



## H-Gram 012: Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> (the Battle)

9 November 2017

### Contents:

1. Guadalcanal, 1942: The Battle of Friday the 13th, 1942
2. Guadalcanal, 1942: Battleship Versus Battleship—The Battle of 14-15 November
3. Operation Torch: The Invasion of North Africa
4. Meanwhile, Back in World War I (100th Anniversary)

*This H-Gram is on the long side, but in my view the sea battles that took place off Guadalcanal in mid-November 1942 are the most epochal in the history of the U.S. Navy, replete with examples of extreme valor in the face of overwhelming odds in which few other battles can compare. The end result, at staggering cost, was a decisive victory for the Navy.*

## 75th Anniversary of World War II

### 1. Guadalcanal, 1942: The Battle of Friday the 13th, 1942

*"It's suicide," was the reaction of Captain Cassin Young, new commanding officer of the task group flagship, the heavy cruiser San Francisco (CA-38), when informed of his mission. "I know. But we have to do it," responded Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan,*



*USS San Francisco (CA-38) entering San Francisco Bay, 11 December 1942, after being damaged in action off Guadalcanal (19-N-44714).*

*the commander of a force of five cruisers and eight destroyers (Task Group 67.4) assigned the mission to interdict a Japanese task group and prevent a second devastating battleship bombardment of Henderson Field and U.S. Marine positions on Guadalcanal (see H-Gram 011 "All Hell's Eve"). Based on intelligence reporting, both of them knew what they were up against: battleships. Captain Young was not the kind to shirk danger; he had been awarded a Medal of Honor for his actions at Pearl Harbor in command of the repair ship Vestal (AR-4), when he was blown off the bridge of his ship by the explosion of Arizona's (BB-39) magazine alongside, swam through burning oil to get back aboard his sinking ship to get her underway under fire and beach her in shallow water. Young was also right: Neither he nor Callaghan, nor Rear Admiral Norman*

*Scott, nor the five Sullivan brothers, nor a total of 1,439 American Sailors would survive the incredibly vicious, chaotic, no-quarter, close-quarters nighttime melee with two Japanese battleships, a light cruiser, and 11 destroyers—an action that naval historian Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison would describe as being like "minnows in a bucket" and others would describe as a "bar room brawl after the lights had been shot out."*

*By the time the battle was over, of the 13 U.S. ships engaged, two anti-aircraft cruisers (Atlanta (CL-51) and Juneau (CL-52)) and four destroyers (Cushing (DD-376), Laffey (DD-459), Barton (DD-599), and Monssen (DD-436)) would be sunk. Two heavy cruisers (San Francisco and Portland (CA-33)) and two destroyers (Sterret (DD-407) and Aaron Ward (DD-483)) were seriously damaged. Only the light cruiser Helena (CL-50) and destroyers O'Bannon (DD-450) and Fletcher (DD-445) survived the deluge of battleship shells and "Long Lance" torpedoes with minimal damage or no casualties. The Japanese lost only two destroyers, but Hiei, one of the two battleships, was so badly battered that she could not steer or clear the battle area, and was sunk the next day by U.S. Navy and Marine aircraft, flying from Henderson Field and USS Enterprise (CV-6). Most important, Callaghan's force accomplished its mission in preventing a bombardment, thus keeping Henderson Field operational and playing a pivotal role in preventing about 5,000 Japanese reinforcements from reaching the island, and sinking almost all the supplies and ammunition of the 2,000 who did. In conjunction with yet another brutal battle during the night of 14/15 November, this engagement turned the tide of the campaign for Guadalcanal in favor of the United States—at great cost.*

*The record of valor displayed by the U.S. Navy in the Battle of Friday the 13th was astounding. Rear Admirals Callaghan and Scott were both awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor (Scott was actually killed by "friendly" fire). Three Medals of Honor were awarded to crew on San Francisco, who fought on after the most senior officers were all killed: Lieutenant Commander Herbert Schonland, Lieutenant Commander Bruce McCandless, and (posthumously) Boatswain's Mate First Class*

*Reinhardt Keppler. San Francisco received a Presidential Unit Citation, as did Laffey, Sterett, and O'Bannon. The crew of San Francisco alone accounted for 32 Navy Crosses (22 posthumous) and 21 Silver Stars, and there were more on other ships. The commanding officers of all 13 ships in the battle were awarded a Navy Cross, four posthumously. At least 28 U.S. Navy destroyers and destroyer-escorts were named in honor of those brave Sailors who fell in this most epochal battle in U.S. Navy history (one of these, USS Harmon (DE-678)—was the first warship named in honor of an African-American, Mess Attendant First Class Leonard Roy Harmon, killed on San Francisco). USS The Sullivans (DD-537 and DDG-68) were named after the five Sullivan brothers, all lost aboard Juneau.*

