz Gang," whom the Vietnamese deemed most resistant and most troublesome. As a result, the group was subject to long periods of solitary confinement—when they weren't being tortured. Denton would receive a Navy Cross, become a rear admiral after release, and eventually U.S. Senator from Alabama.*

*—Another member of the "Alcatraz Gang" was Commander James Bond Stockdale, who was the senior U.S. naval officer captured by the North Vietnamese. Flying from Oriskany, Stockdale's A-4 Skyhawk was shot down over North Vietnam on 9 September 1965. Stockdale was a primary organizer of prisoner resistance, and created a code that governed prisoner behavior, which resulted in extra torture for him. In several instances, Stockdale deliberately disfigured his face with sharp objects or by beating it against the bars so that the Vietnamese could not use him in propaganda broadcasts. Stockdale would be awarded a Medal of Honor when he was released after over seven years in captivity.*

*More on Operation Rolling Thunder in future H-Grams.*

*(Sources and good reading for this H-Gram include: Guadalcanal by Richard B. Frank; Neptune's Inferno by James Hornfischer; Conquering Tide by Ian Toll; Combined Fleet Decoded by John Prados; and Information at Sea by Timothy Wolters. And, of course, The Struggle for Guadalcanal, volume five of*

*the History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War  
II by Samuel Eliot Morison.)*



*Number 3 6-inch/47-caliber triple gun turret of USS Boise (CL-47), showing the effects of a Japanese shell that struck the turret's 6.5-inch class-A armor face plate during the Battle of Cape Esperance, 12 October 1942. Photographed at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in November 1942, as the ship was receiving repairs. The shell, of unknown caliber, exploded on impact. It did relatively little damage to the armor, but its fragments riddled nearby structure and gouged the turret's guns. The explosion also destroyed the leather gun bucklers (80-G-300232).*

## **H-011-1: Guadalcanal: Victory at Cape Esperance (Sort of), 11/12 October 1942**

*H-Gram 011, [Attachment 1](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
October 2017*

Although Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was rightly known for his even-tempered, gentlemanly leadership

style, it is less well remembered that he had nerves of steel and ice water in his veins when the situation required, and he was single-minded in his drive to engage with and defeat the enemy. Not long after the debacle at the Battle of Savo Island, as U.S. Navy forces were licking their wounds and had essentially ceded the night waters around Guadalcanal to the Japanese, Nimitz issued the following directive on 19 August 1942:

"Suitable targets present themselves only rarely to our guns, bombs and torpedoes. On those rare occasions our tactics must be such that our

objective will be gunned, bombed or torpedoed to destruction. Surely we will have losses—but we will also destroy ships and be that much nearer to the successful conclusion of the war. We cannot expect to inflict heavy losses on the enemy without ourselves accepting the risk of punishment. To win this war we must come to grips with the enemy. Courage, determination and action, will see us through.”

Since Sailors on ships don't get to decide when to fight, Nimitz's message was clearly directed at the Commander of U.S. Forces in the South Pacific Area, Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley; the commander of the U.S. carrier task force (CTF-61), Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher; and the commander of the U.S. amphibious force (CTF-62), Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, none of whom appeared to “get” Nimitz's intent. Although Turner sent multiple risky supply runs into Guadalcanal, Fletcher spent most of his time out of range of Japanese land-based aviation (and too far to provide regular close support to Guadalcanal), while steaming around in submarine-infested waters. To be fair to both commanders, a severe shortage of fuel oil adversely affected their operations, but after the Battle of Savo Island (and a couple of subsequent smaller night battles that went badly for the U.S. forces) Ghormley considered it too dangerous to risk U.S. surface ships in night action around Guadalcanal to interdict the frequent runs by the Japanese “Tokyo Express” bringing reinforcements and supplies by destroyer to the Japanese army forces on Guadalcanal that were attempting to dislodge the U.S. Marines. Although the Japanese army repeatedly underestimated the force levels required to eject the Marines, nevertheless the increasing numbers and supplies made it increasingly more difficult for the Marines to hold the island in the face of repeated Japanese attacks.

After what both Nimitz and CNO King viewed as a lackluster performance at the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, and after he was slightly wounded

when his flagship *USS Saratoga* (CV-3) was torpedoed and put out of action on 31 August, Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher was promoted to Vice Admiral and then sent back to the States, where he never held combat command again. His successor as commander of the carrier task force, Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes, didn't last much longer, being relieved after *USS Wasp* (CV-7) was torpedoed and sunk on 15 September. Ghormley's days were numbered, too. After a major command conference held on Ghormley's flagship, *USS Argonne* (AG-31) at Noumea, French New Caledonia, on 28 September 1942, Nimitz's concern increased that Ghormley (a close friend) lacked the fortitude and aggressiveness needed for the job, as well as the physical stamina. Nimitz then flew to Guadalcanal (where Ghormley had not yet been) to see for himself the conditions on the ground. Nimitz clearly recognized the extreme challenges in getting sufficient supplies to the island, but also identified a long list of things that could be done—and that weren't being done—to improve the situation, which Nimitz then handed to Ghormley on his way back to Hawaii. In response to pressure from Nimitz, Ghormley issued an order on 5 October to Rear Admiral Norman Scott to take a task group of cruisers and destroyers into the approaches to Guadalcanal and interdict the next “Tokyo Express” run.

Fortuitously, Rear Admiral Scott, an aggressive commander in the mold Nimitz was looking for, had spent the previous several weeks in intensive night training, trying to make up for two previous decades in which the U.S. Navy mostly avoided such evolutions. In fact, U.S. doctrine specifically called for cruisers to avoid night fighting, and destroyers were to engage only when necessary (and withhold using their torpedoes for “high-value” units). Scott's efforts would get their test on the night of 11/12 October 1942.

The Japanese had quickly realized that any supply ships, even fast destroyer-transports, were at serious risk if they were caught during daylight by

U.S. Marine and Navy aircraft flying from Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. After a couple of night attacks by U.S. aircraft, the Japanese also determined that running the missions when the moon was full was a bad idea (reaching this conclusion at the same time that Brigadier General Roy Geiger, USMC, commander of U.S. aircraft on Guadalcanal, banned further nighttime attacks as too dangerous due to several operational losses). As a result, "Tokyo Express" runs were timed to go about every three days during the dark phase of the moon.

The Japanese planned for a major coordinated army and navy offensive to retake Guadalcanal timed for mid-October. To do so, the Japanese needed to get more reinforcements and at least some heavy artillery onto the island, and to suppress air operations from Henderson Field. So, the Japanese operation on 11/12 October was much more than the typical five- to six-destroyer "Tokyo Express" run. The Japanese sent two task groups: a reinforcement group and a bombardment group. For reasons that made sense only to the Japanese, the reinforcement group went first and the bombardment followed several hours later. The reinforcement group, consisting of the seaplane tenders *Nisshin* and *Chitose* (serving as transports, with cranes to get heavy artillery off) and six destroyers carrying hundreds of troops, was sighted by U.S. scout aircraft, although the seaplane tenders were misidentified as cruisers (so Rear Admiral Scott knew he was facing more than a normal "Tokyo Express"). Their speed was miscalculated so that they arrived off Guadalcanal faster than Scott expected, and before Scott arrived to interdict. So important did the Japanese consider this group that the last six Zeros providing air cover were ordered to stay on station until after nightfall and ditch when they ran out of gas; five of the pilots perished.

The Japanese bombardment group, under the command of Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto and consisting of three heavy cruisers (flagship *Aoba*,

*Furutaka*, and *Kinugasa*, all among the victors at the Battle of Savo Island,) and two destroyers remained undetected by U.S. scout aircraft as they passed through a gauntlet of rain showers. When the reinforcement group arrived off Guadalcanal, they reported that there were no American ships present, which reinforced Goto's false sense of security.

In the meantime, Rear Admiral Scott's cruiser-destroyer force transited up the west coast of Guadalcanal, where it was sighted by the surprised Japanese submarine *I-26*, which submerged rapidly before issuing a contact report; when it resurfaced to do so it was too late. Scott's force consisted of nine ships in single line-ahead formation, with destroyers USS *Farenholt* (DD-491), USS *Duncan* (DD-485), and USS *Laffey* (DD-459) in the lead, followed by four cruisers: the flagship heavy cruiser USS *San Francisco* (CA-38), light cruiser USS *Boise* (CL-47), heavy cruiser USS *Salt Lake City* (CA-25), and light cruiser USS *Helena* (CL-50). Two destroyers, USS *Buchanan* (DD-484) and USS *McCalla* (DD-488), followed behind the cruisers.

*Boise* and *Helena* were each equipped with the newer SG radar (centimetric wave), which was much more accurate and less prone to false alarms than the older SC radars (metric-wave) on *San Francisco* and *Salt Lake City* (although the "older" SC radars were only a year old.) Scott had also been mistakenly informed that the Japanese had receivers that could detect the SC radar (they didn't), which would give the Japanese the edge on warning. As a result, Scott ordered the SC radars turned off so as not to give away his presence, an order that *Salt Lake City* either didn't get or ignored. Regardless, Scott did not have a radar picture onboard *San Francisco* until after the battle started. Scott had also previously ordered all four cruisers to offload all but one each of their catapult-launched scout float planes to avoid what happened at Savo Island, where burning float planes essentially divided the ships in two and served as beacons for additional Japanese fire.

Scott ordered the remaining float planes to launch after dark to search for the Japanese. The plane from *Salt Lake City* caught fire and crashed immediately after launch, but fortunately the Japanese reinforcement group was already around the corner on the north side of Guadalcanal and did not see the flames—nor did the approaching bombardment group, which was in a rain squall. *Helena* didn't get the word to launch, and jettisoned her plane over the side. *Boise's* plane developed engine trouble and set down north of Guadalcanal, where it observed the rest of the battle from the water. At 2250, *San Francisco's* plane sighted the reinforcement group north of Guadalcanal and her report caused confusion because the Japanese were not expected to be there yet. The reinforcement group failed to report the presence of a scout plane to Rear Admiral Goto.

As Scott transited northward just west of the strait between Guadalcanal and Savo Island, the Japanese reinforcement group was already past him unseen to the east, while the Japanese bombardment group was approaching from the west—the direction from which Scott was expecting a Japanese force of some kind to come. The Japanese cruisers were in a line-ahead formation with *Aoba* in the lead, followed by *Furutaka* and *Kinugasa*, while the two destroyers screened slightly ahead on each flank. Right before Scott gave the order for his formation to conduct a column turn and reverse course to stay within the strait—and unbeknownst to him—radar on *Helena* and then *Boise* began detecting the Japanese ships approaching from the northwest. As related in the introduction, Scott's order immediately went wrong. Instead of following the lead destroyers into the column turn, flagship *San Francisco* immediately turned to port. Captain Edward J. "Mike" Moran on *Boise*, following behind *San Francisco*, had to make a quick decision: Either do what the admiral ordered and follow the destroyers into the column turn, or do what the flagship was doing and stay behind *San Francisco* into her turn. He

chose the latter, as did the rest of the ships in the formation. Captain Robert Tobin, the destroyer squadron leader on *Farenholt*, then had to guess what he was supposed to do, so he led the three destroyers in a port turn to reverse course coming up alongside the U.S. cruisers, between them and the approaching Japanese, although *Duncan* spun out alone into the darkness.

*San Francisco's* mistake actually resulted in Scott being in position to cross Goto's "T." Had the U.S. ships correctly executed the column turn, which would have taken longer, the two forces would have approached each other on a perpendicular collision course, and Goto might even have crossed Scott's "T." Scott delayed opening fire while he tried to determine exactly where his lead destroyers were. The picture was further clouded as U.S. ships reported relative and true bearings of Japanese ships interchangeably. Goto remained convinced that the ships his lookouts were reporting ahead (initially at 11,000 yards) had to be the Japanese reinforcement group since American ships had not operated in force off Guadalcanal at night since their thrashing at Savo Island two months earlier. Goto was still not convinced even after his lookouts at 7,000 yards reported that the ships were the enemy, and he ordered his flagship *Aoba* to flash her recognition lights and signal her identity via flashing light. (For whatever reason, the U.S. ships did not seem to have seen this, apparently while staring at their radar scopes.)