*Although Rear Admiral Callaghan's courage has never been questioned, the appalling cost of the battle caused many navy leaders at the time—and many historians since then—to question his tactical judgement, in particular his integration (or lack thereof) of newer radar on some of his ships. Some of these criticisms are probably valid, but none really take into account that Captain Young's assessment (suicide) was valid. The two Japanese battleships (eight 14-inch guns each) and 95 powerful torpedoes (not counting reloads) aboard the destroyers, all superbly trained and equipped for night fighting, had vastly superior throw weight. Callaghan's own ships were never designed or intended to duke it out with battleships, nor could the technology of radar be a panacea for decades of avoidance of realistic nighttime training (which would be disastrously demonstrated at the Battle of Tassafaronga just two weeks after this battle). Callaghan's only hope of success was to get as close to the battleships as quickly as possible before opening fire. Whether this was his concept is unknown, because he left no written plan and those who might have known were dead too, but that is what happened. Opening fire sooner only would have given the Japanese battleships more time to find the range before the much lighter U.S. weapons could inflict any serious damage on the more heavily armored battleships, and crossing the Japanese "T" would only have made better targets for Japanese torpedoes. Given the force disparity, there is no realistic outcome in which this battle would have*

turned out any better for the U.S. with or without more effective use of radar. So, in my assessment, in the face of overwhelming odds, Callaghan chose to attack, did his duty to the utmost, and, in strategic terms, he won.

The words of Major General A. A. Vandegrift, USMC, commander of all Marine and Army forces on Guadalcanal, perhaps sum it up the best: "[O]ur greatest homage goes to Scott, Callaghan and their men who with magnificent courage against seemingly hopeless odds drove back the first hostile stroke and made success possible. To them the men of Cactus (Guadalcanal) lift their battered helmets in deepest admiration."

Or perhaps the words of the skipper of USS Fletcher (DD-445), Commander William Cole, to his executive officer as Fletcher (13th ship in line of a group of 13 ships on Friday the 13th, with hull number that added up to 13 and named after Frank Friday Fletcher) entered the battle: "Aren't you glad our wives don't know where we are right now?" (For more of the Battle of Friday the 13th, please see attachment H-012-1.)

Attachment H-012-2 is a Navy Art Collection painting that depicts destroyer Laffey just after she has crossed under the Japanese battleship Hiei's bow and is engaging the battleship with 5-inch and 20-mm guns—and sidearms—at near-point-blank range on 13 November 1942 off Guadalcanal.

Attachment H-012-3 is a photo of the USS San Francisco Memorial in San Francisco, California, showing damage to her port bridge wing sustained on 13 November 1942. The ship's damaged bridge wings were removed after the battle and used to create a memorial to her crew.

## **2. Guadalcanal, 1942 Battleship Versus Battleship—The Battle of 14-15 November**

The tide of the Guadalcanal campaign was turned by one new American battleship, USS Washington (BB-56), Captain Glenn B. Davis commanding, in a brutal and near-run battle during the night of 14/15 November 1942. With the battleship South Dakota

(BB-57) on fire and out of action, and the four screening destroyers sunk or crippled, Washington was the only ship left of Rear Admiral Willis "Ching" Lee's Task Force 64, which entered Iron Bottom Sound the evening of 14 November in a last-ditch effort by Vice Admiral William F. Halsey to halt yet another major attempt by the Japanese to bombard Henderson Field and land more reinforcements on Guadalcanal (it was a last-ditch effort for the Japanese, too). Washington single-handedly took on a Japanese force of one battleship (Kirishima, a survivor of the 13 November battle), two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and nine destroyers. In a matter of minutes, with accurate radar-directed fire, Washington pummeled the Kirishima with between nine and 20 hits (probably 20) by 16-inch shells and over 40 hits by 5-inch shells, which caused Kirishima to sink after midnight. Washington also hit other Japanese ships with her secondary armament, probably including the destroyer Preston (DD-379). Washington then maneuvered to avoid multiple torpedo attacks. The loss of the Kirishima caused the rest of the Japanese force to withdraw, with the exception of one sinking destroyer.

Lee was the Navy's foremost flag-level expert on the integration and use of radar, and that knowledge and technology provided the critical edge in turning what could have been a disaster into a decisive victory, which contributed in a major way to ending the last major Japanese push to re-take Guadalcanal. Disillusioned by the Japanese army's inability to make any progress against the U.S. Marines and stunned by the loss of two battleships, the Japanese navy decided to limit further action to making "Tokyo Express" supply runs using destroyers. It would never again commit cruisers or battleships (or aircraft carriers) to the waters around Guadalcanal.