As the two forces closed to within 4,500 yards, Captain Gilbert C. Hoover on *Helena*, convinced that the ships he was seeing to west were Japanese and not U.S. destroyers, requested permission to open fire. Hoover misinterpreted Scott's acknowledgment of the transmission as permission, and opened fire at 2345. Other U.S. ships followed suit. Scott then spent the next several minutes trying, unsuccessfully, to order a cease-fire. *Farenholt*, caught in the line of fire, received some damage from rounds impacting her masts and one in her hull that were intended

for the Japanese cruisers beyond, while *Laffey* went to an emergency backing bell to get out of the line of fire.

Although Goto had ordered his ships to go to general quarters as a precaution, he was still caught by surprise and unprepared. His guns were still trained fore and aft, still loaded with antipersonnel bombardment rounds, when his flagship was savaged by repeated hits from the Americans. *Furutaka* turned to parallel in the same direction as the American course, valiantly interposing herself between the Americans and the Japanese flagship, and paid the price. *Aoba* would ultimately survive (with over 40 hits and 79 dead), but *Furutaka* would not. The Japanese destroyer on the starboard side of the Japanese formation, *Fubuki*, took a severe pounding and would sink too (*Fubuki* had been instrumental in sinking the heavy cruiser USS *Housto* (CA-30)—during the Battle of Sunda Strait on 1 March 1942). In a rare event by that time of the war, 111 of *Fubuki*'s crew would be rescued by the Americans the next day and become prisoners of war.

As *Aoba* limped away under cover of a smoke screen, and *Furutaka* was smothered in U.S. shellfire (hit over 90 times, with 258 dead), the third cruiser in the Japanese line, *Kinugasa*, opted to turn parallel, but in the opposite direction as the American line, quickly taking her out of the close-range fight. *Kinugasa* then proceeded to give a demonstration of accurate Japanese nighttime shooting, and fired several torpedoes at *Helena* and *Boise*, which both ships successfully maneuvered to avoid. *Kinugasa* received only a few hits, much less than she inflicted. *Kinugasa* repeatedly straddled *Boise* forward, stressing her hull. Then, she hit and jammed *Boise*'s number 1 turret and ignited a fire; as the crew of burning turret 1 attempted to abandon it, they were cut down by another hit. Another shell hit *Boise* below the waterline. This was a special Type 91 shell, which was specifically designed to do exactly what it did: hit short and hole the target

below the waterline. In a freak combination, the hits were both devastating and saved the ship. The first hits resulted in a flash fire that incinerated the entire crews of turrets 1 and 2—over a hundred men—and threatened a magazine explosion. Only the discipline and training of *Boise*'s crew in how they handled powder prevented an instant explosion. Captain Moran ordered the forward magazines flooded, but the men who would carry out that order were dead. However, the hole and cracks below the waterline flooded the magazine before it could detonate. Nevertheless, the fire was so great that observers on other ships assumed *Boise* was lost. Like *Furutaka*, *Salt Lake City* placed herself between the burning *Boise* and the Japanese, and took a couple hits from *Kinugasa* as a result.

As the battle was starting, the destroyer *Duncan* (second in line) had become separated from the other two leading destroyers, at which point she sighted Japanese ships, probably *Kinugasa* and a destroyer. Alone and lacking any orders, the skipper of *Duncan*, Lieutenant Commander Edmund B. Taylor, decided to conduct a solo torpedo attack. Just as *Duncan* was in position to launch her torpedoes, she took a devastating series of hits from both Japanese and American shells, which knocked out the gun director among other things, and one of her torpedoes actually launched into her own forward stack. With the flames forward out of control, the only means of escape from the advancing flames for the bridge crew was to jump directly into the water from the bridge. Meanwhile, the crew aft of the blaze continued to try to fight the fire, and fight the ship at the same time, guns still blazing. Eventually, however, the flames forced all the survivors into the water. The next day, the destroyer USS *McCalla* found the burned-out hull of *Duncan* still afloat, without her crew, and sent a boat with a damage-control party aboard to try to save the ship; they were driven off when it became apparent that the forward magazine was in danger of exploding. One hundred and ninety-five of *Duncan*'s valiant crew were ultimately

rescued, but 48 were lost. Lieutenant Commander Taylor would be awarded a Navy Cross. (Taylor's son, Captain Edmund R. Taylor Jr., would be killed in the same helicopter crash that took the life of Rear Admiral Rembrandt Robinson in the Gulf of Tonkin in May 1972.)

As the remains of Goto's force withdrew to the northwest, Scott initially turned to follow, but believing that they had sunk more Japanese ships than were actually involved and concerned over the fate of *Boise* and *Duncan*, he opted to withdraw to the south. (Japanese sinking claims were just as inflated.) The Japanese force received orders to turn around and attack, which they were in no condition to do, and after a brief period of advance to save face, *Kinugasa* turned about to retreat. The Japanese did send two destroyers to search for survivors of *Furutaka*, which were caught and bombed by U.S. aircraft at dawn, and one (*Murakumo*) was immobilized. Two more Japanese destroyers came to the rescue, and they were also bombed, sinking *Natsugumo* before *Murakumo* finally sank, too, bringing total Japanese losses in the battle to one heavy cruiser, three destroyers, and 565 men, for the loss of one U.S. destroyer and 163 American dead. The loss of a heavy cruiser in a night surface action was a profound shock to the Japanese, who had come to believe themselves to be nearly invincible at night. It was also a huge morale boost to the U.S. Navy, who had finally proved that the Japanese were not invincible at night.