The action between Washington and Kirishima was the only one-on-one battleship action in the Pacific War, and the first of only two battleship-versus-battleship actions in the Pacific (the other was at the Battle of Surigao Strait in October 1944). Most accounts focus on the fact that Kirishima was hopelessly outclassed by Washington. The Japanese warship was a World War I-vintage battlecruiser (which had received some additional armor and upgrades during the inter-war years), armed with

four twin 14-inch gun turrets. Washington (and South Dakota) were both brand-new, state-of-the-art battleships, armed with three triple 16-inch gun turrets, the latest radar, and an admiral who knew how to use it. The standard interpretation was that Kirishima didn't have a prayer, and this is arguably true on a ship-to-ship basis. However, such analysis does not account for the 90 torpedo tubes (plus reloads) aboard the Japanese cruisers and destroyers and the power of the Type 93 "Long Lance" torpedo, the capabilities of which the U.S. was still largely ignorant. Had the U.S. destroyer screen not absorbed many of these torpedoes at great sacrifice, and had the Japanese commander not lost situational awareness in the chaos of battle, the outcome could have been disastrous for the U.S. Halsey took an enormous risk, much more than he even knew, in stripping both his battleships from carrier-screen duties and committing them to a night battle in constricted waters against so many torpedoes; the outcome could easily have been USS Houston (CA-30) at the Battle of Sunda Strait redux.

As in the Battle of Friday the 13th, the ferocity of the engagement was such that every commanding officer of the six U.S. ships involved was awarded a Navy Cross, two posthumously. Total U.S. personnel losses in the battle were 242 killed in action and 142 wounded. The destroyers Walke (DD-416) and Preston (DD-379) were immediately smothered and sunk by Japanese torpedoes and shellfire, and were lost with most of their crews (80 killed on Walke, including skipper Commander Thomas E. Fraser, and 117 killed on Preston, including skipper Commander Max C. Stormes). Benham (DD-397) and Gwin (DD-433) were both quickly put out of action, but the skipper of Benham got all of his crew onto Gwin before Benham sank, with only 8 wounded on Benham and 6 killed on Gwin. The battleship South Dakota (Captain Thomas L. Gatch commanding) suffered a massive and debilitating power failure at a critical point in the battle, ending up silhouetted by the burning U.S. destroyers and taking 27 topside hits, none threatening to the integrity of the ship, but killing 39 crewmen (including one Marine) and wounding 59 more, and putting her out of the battle. Dozens of Japanese torpedoes missed both South Dakota and Washington. Washington came through the battle (and the rest of the war) unscathed and

with no casualties. Given her impact on the course of the Guadalcanal campaign and the war, why the battleship did not receive a Presidential Unit Citation (or even a Navy Unit Citation or Meritorious Unit Commendation) remains a complete mystery to me.

After the battle, Washington's skipper, Captain Glenn Davis, made a profound observation: "Radar has forced the Captain or OTC to base a greater part of his actions on what he is told rather than what he can see." Naval warfare had just been revolutionized. (For more on the Battle of 14-15 Nov, please see attachment H-012-4.)

### **3. Operation Torch: The Invasion of North Africa**

Allied forces invaded French North Africa beginning on 8 November 1942. The operation ultimately landed over 100,000 U.S. and Allied troops at multiple locations in Morocco and Algeria in an effort to relieve pressure on the British in Egypt and the Russians at Stalingrad. The large forces required for this invasion were a primary reason why Operation Watchtower (the invasion of Guadalcanal) was perpetually short of ships, aircraft, troops, and supplies. Both CNO Ernest J. King and Chief of Army Staff General George C. Marshall opposed Operation Torch, viewing it as a diversion from what they believed should be the main effort (the invasion of France), but were overridden by President Franklin D. Roosevelt out of deference to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. I will cover Operation Torch, particularly the Naval Battle of Casablanca (which included a duel between the battleship USS Massachusetts (BB-59)—and the Vichy French battleship Jean Bart, and resulted in the sinking of multiple French warships that opposed the landing), more in the next H-Gram.

### **4. Meanwhile, Back in World War I (100th Anniversary)**

On 17 November 1917, the destroyers Fanning (DD-37) and Nicholson (DD-52) sank the German submarine U-58, the first U-boat sunk by U.S. forces in World War I (and the first submarine ever sunk by

*U.S. Navy forces—to include the CSS Hunley episode). Of the submarine's 40-member crew, 38 were rescued by Fanning and became prisoners of war.*

*On 19 November 1917, the destroyer Chauncey (DD-3) was accidentally rammed and sunk by the British merchant ship Rose 110 miles west of Gibraltar, killing three officers and 18 men.*

*On 22 November 1917, a Tellier seaplane flown by Ensign Kenneth R. Smith conducted the first armed patrol by a U.S. Navy aircraft in European waters and was forced to ditch while investigating a reported German submarine contact. The two crewmen were rescued two days later.*

*On 25 November, Battleship Division Nine (New York (BB-34), Delaware (BB-28), Florida (BB-30), and Wyoming (BB-32)) departed Hampton Roads for Scapa Flow, United Kingdom, the first U.S. battleships to head across the Atlantic to participate in World War I. At the time, there was an acute shortage of oil in the U.K. These U.S. battleships are not the newest in the Navy, but were the newest that still burned coal, of which the British had plenty.*

*I will cover more of the World War I developments between July and December 1917 in the next H-Gram.*

*(Sources—and great reading—used for this H-Gram include Guadalcanal by Richard Frank; Neptune's Inferno by James Hornfischer; The Conquering Tide by Ian Toll; Information at Sea by Captain Timothy Wolters, USNR; Combined Fleet Decoded by John Prados; Japanese Destroyer Captain by Tameichi Hara; and A Dawn Like Thunder: The True Story of Torpedo Squadron Eight by Robert Mrazek. And of course, The Struggle for Guadalcanal, the fifth volume of The History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II by Samuel Eliot Morison.)*



*The five Sullivan brothers on board USS Juneau (CL-52) at the time of her commissioning ceremonies at the New York Navy Yard, 14 February 1942. All were lost with the ship following the 13 November 1942 Naval Battle of Guadalcanal. The brothers are (from left to right): Joseph, Francis, Albert, Madison, and George Sullivan (NH 52362).*

## **H-012-1: Guadalcanal, 1942—The Battle of Friday the 13th**

*H-Gram 012, Attachment 1  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
November 2017*

The battles that took place in the sound between Guadalcanal and Tulagi after midnight on the night of 12/13 November 1942 and on 14/15 November are known by multiple names. In

his *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison refers to them as the “Naval Battle of Guadalcanal,” with part one on 12/13 November and part two on 14/15 November. Other works call the engagements the First Night Battle of Guadalcanal (which is confusing since Savo Island and Cape Esperance were also night battles off Guadalcanal). Yet other sources refer to the Third and Fourth Battles of Savo Island, and Japanese sources refer to the Third and Fourth Battles of the Solomon Sea. Regardless, these two battles were the decisive engagements of the Guadalcanal campaign that turned the tide in U.S. favor.

This time, U.S. naval intelligence and code breakers provided extensive warning of the timing and force composition of the next major Japanese push to reinforce and retake Guadalcanal, occupied by U.S. Marines since 7 August (and since October, by some U.S. Army troops as well). Following the disastrous failure by Japanese army forces to penetrate the U.S. perimeter and retake Henderson Field in late October, the Japanese high command determined that yet another major reinforcement attempt take place, although the Japanese army still grossly underestimated the number of U.S. troops on Guadalcanal and how much force would be needed to evict them. As for the Japanese navy, coming off their costly "victory" in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto (commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet) determined that there was a narrow window to conduct a major reinforcement effort while there were no operational U.S. carriers in the region.

Yamamoto believed the USS *Hornet* (CV-8) and USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) had been sunk, but *Enterprise* was only badly damaged, and, as of early November, still had her forward elevator jammed in the "up" position and was trailing an oil slick. The Japanese, too, were shorthanded with aircraft carriers. The fleet carriers *Zuikaku* and the badly damaged *Shokaku*, with their decimated air groups, as well as the damaged light carrier *Zuiho*, had returned to Japan. This left only the medium carrier *Junyo*, with a reduced air group, available to support operations, along with about 125 operational land-based bombers and fighters, and about 25 operational float planes. Nevertheless, Yamamoto amassed a force of four battleships, three heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, and 21 destroyers for the operation, under the overall command of Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo. Another four heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, and six destroyers under Rear Admiral Gunichi Mikawa (the victor at the Battle of Savo Island) were assigned to the operation. An additional 12 destroyers were to provide escort

services for 11 Japanese troop transports with 7,000 troops and large quantities of ammunition and supplies embarked.

Believing that the U.S. carriers were out of the picture, the key to the Japanese operation was to suppress (and preferably destroy) the U.S. aircraft at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. Failure to do so would have dire consequences, as the slow transports would be acutely vulnerable to daylight U.S. air attacks from the airfield (by then, a complex of three airstrips, with 77 operational aircraft on 12 November). This critical mission fell to Rear Admiral Hiroaki Abe and Battleship Division 11 (*Hiei* and *Kirishima*) escorted by one light cruiser (*Nagara*) and 11 destroyers.