Nevertheless, the Americans took away some bad lessons. Most importantly, because of the surprise, the Japanese were not able to mount an effective torpedo attack, so the U.S. remained oblivious to the real power and range of the Japanese Long Lance torpedo—and a line of nine American ships all in a column would have made a great target (especially with *Boise's* and *Helena's* near-continuous gunfire flashes acting as beacons) had the Japanese not been thrown into total chaos in the opening moments of the battle. The U.S. would use that formation again and

suffer for it several times. (To be fair, though, Japanese Rear Admiral Mikawa had used a single column formation to great effect at Savo Island, because it was the most simple to control, and even he lost control of it.) Scott's choice of *San Francisco* as flagship (the "traditional" choice since she was the largest ship in the force), which did not have the most modern radar, would also be repeated in future battles. Nevertheless, numerous practical lessons were learned about communications, gunnery, and ship-handling necessary to fight at night. Despite the chaotic aspects of the battle, Scott was the first U.S. commander who could claim to have engaged a major Japanese surface force in battle (night or day) and won.

Meanwhile, however, the Japanese reinforcement group successfully completed its mission unmolested, putting ashore hundreds of Japanese troops, and four 15-cm (approximately 6-inch) artillery pieces, which were the first that could reach the western end of Henderson Field from Japanese lines. They opened fire the next night, presaging a far more devastating bombardment to follow.



USS Meredith (DD-434) at Suva, Fiji Islands, 23 June 1942 (NH 89418).

## H-011-2: Forgotten Valor: The Sacrifice of USS *Meredith* (DD-434)

H-Gram 011, [Attachment 2](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
October 2017

Aviation fuel at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal was perpetually in short supply. Even before the Japanese battleship bombardment of Henderson Field that killed 41 Marines and destroyed or damaged most of the aircraft at the airfield, a U.S. Navy convoy was en route to Guadalcanal with aviation fuel. The cargo ships USS *Alchiba* (AKA-6) and USS *Bellatrix* (AKA-3), along with the PT-boat tender USS *Jamestown* (PG-55), were each towing

a fuel barge. The small convoy was escorted by the destroyers USS *Nicholas* (DD-449) and USS *Meredith* (DD-434), and the fleet tug USS *Vireo* (AT-144). The convoy was a desperate gamble to get critical fuel to Guadalcanal. The Japanese Carrier Division One (fleet carriers *Shokaku*, *Zuikaku*, and light carrier *Zuiho*) was operating north of Guadalcanal seeking U.S. carriers. However, with USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) still repairing battle damage at Pearl Harbor, the U.S. had only one operational carrier in the Pacific, USS *Hornet* (CV-8), operating well south of Guadalcanal. With only one carrier, Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, Commander of U.S. Forces in the South Pacific Area, sought to avoid engagements with the Japanese. As a result, the convoy would have no air cover. The strategy was based on the slim hope that the convoy would not be sighted by Japanese aircraft.

Early on the morning of 15 October, Ghormley received solid intelligence that Japanese ships, including aircraft carriers, were operating in the vicinity of the convoy's intended track. At 0608, Ghormley ordered the convoy to turn back because threat was too high. However, with the fuel situation on Guadalcanal extremely critical following the Japanese bombardment, the *Vireo* was ordered to take one of the fuel barges in tow and *Meredith* would provide escort. The hope was that the smaller group would slip through Japanese reconnaissance.

*Meredith*, *Vireo*, and the barge got to within 75 miles of Guadalcanal before their luck ran out. Sighted by a search plane, and then attacked by two planes at 1050 that were out on an unsuccessful scouting mission looking for American carriers, the convoy was in serious trouble. Recognizing that the planes were carrier-based and that no other U.S. ships were in the vicinity, the skipper of *Meredith*, Lieutenant Commander Harry Hubbard, correctly deduced that *Meredith* would shortly come under a massive carrier air attack. Initially, Hubbard ordered the *Vireo* to cut loose the barge, and reverse course in an attempt to escape. It quickly became apparent that with *Vireo*'s slow speed, that course of action was futile. Indeed, at 1137, *Zuikaku* launched a 38-plane strike (21 Val dive-bombers, nine Kate torpedo bombers, and eight Zero fighters for escort) to attack *Meredith* and any other ships they might find. Knowing that *Vireo* was a defenseless sitting duck, Hubbard ordered the tug abandoned, and *Vireo*'s crew was brought aboard the *Meredith* to give them the best chance of surviving. Hubbard then planned to sink *Vireo* with a torpedo so it would not fall in Japanese hands.

It was too late. At 1225, the *Zuikaku* strike rolled in on *Meredith*. She put up a gallant fight, knocking down three of her attackers (one Val and two Kates), but the strike was overwhelming and extremely well-executed. In a matter of minutes, *Meredith* was hit by 14 bombs and at least three

torpedoes, and was repeatedly strafed. The destroyer sank within a matter of minutes. Despite serious burns about his face, Hubbard continued to fight the ship until the end, abandoning ship only after the rest of the surviving bridge crew got off. Japanese aircraft strafed survivors in the water.

Perversely, the abandoned *Vireo* was not hit (and the barge survived too.) However, *Vireo* was drifting away, and only one raft-load of *Meredith* and *Vireo* survivors reached the tug, where they were later rescued. The other rafts, filled with burned and mangled Sailors, became a preview of what would happen to Sailors on the USS *Juneau* (CL-52) and USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35) later in the war. As the rafts and wreckage drifted for three days and three nights, numerous Sailors died from wounds, exposure, salt-water ingestion (and resulting mental incapacity and hallucinations), and from particularly aggressive shark attacks. One shark even jumped into a raft and ripped a chunk from an already mortally wounded Sailor. There was not enough room on the rafts, so the less-injured Sailors treaded water, hanging on to the rafts, and had to fight off the sharks as best they could. Most of the injured, including burned and blinded Hubbard, perished in the rafts.

Finally, the destroyers USS *Grayson* (DD-435) and USS *Gwin* (DD-433) found 88 survivors of *Meredith* and *Vireo* adrift. (About another dozen had earlier been found on the *Vireo*.) However, 187 from *Meredith* and 50 from *Vireo* died in a desperate attempt to get fuel to the Marines on Guadalcanal.