Vice Admiral William Halsey, the commander of all U.S. forces in the South Pacific Area since 18 October, understood that aggressive measures would be needed to prevent a reoccurrence of that month's devastating battleship bombardment by *Kongo* and *Haruna* of Henderson Field. Unlike his predecessor, Vice Admiral Ghormley, Halsey flew to Guadalcanal on 8 November to see the situation firsthand and personally experienced an embarrassing nighttime shelling by the Japanese destroyer *Kagero* (opposed ineffectually by three U.S. PT boats). Halsey had given his word to Major General A. A. Vandegrift, USMC, commander of U.S. forces on Guadalcanal, that the U.S. Navy would make maximum effort to reinforce and defend Guadalcanal, and, in early November, U.S. surface ships began regularly entering the sound north of Guadalcanal to conduct extensive daylight shore bombardment of Japanese positions on the island. However, Halsey's options were limited. Lack of tankers contributed to a serious fuel shortage, he had no operational carriers, and the concurrent Allied invasion of North Africa (Operation Torch) which commenced on 8 November, had left the South Pacific with resources only barely adequate to support the Guadalcanal mission—and many have argued that resources were inadequate.

On 12 November, two U.S. convoys transporting 5,500 Army and Marine troops converged on Guadalcanal. One group (TG 67.1), commanded by Rear Admiral Kelly Turner himself, included four transports escorted by cruisers *San Francisco* (CA-38) (with Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan embarked), *Portland* (CA-33,) *Helena* (CL-50,) and *Juneau* (CL-52), plus 10 destroyers. Rear Admiral Norman Scott, embarked on the anti-aircraft cruiser *Atlanta* (CL-51), with three destroyers escorting three transports, one of which was damaged by air attack and had to turn back with a destroyer. At dawn, six U.S. transports were off Guadalcanal off-loading troops and supplies.

At 1405, a major Japanese air raid came in over Florida Island and Tulagi from the north, and attacked U.S. ships in the sound between Tulagi and Guadalcanal. Alerted by coast watchers that the strike was inbound, the flight of 16 G4M Betty twin-engine torpedo bombers, escorted by 30 Zero fighters (which didn't do a very good escort job), was badly mauled by Marine fighters from Henderson, while others were downed by U.S. shipboard anti-aircraft fire. Only two of the Bettys made it back to their base at Rabaul, and none of their torpedoes hit. However, one damaged Betty kept coming at the *San Francisco* after dropping its torpedo (which missed). Gunners on the cruiser stood their ground and kept firing at the Betty until it crashed into the after superstructure, wiping out most of the ship's anti-aircraft guns (three of four 20-mm mounts) with a massive spray of flaming gasoline. The explosion killed 24 Sailors and wounded another 45, including the executive officer, Commander Mark Crouter (whose decision to remain aboard would cost him his life in the battle to follow, resulting in a posthumous Navy Cross). Despite significant damage, there was no serious discussion by Captain Cassin Young and Rear Admiral Dan Callaghan about withdrawing *San Francisco* from the expected fight that night.

By this time, both Halsey and Turner had sufficient intelligence and air reconnaissance reports to

know that the major Japanese force was on the way. They did not know the exact composition of the bombardment force, but knew several Japanese battleships would be involved in the operation, and assumed there would be a bombardment. Despite the heavy odds, Turner stripped almost all the escorts from his convoy, except one damaged destroyer and two that were low on fuel, and combined them into a single task force (TG 67.4), under the tactical command of Callaghan, to attempt to stop the Japanese bombardment. Given the odds, this was an extremely bold decision, which many in the force considered to be suicidal.

Turner's decision to make Callaghan the commander, instead of Rear Admiral Scott, who was embarked on *Atlanta*, remains controversial to this day. Callaghan was only 15 days senior to Scott, but Scott had combat experience and had been the victor at the Battle of Cape Esperance, where he had learned numerous lessons in night fighting the hard way. Callaghan's choice of *San Francisco* as his flagship has also been heavily criticized (although Scott had made the same decision at Cape Esperance and there is no evidence he would have done differently if still in command of the task force). The cruiser was the "traditional" choice, since she was the largest ship in the task force, and was also the "sentimental" choice, having been Callaghan's previous command as a captain.

What *San Francisco* lacked was the latest SG search radar carried on the heavy cruiser *Portland* and the light cruiser *Helena*, both of which would have made suitable flagships. (Two destroyers, *Fletcher* (DD-445)—and *O'Bannon* (DD-450)—and the anti-aircraft cruiser *Juneau* also had SG radars.) The SG radar had much better contact discrimination, was less prone to false alarms, and had a radar "scope" that provided a "birds-eye" view of the battlefield. The older (by a year) SC radar carried on *San Francisco* and *Atlanta* had none of these advantages. Callaghan would also be criticized for not putting his SG-equipped

destroyers in the lead (*O'Bannon* was fourth in line and *Fletcher* last, although Callaghan expected to make a column turn before the battle that would have put *Fletcher* first). Callaghan had also chosen to put his most combat-experienced skipper, Lieutenant Commander Edward Parker (two Navy Crosses in action in the Dutch East Indies) on *Cushing* in the lead despite an inoperable fire-control radar on *Cushing*. To be fair to Callaghan and Scott, neither of them had much opportunity to train or become familiar with the new radar technology, nor did any of the ships have a configuration that optimally integrated radar information into command decision making. Captain Gilbert Hoover on *Helena* had done the most to create an ad hoc arrangement for using radar. Callaghan also did not publish a battle plan, and whatever his plan might have been, no one was left alive who might have known it.

Callaghan chose the same line-ahead column formation that Scott had employed at Cape Esperance, a "lesson learned" from that battle, to best maintain control and avoid the confusion and "friendly fire" that damaged U.S. destroyers in that engagement. Callaghan's force consisted of 13 ships, in a single line, in the following order: destroyers *Cushing*, *Laffey*, *Sterret*, and *O'Bannon*, followed by *Atlanta* (with Scott embarked), *San Francisco* (with Callaghan embarked,) *Portland*, *Helena*, and *Juneau*, followed by destroyers *Aaron Ward*, *Barton*, *Monssen*, and *Fletcher*. The down side of a line of ships is that it made a great target for Japanese torpedoes, especially since the U.S. Navy still didn't grasp the fact that Japanese torpedoes were more powerful and had a much greater range than U.S. torpedoes (and left little wake due to their oxygen fuel), not to mention being much more reliable.

After midnight, the Japanese Bombardment Group emerged from a series of torrential rain squalls with their formation in disarray, still basically in a (very rough) circular cruising disposition. The night was very dark, even when it was not raining. The two battleships were

prepared for shore bombardment, with anti-personnel, incendiary, and general-purpose high-explosive rounds (i.e., not armor piercing) in the hoists ready to fire. Like Rear Admiral Goto before him at Cape Esperance, Abe was not expecting to encounter an American surface force at night. Abe did not know for sure where all his own ships were, and he squandered precious time trying to figure it out. As a result, the Japanese were once again caught by surprise. In fact, this time, at 0124 American radar on *Helena* detected the Japanese (at 13.5 miles, ten miles from *Cushing* in the lead) before Japanese lookouts detected the Americans.

Callaghan did not appear to receive or react to radar contacts from *Helena* on Japanese force disposition, focusing his attention on what Lieutenant Commander Parker on the lead destroyer, *Cushing*, could see, which in the dark night was pretty much nothing. With talk-between-ships (TBS), the U.S. Navy's relatively new means for short-range voice communications, clobbered by too many ships on the net, critical contact information was also dropped. Much has been made of Callaghan's failure to use his radar advantage to gain surprise over the Japanese. My assessment (which is not the standard one) is that had Callaghan opened fire earlier, his 8-inch, 6-inch, and 5-inch guns would have had limited impact on the Japanese battleships, which would have then had more time to switch to appropriate ammunition and find the range to kill Callaghan's cruisers at a distance with 14-inch guns and torpedoes. With two battleships in the Japanese formation, crossing the Japanese "T" wouldn't have done much good either, since it would only have taken a couple minutes for the battleships to turn their broadsides to the U.S. line.

At 0142, *Cushing* and the lead Japanese destroyers, closing on each other unseen at a combined speed of over 40 knots to a CPA of 2,000 yards, were startled to see enemy ships so close. *Cushing* veered away to avoid a collision,

while the three destroyers piled up behind her, resulting in a ripple effect of confusion down the U.S. line. Whether Callaghan meant it or not, the result was that the U.S. line pierced into the center of the dispersed Japanese formation like a javelin before blunting on the hard rock that was the battleship *Hiei*. The Japanese, despite their surprise, actually opened fire first at 0148, revealing to Callaghan that there were Japanese ships all around, leading to his famous (and much maligned) order for “Odd ships fire to starboard and even ships fire to port.” (The purpose of Callaghan’s order was to prevent U.S. ships from all targeting the same Japanese ships—which happened several times in later battles with very bad results for the Americans.) It was maligned because some U.S. ships already had targeting solutions on close-by Japanese ships, awaiting the order to open fire, and were forced to shift to targets on the opposite side to comply with Callaghan’s order. From there, the battle quickly degenerated into chaos, a bit like a multicar pile-up on the interstate in fog. The battle became individual ship versus individual ship, with such intermingled maneuvers that an accurate reconstruction or chronology is impossible. So, I will follow the methodology of Richard Frank in his excellent book *Guadalcanal* and give a brief synopsis of what happened to each ship in the American line.