(I haven't been able to find a record of a medal for valor for Lieutenant Commander Harry Hubbard; however the *Sumner*-class destroyer DD-748 was named in his honor and served with distinction in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.)



*Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands: Ships of Task Force 17 maneuver to avoid Japanese air attack, 26 October 1942. Taken by a USS Hornet (CV-8) plane. Hornet is at left with the cruisers San Diego and Juneau close together at right. Several aircraft are visible in the center (80-G-304510).*

## **H-011-3: Guadalcanal: Santa Cruz (Japanese Pyrrhic Victory), 26 October 1942**

*H-Gram 011, [Attachment 3](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
October 2017*

As the Japanese army maneuvered on Guadalcanal for a division-sized assault on the Marine lines with the intent to capture Henderson Field, the Imperial Japanese Navy planned for a concurrent major push to be timed with the capture of Henderson Field. The U.S. Marines

(and by now a number of U.S. Army troops) were challenged and spread thin to defend their perimeter, which included Henderson Field and a new fighter strip. The Japanese only had to concentrate their forces at a single point along the perimeter to have a good chance of breaking through. However, in order to do so required the under-supplied Japanese troops to hack their way through miles of virtually impenetrable jungle and swamps. In a previous major attempt (the Battle of Bloody Ridge in mid-September), Japanese units had become separated in the jungle, resulting in uncoordinated piecemeal attacks that were repulsed with extremely high Japanese casualties. The same would be true for the next push in late October, except on an even larger scale of

carnage for the Japanese. The Japanese army kept delaying the onset of the attack, resulting in the Japanese navy burning up massive quantities of scarce fuel while waiting for the army to mount their attack, and one medium carrier, *Hiyo*, had to withdraw to the Japanese stronghold at Truk due to an engine room fire. The Japanese ground commander was so confident of success that he reported that Henderson Field had fallen, which triggered the naval operation, before he had even launched his attack. By the time the Japanese navy learned Henderson had not fallen, it was too late, and the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands was on.

U.S. naval intelligence and code breakers had significantly recovered from Japanese operational security countermeasures that had adversely affected U.S. ability to accurately predict Japanese intentions in the early part of the Guadalcanal campaign. The new commander of the South Pacific area, Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, was well aware that a major Japanese naval offensive was imminent, and also had an accurate assessment of Japanese naval forces that would be involved, including the carriers and aircraft. What intelligence was unable to provide was precise timing, mostly because even the Japanese navy didn't know, dependent as they were on the actions of the Japanese army. Not being one to sit around and wait for the Japanese to get their act together, Halsey issued orders to Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, commander of the U.S. carrier task force, to seek out the Japanese in the waters north of the Solomon Islands chain. Kinkaid didn't exactly move as fast as Halsey would have liked, but he was already on the move looking for the Japanese when their navy commenced their operation.

The U.S. forces were significantly outnumbered by the Japanese in almost all categories. The Japanese force, under the overall command of Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo, was organized into a typically complex Japanese formation of multiple task groups. The primary offensive

capability was Carrier Division One, under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, consisting of the fleet carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* and the light carrier *Zuiho*. A fourth carrier, the medium carrier *Junyo*, provided cover for the Advanced Force. The Japanese carriers embarked about 200 operational aircraft, consisting of Zero fighters, Val dive bombers, and Kate torpedo bombers. All told, the Japanese task groups included a total of four battleships, eight heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, 25 destroyers, and 16 submarines. An additional 158 land-based aircraft could reach Guadalcanal, but except for long-range reconnaissance seaplanes, could not reach the battle area.

The Japanese still retained an overall qualitative edge in pilots, despite losses at Midway, and virtually all of them were combat veterans. The attrition of experienced U.S. aviators in the opening months of World War II was also very high. *Enterprise's* new air group in particular (and *Hornet's* torpedo squadron) consisted of very many "green" pilots, led by a few (and relatively junior) experienced pilots. Although *Hornet's* lack of combat experience showed clearly at Midway, that experience in combat showed in greatly improved performance at Santa Cruz.

On the U.S. side, Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid was dual-hatted in command of Task Force 61, the combined carrier task force, and Task Force 16, the task force centered on the recently repaired USS *Enterprise* (CV-6.) Rear Admiral George D. Murray was in command of Task Force 17, centered on the carrier USS *Hornet* (CV-8.) The American carriers embarked 136 operational aircraft (63 Wildcat fighters, 47 SDB Dauntless dive bombers, and 26 new TBF Avenger torpedo bombers—still carrying the unreliable Mk 13 torpedo, though). Additional U.S. forces included one battleship, USS *South Dakota* (BB-57). The new *South Dakota* and the repaired/refitted *Enterprise* each carried 16 (four quad mounts) of the new Bofors 40-mm anti-aircraft guns, which would prove very effective in the battle. Three

heavy cruisers (*Portland*, *Northampton*, and *Pensacola*), three anti-aircraft cruisers (*San Juan*, *San Diego*, and *Juneau*), and 14 destroyers rounded out TF 61. A separate surface action force (TF 64), under the command of Rear Admiral Willis A. Lee and centered on the new battleship USS *Washington* (BB-56), operated south of Guadalcanal but was not a factor at Santa Cruz, although a couple of Japanese submarines tried to torpedo *Washington* after the battle.

The U.S. started with an advantage when radar-equipped PBY Catalina flying boats located Japanese forces beginning shortly after midnight on 26 October. At 0033, one of the PBYs dropped a torpedo at the Japanese destroyer *Isokaze* in the Advance Force, which was avoided. At 0250 another PBY surprised the carrier *Zuikaku*, dropping four bombs which missed by several hundred yards. Nevertheless, communications challenges prevented Kinkaid from receiving several PBY contact reports, including one at 0310 that provided accurate data on the Japanese carrier force location, composition, course, and speed. Other U.S. ships received the message and incorrectly assumed that Kinkaid had as well. The Japanese navy commanders, however, were in even more of the dark, only learning that the attack by the Japanese army's Sendai Division on Henderson Field had failed (they did not know just how badly it had failed).