**1. USS Cushing (DD-376), Lieutenant Commander Edward N. Parker commanding. Lost in action; 72 KIA, 68 WIA.**

After avoiding the Japanese destroyer *Yudachi* leading the van, *Cushing* found herself closing to within 1,000 yards of battleship *Hiei* to port, but in response to Callaghan’s even/odd order, targeted a Japanese destroyer with her main battery on the opposite side instead, while raking the battleship with 20-mm cannon fire and one torpedo to no effect. *Cushing* was hit almost immediately by Japanese shells, including her engineering spaces. Before going dead in the water, *Cushing*

fired six torpedoes at *Hiei* at a range of 1,200 yards, which missed or failed to work. *Cushing* was then hit at least 17 more times before Parker was forced to give the order to abandon ship. The light cruiser *Nagara* (which had been fired upon by numerous U.S. ships, but escaped serious damage) and the destroyer *Yukikaze* gave *Cushing* the final blows as they exited the battle area.

Lieutenant Commander Parker (future vice admiral) was awarded a third Navy Cross.

**2. USS Laffey (DD-459), Lieutenant Commander William E. Hank commanding. Lost in action; 57 KIA, 114 WIA.**

*Laffey* sighted both Japanese battleships shortly after *Cushing* came under fire. *Laffey* passed under the bow of *Hiei* at a range of 20 yards, blasting the battleship point blank with 5-inch shells and 20-mm fire (officers on the bridge of *Laffey* also fired their sidearms at the battleship). Rear Admiral Abe and the captain of *Hiei* were both wounded and Abe’s chief of staff killed by fire from *Laffey*. Abe did not remember the rest of the battle after being wounded. The early hits from *Laffey* and *Cushing* set *Hiei*’s massive superstructure aflame (described by some as like a burning high-rise apartment building) with the result that *Hiei* drew fire and numerous hits (over 85) from almost every U.S. ship engaged in the battle. This resulted in massive topside damage, but none that penetrated to her vitals. In the confusion, *Hiei* also fired on several Japanese destroyers. *Laffey* escaped from *Hiei* only to run into the large anti-aircraft destroyer *Teruzuki*, which scored repeated hits on *Laffey* and blew off her stern with a torpedo before a salvo of 14-inch shells from the battleship *Kirishima* hit the destroyer. *Teruzuki* avoided using her searchlight and, as a result, avoided drawing fire. As fires raged out of control from more hits by three other Japanese destroyers, Hank gave the order to abandon ship just before a massive explosion tore *Laffey* apart, killing Hank and many men.

Presidential Unit Citation. Lieutenant Commander Hank awarded posthumous Navy Cross. *Allen M. Sumner*-class DD-702 named in his honor.

**3. USS Sterett (DD-407), Commander Jesse G. Coward commanding. Damaged; 29 KIA, 22 WIA.**

*Sterett* shifted her guns from port to starboard in response to Callaghan's order and got off 13 salvos at—probably—the light cruiser *Nagara* before a hit crippled her steering. Additional hits inflicted yet more damage. *Sterett* launched four torpedoes at either *Hiei* or *Kirishima*, which either missed or didn't work, while hitting the battleship with multiple 5-inch rounds. *Sterett* also fired two torpedoes at a Japanese destroyer. By 0227, *Sterett* had sustained 11 direct hits, including three 14-inch bombardment rounds, knocking out half her main battery. With all torpedoes expended, steering by her engines, *Sterett* limped out of the battle area.

Presidential Unit Citation. Commander Coward awarded first of two Navy Crosses.

**4. USS O'Bannon (DD-450), Commander Edwin Wilkinson commanding. No damage; 0 KIA/0 WIA.**

*O'Bannon* led a charmed life throughout the entire war. Maneuvering to avoid the flaming wrecks of *Cushing* and *Laffey*, *O'Bannon* became the lead of the U.S. column by default, closing within 1,800 yards of *Hiei*. *O'Bannon* scored numerous 5-inch hits on *Hiei* while the battleship's 14-inch shells passed within feet overhead and other fire missed. The destroyer fired two torpedoes at *Hiei* with no effect. *O'Bannon*'s only damage came from chunks of *Laffey* falling from the sky.

Presidential Unit Citation. Commander Wilkinson awarded Navy Cross. *O'Bannon* would earn 17 Battle Stars in World War II (tied for third) with no combat casualties. (The crew of *O'Bannon* attributed their good fortune to a St. Christopher's

medal mounted on the bridge. When *O'Bannon* was being scrapped, two former crewmen—who were also Pearl Harbor survivors—went onboard and retrieved the medal. They later presented it to Rear Admiral Winston Copeland, Commander of the *Theodore Roosevelt* Battle Group, just prior to *TR*'s 1999 deployment, during which its air wing (CVW-8) flew over 3,000 strike sorties in Kosovo/Serbia and 40 more in Iraq without suffering a combat loss or casualty. Rear Admiral Copeland subsequently presented the medal to then-Commander Ted Carter, now vice admiral and USNA superintendent. It now hangs in the Supe's conference room.)