At 0415, well before dawn, Japanese float planes were launched from the Advance Force to search for the American carriers that Kondo and Nagumo suspected were in the area, followed by several Kate torpedo bombers from the carriers acting as scouts. At 0450, *Enterprise* launched 16 SBD dive bombers (in pairs) on search missions.

At 0512, Kinkaid finally received the 0310 PBY contact report. One pair of *Enterprise* SBDs sighted a Japanese Kate, which confirmed the presence of Japanese carriers in the vicinity. At 0650, the skipper of *Enterprise*'s Scout Bomber Squadron (VS-10), Lieutenant Commander James

R. Lee, sighted Nagumo's carriers. Lee and his wingman immediately climbed to attack (two planes against the entire Carrier Division One), issuing a contact report received by both U.S. carriers as well as other U.S. scout bombers, which quickly converged on the area. Japanese fighters drove Lee's section into the clouds, and did the same to a second pair of SBD scout bombers, but this cat-and-mouse game enabled a third pair to get through the Japanese 20-plane fighter combat air patrol. Lieutenant Stockton B. Strong and Ensign C.B. Irvine each dived on the Japanese light carrier *Zuiho* at 0740, hitting her with one 500-pound bomb aft, which blew a 50-foot hole in the flight deck, preventing her from recovering aircraft. *Zuiho*'s damage-control teams responded effectively to keep fires under control, but *Zuiho* was out of the battle.

At 0612, a *Shokaku* Kate sighted one of the American carriers, but in keeping with Japanese doctrine to avoid revealing the direction of the Japanese carriers, circled around the U.S. force before issuing a contact report at 0658. Nagumo, mindful of the lessons of Midway, immediately commenced launching a strike, and by 0725 a 62-plane multicarrier strike pushed toward the U.S. carriers. The strike consisted of 20 *Shokaku* Kate torpedo bombers, 21 *Zuikaku* Val dive bombers, and Zero fighters from all three carriers.

At 0732, *Hornet* began launching a strike of 15 SBD dive bombers and six TBF torpedo bombers, escorted by eight Wildcat fighters, which pushed at 0750. At 0747, *Enterprise* began launching a 20-plane strike of three SBD dive bombers and nine TBF torpedo bombers (one armed only with a camera), escorted by eight Wildcat fighters. The *Hornet* strike did not wait for the *Enterprise* strike to join up. By 0810, *Hornet* was launching her second strike of nine SBDs and nine TBFs (armed with bombs rather than torpedoes), escorted by seven fighters.

Meanwhile, at 0810, *Shokaku* was launching a second strike of 19 Val dive bombers, escorted by

five Zeros. At 0840, *Zuikaku* launched 16 Kate torpedo bombers, escorted by four Zeroes. During the night, under threat of PBY bomb attack and mindful of Midway lessons, all aircraft in the hangar bays had been disarmed. The Vals on *Shokaku* were re-armed and spotted on the flight deck 30 minutes before the Kates on *Zuikaku* completed re-arming with torpedoes. This time, Nagumo did not hesitate; he launched the Vals as soon as they were ready, followed later by the Kates, choosing speed over a combined strike.

By shortly after 0900, 110 Japanese aircraft in three groups were heading toward the U.S. carriers, while 75 American aircraft in three somewhat less-organized groups were heading toward the Japanese carriers. The two groups collided when nine *Zuiho* Zeros escorting the Japanese strike peeled off and jumped *Enterprise's* torpedo-bomber group 80 miles from *Enterprise*, shooting down two of the TBFs, including VT-10 squadron commander Lieutenant Commander John A. Collett, who was killed, and forcing two others to ditch due to damage (the torpedo from one of these ditched aircraft accidentally hit the destroyer USS *Porter* as she was rescuing the aircrew, knocking out all propulsion and forcing *Porter* to be scuttled). The Zeros also shot down three of the four escorting Wildcats, and forced the fourth to return with serious battle damage. Four of the surviving U.S. air crewmen would be captured by the Japanese (unlike at Midway, they were not weighted and thrown overboard). The Japanese lost four Zeroes in the engagement and the remaining five expended all their ammunition, leaving the first Japanese strike with only 12 Zeroes for escort. Wildcat pilot Lieutenant John Leppla, who had performed heroically at the Battle of the Coral Sea (Navy Cross,) accepted battle with the Zeroes from a disadvantageous position in a valiant attempt to protect the TBFs, but he was shot down and killed (second Navy Cross, posthumous).

*Hornet's* radar detected the inbound Japanese strike at 60 miles out, and launched eight Wildcats to join eight *Hornet* Wildcats and 21 *Enterprise* Wildcats already on combat air patrol. At 0855, the Japanese strike group sighted the *Hornet*, but *Enterprise* was hidden in a rain squall, so *Hornet* bore the full brunt of the attack. Once again, as at Eastern Solomons, U.S. radar fighter direction failed and most of the U.S. fighters wound up too low to engage the Vals before they commenced their dives, while the Kates made effective use of cloud cover to conceal their low-altitude approach.

*Hornet* and her escorts put up an intense barrage of fire, and parts of destroyed aircraft rained down around *Hornet*, but the attack by 20 Vals was overwhelming. The first bomb hit *Hornet* at 0912, penetrating the flight deck near the bridge. A minute later, two bombs hit and penetrated the flight deck between the amidships and aft elevators. At 0914, a damaged Val deliberately crashed into the island, before hitting the flight deck, starting a serious fire. Meanwhile, the Kates divided into two groups, trapping *Hornet* in a near-perfect hammer-and-anvil attack, so no matter which way she turned she could not avoid presenting her beam to one of the groups of Kates. At 0915, *Hornet* was hit by two torpedoes on her starboard side. Another damaged Val dive bomber crashed into *Hornet* forward. By the time the attack ended at 0925, *Hornet* was listing eight degrees to starboard, dead in the water, with multiple serious fires, and with no power, communications, or fire-main pressure. The Japanese paid dearly for their success, losing 38 of 53 aircraft in the strike, including 17 of 21 Vals and 16 of 20 Kates.

As *Hornet* was being pounded, her first air strike found and attacked the Japanese carrier *Shokaku*. After several *Hornet* SBD dive bombers were shot down by fighters or forced to turn back due to damage, 11 *Hornet* SBDs led by Lieutenant James Vose rolled in on *Shokaku* at 0927, hitting her at least four and possibly five times and with

numerous near misses. This time, *Shokaku's* damage-control teams rapidly put out the fires, but with her flight deck completely mangled *Shokaku* withdrew from the battle (with Nagumo still embarked) under her own power, although *Shokaku's* skipper begged to stay so *Shokaku* could draw bombs and torpedoes away from *Zuikaku*. Unfortunately, *Hornet's* torpedo bombers did not sight the Japanese carriers and attacked—and missed—the heavy cruiser *Tone* instead, which was leading a charmed life, having avoided bombs from two of the *Enterprise* SBD scouts earlier that morning.

*Enterprise's* strike group also failed to find the Japanese carriers, unsuccessfully bombing an unidentified Japanese “heavy cruiser” and unsuccessfully attempting to torpedo the heavy cruiser *Suzuya*. *Hornet's* second strike may have fallen for Japanese radio deception when it received a message that no Japanese carriers were present. For whatever reason, the entire 20-plane strike rolled in on the heavy cruiser *Chikuma* (*Tone's* much less lucky sister). At least three bombs were direct hits, including one in a torpedo bank, and several near misses, which caused very high casualties—almost 200 killed. Had *Chikuma* not jettisoned her Type 93 Long Lance oxygen torpedoes as the air strike commenced, she almost certainly would have suffered the same fate as *Mikuma* at Midway, when a bomb initiated mortal damage from her own torpedoes.

At around 1000, the second Japanese strike (*Shokaku's* 19 Vals) found the U.S. carriers, bypassing the clearly damaged *Hornet* and going for *Enterprise*. Yet again, radar fighter direction flopped, and the 21 Wildcats airborne succeeded in shooting down only two Vals before they dove on *Enterprise*. The first bomb hit *Enterprise* at 1017. A minute later another bomb hit, which split in two: One part penetrated the flight deck and destroyed five aircraft in the hangar bay, while another part penetrated deep into the ship, killing 40 men. This was followed by a damaging near-

miss that blew a dive bomber over the side. Ten of the 19 Vals were shot down.

Around 1030, *Zuikaku's* second strike (16 Kate torpedo bombers) commenced an attack on *Enterprise* and evaded detection until they were only about five miles out. As the Kates split to attack *Enterprise* from both port and starboard, an *Enterprise* Wildcat, flown by Lieutenant Stanley W. Vejtasa, downed four of the Kates. He had to fly into U.S. anti-aircraft fire to knock down the last one, which was also the one that crashed into the destroyer USS *Smith* (see introduction). The group of Kates approaching from starboard dropped five torpedoes, which the skipper of *Enterprise*, Captain Osborne Hardison, skillfully avoided. Unfortunately (for the Japanese), the attack by five Kates from port was not perfectly timed with those from starboard, and *Enterprise* gunners shot down several Kates and Hardison dodged the two torpedoes that were dropped at her. At 1053, the heavy cruiser USS *Portland*, which was out of control due to a steering casualty, was hit by three torpedoes that missed *Enterprise*, but all failed to explode (rare for Japanese torpedoes). Ten of the 16 Kates were lost.

Shortly after 1100, the carrier *Junyo's* first strike (17 Val dive bombers and 12 Zero fighters), launched at 0914, found the U.S. carriers. Skipping the obviously damaged *Hornet*, they went after *Enterprise*, commencing their dives at 1121. While *Enterprise* was heeled over in a hard turn, one bomb bounced off her exposed below-the-waterline hull and then exploded, which among other damage jammed the forward elevator in the up position. (The amidships elevator was jammed in the down position due to the earlier strike.) Another Val hit the anti-aircraft cruiser *San Juan* (CL-54) with a bomb on her stern, jamming her rudder hard right and causing her to steam in circles before steering control could be regained. At 1129, several *Junyo* Vals attacked the battleship *South Dakota*, achieving several near-misses and one direct hit on the number 1 16-inch turret. No one in the turret was

injured (or even knew they had been hit), but fragments sprayed topside, killing two and seriously wounding the skipper, Captain Thomas Gatch, who had refused to dive for cover. A communications breakdown shifting control from the bridge to after control resulted in *South Dakota* being out of control for a short period, narrowly avoiding a collision with *Enterprise*. After this attack, *Enterprise* began recovering her aircraft and those of *Hornet*, a difficult feat with two of three elevators jammed, completing at 1335. Eleven of *Junyo*'s 17 Vals were shot down or ditched returning to their carrier following the attack on *Enterprise*.

While these attacks were going on, Vice Admiral Kondo sent his battleships and other surface ships racing toward the American positions, leaving *Junyo* behind to join up with Nagumo's carriers, of which *Zuikaku* was the only one still operational. With both U.S. carriers damaged, *Hornet* critically, Kinkaid gave the order for *Enterprise* to set a course to disengage, an action which deprived *Hornet* of air cover, but by then *Enterprise* was not in much condition to be of help. One of *Hornet*'s escorts, the anti-aircraft cruiser USS *Juneau* (CL-52), misunderstood the order and followed *Enterprise*, leaving *Hornet* with less anti-aircraft fire power.

As the crippled *Hornet* drifted without power, three destroyers came alongside to help fight the fires, with some success. The first attempt by the heavy cruiser *Northampton* (CA-26) to take *Hornet* under tow was interrupted by a lone Val from *Shokaku* that came out of nowhere and barely missed the destroyer *Morris* (DD-417), which was alongside *Hornet*. Nevertheless, by 1130, *Northampton* was towing *Hornet* at three knots out of the battle area until 1450, when yet another inbound Japanese strike was detected.

At 1520, seven *Junyo* Kate torpedo bombers, escorted by eight Zeros, commenced their attack on *Hornet*. *Northampton* cut the tow line when two of the Kates made for her, and narrowly

avoided the torpedoes. *Hornet*'s anti-aircraft gunners still downed at least two Kates, but one torpedo, dropped from very close range, struck *Hornet* at 1523 and prevented any possibility of regaining power. At 1550, Vice Admiral Halsey issued an order to Kinkaid to withdraw as radio intelligence relayed from Admiral Nimitz indicated the Japanese battleships were converging on *Hornet*'s position.

Beginning at 1540, *Zuikaku*'s third strike of the day (two Vals, six Kates and five Zeros—the best that Carrier Division One could muster after the morning's losses and damage) attacked *Hornet*. The two Vals achieved a near-miss on *Hornet* and another near-miss on the anti-aircraft cruiser *San Diego* (CL-53). The six Kates followed a few minutes later, executing a horizontal bombing attack (apparently *Zuikaku* was out of torpedoes), one of which hit *Hornet* with minor damage. By this time, *Hornet*'s list had reached 18 degrees, and Captain Charles P. Mason gave the order to abandon ship. Mason was the last off at 1627.

At 1703, *Junyo*'s third strike arrived (four Vals and six Zeroes). *Hornet*'s escorts still put up a barrage of fire, but one of the Vals hit the now-abandoned *Hornet* with yet another bomb, which exploded in the hanger bay. *Hornet*'s escorts rescued the great majority of *Hornet*'s crew, but 118 were killed or would die from wounds.

At 1810, as the entire American force commenced a high-speed withdrawal, Rear Admiral Murray (CTF 17) having shifted his flag from *Hornet* to the heavy cruiser *Pensacola* (CA-24), ordered *Hornet* scuttled. The destroyer *Mustin* (DD-413) fired eight carefully aimed torpedoes at *Hornet*, and provided a demonstration of just how unreliable U.S. torpedoes were; five hit *Hornet*, but only three detonated. One other exploded prematurely, while the other two ran erratically and completely missed. The destroyer *Anderson* (DD-411) was then ordered to sink *Hornet*. Around 1915, *Anderson* hit *Hornet* with six of eight torpedoes fired, and still she refused to

sink. *Mustin* (DD-413) and *Anderson* then fired hundreds of 5-inch rounds into *Hornet*, with little apparent effect, an action observed by Japanese float planes from the cruisers *Suzuya* and *Isuzu*.

At 1920, Admiral Ugaki (Admiral Yamamoto's chief of staff) sent an order to try and capture and tow *Hornet*; the message was intercepted, broken, and passed to Admiral Nimitz. By 1945, Kondo's battleships were steaming at high speed toward *Hornet*, and Rear Admiral Tanaka's destroyers even faster. At 2040, *Mustin* and *Anderson*, dogged by Japanese float planes, gave up trying to sink *Hornet* when radar detected inbound Japanese ships. By 2100, two Japanese destroyers arrived close to *Hornet* and determined that it would not be possible to tow her. After milling about for a while, each Japanese destroyer fired two Long Lance torpedoes (which all worked), and even then it took until 0135 before *Hornet* finally went down.

By 2400, Kondo was convinced that the Americans were in high-speed retreat, an assessment confirmed by several Japanese submarines in the pre-dawn hours. With his fuel already at a critical state, Kondo determined there was no need for further pursuit and he commenced a return to Truk. During the night, the radar-equipped PBY Catalinas dogged the Japanese. At 0055 one of the PBYs bombed, hit, and damaged the destroyer *Teruzuki*, while at 0130 another attempted unsuccessfully to torpedo the carrier *Junyo*.

After the battle, the Japanese initially claimed to have sunk three carriers, a battleship, a cruiser, a destroyer, and a submarine. Imperial General Headquarters inflated the claim further, to four U.S. carriers sunk and more than 200 aircraft downed. The real tally of *Hornet* sunk, *Enterprise* badly damaged, and destroyer *Porter* sunk by a U.S. torpedo, was bad enough. The U.S. lost 81 aircraft (including 28 aboard ship and 28 ditched, and 25 shot down by fighters or anti-aircraft fire). Twenty-four U.S. pilots and aircrew were lost,

including one squadron commander and four POWs. U.S. ships lost 240 killed or missing.

The U.S. Navy did not claim to have sunk any Japanese ships at Santa Cruz, nor did they. They did claim to have shot down 115 Japanese aircraft. The real total was 97, including 65 shot down, 29 ditched due to damage, and three lost aboard ship. Only 86 aircraft remained flyable of the 102 that survived the battle (out of 199 operational aircraft at the start). Most critically, the Japanese lost 148 pilots and air crewmen, including two of three dive-bomber leaders, three torpedo squadron leaders, and almost all section leaders. Over half the Japanese aircrew who attacked Pearl Harbor was now dead, including an even higher percentage of squadron and senior leaders. Japanese naval aviation would never recover. Vice Admiral Nagumo's reward for his victory was to be consigned to shore duty.

On the American side, the new 40-mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns proved their worth, accounting for the majority of lost and damaged Japanese aircraft; the lesson as written by Kinkaid was that there cannot be too many 40-mm and 20-mm guns on any type of ship. In the following months and years, U.S. ships would be carpeted with such guns. The failure of fighter radar direction resulted in intensive study of how to better integrate radar, sensors, and communications into a coherent battle picture. Within a few months the result would be something close to a modern combat information center (CIC).



*A Japanese Type 99 shipboard bomber (Allied codename Val) trails smoke as it dives toward Hornet (CV-8), during the morning of 26 October 1942. This plane struck the ship's stack and then her flight deck. A Type 97 shipboard attack plane (Kate) is flying over Hornet after dropping its torpedo, and another Val is off her bow. Note anti-aircraft shell burst between Hornet and the camera, with its fragments striking the water nearby. Hornet was lost in the battle (80-G-33947).*

## **H-011-4: *Hornet* Under Attack**

H-Gram 011, [Attachment 4](#)  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
October 2017