**5. USS Atlanta (CL-51), Captain Samuel P. Jenkins commanding. Rear Admiral Norman Scott embarked. Lost in action; 170 KIA, 103 WIA.**

Moments before the Japanese opened fire, Rear Admiral Abe ordered his ships to illuminate targets with searchlight, and *Atlanta* was caught in the "crossfire" of searchlights. The cruiser fired at the offending lights, while coming under Japanese fire from multiple directions. *Atlanta*'s forward main 5-inch gun mounts engaged the *Hiei* to port while her after mounts engaged three Japanese destroyers to starboard; these had crossed through the U.S. formation ahead of *Atlanta*, which hit the *Hiei* and the destroyers multiple times. One of the three Japanese destroyers, the *Akatsuki*, was hit by so many U.S. ships simultaneously that she became a flaming wreck and sank with few survivors. However, along with multiple 5-inch hits from the destroyers and 6-inch hits from *Hiei*'s secondary batteries, a torpedo from one of the destroyers crippled the *Atlanta*. With visibility reduced even further by smoke, *Atlanta* then drifted into the line of fire of *San Francisco* and was hit by two full main 8-inch battery salvos, which hit high in *Atlanta*'s superstructure on a flat trajectory, aimed most likely for targets beyond. These shells (with telltale *San Francisco* green dye,) killed Rear Admiral Scott and three of his four staff officers. *Atlanta*

was hit by at least 13 rounds from the *Nagara* and *Hiei*, and 19 from *San Francisco*.

Presidential Unit Citation. Rear Admiral Scott awarded posthumous Medal of Honor. Captain Jenkins awarded Navy Cross. *Fletcher*-class DD-690 and *Kidd*-class DDG-995 named in honor of Scott.

**6. USS San Francisco (CA-38), Captain Cassin Young commanding. Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan embarked. Heavily damaged, 86 KIA (including 7 USMC) and 85 WIA, plus 24 KIA and 45 WIA in 12 November air attack.**

*San Francisco* opened fire on the Japanese destroyer *Yudachi*, hitting her multiple times. As numerous other U.S. ships started to pummel *Yudachi*, *San Francisco* shifted fire to the destroyer *Harusame*, which suddenly reversed course and possibly passed behind the drifting *Atlanta*, which was caught in the crossfire and heavily hit by *San Francisco*. This prompted Callaghan to issue the order "Cease fire own ships," which resulted in confusion about whether he meant a general cease-fire. Subsequently Callaghan had to clarify his order. *San Francisco* then encountered the battleship *Hiei* on opposite course. Both flagships fired broadsides into each other at a range of 2,500 yards while they were both being hit by other ships from opposite directions. During this brief duel, *San Francisco* hit *Hiei* with numerous 8-inch shells, one of which crippled *Hiei's* steering and would be the cause of the battleship's doom. *San Francisco* was hit by fire from the light cruiser *Nagara* and was engaged by the battleship *Kirishima* as well. The destroyer *Amatsukaze* fired four torpedoes at *San Francisco*, too close for them to arm, and narrowly avoided a collision. With *San Francisco* taking hits on both sides, *Hiei's* third 14-inch salvo hit *San Francisco* in the bridge area, and the several hits from *Hiei's* secondary batteries mortally wounded Captain Young, another hit killed Rear Admiral Callaghan and all but one of his staff, and yet another hit killed the acting executive officer,

Commander Joseph C. Hubbard in after control, while the wounded XO, Commander Crouter, was killed in his bunk. The only survivors in the pilot house were Lieutenant Commander Bruce McCandless and a quartermaster. After determining that Lieutenant Commander Herbert Schonland, the damage control officer, was senior surviving officer, the two agreed that Schonland would stay below in engineering to keep the ship (which had sustained over 45 hits by this point) from sinking while McCandless would fight the ship topside. Knowing that if he withdrew from the battle, other U.S. ships might follow, thinking they were following Callaghan, McCandless chose to stay in the fight, still exchanging fire with *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, although by this time most of *San Francisco's* guns were out of action. About the time Callaghan was killed (0200), Rear Admiral Abe lost his nerve and ordered the bombardment cancelled and his ships to withdraw and regroup—despite the fact that *Kirishima* was unscathed.

Presidential Unit Citation. Rear Admiral Callaghan awarded posthumous Medal of Honor. Captain Young awarded posthumous Navy Cross (previously awarded Medal of Honor at Pearl Harbor.) Lieutenant Commanders Herbert Schonland and Bruce McCandless awarded Medals of Honor. Boatswain's Mate First Class Reinhardt Keppler awarded posthumous Medal of Honor. Crew of *San Francisco* were awarded 32 Navy Crosses, 21 Silver Stars, and 1 Bronze Star with combat V. *Fletcher*-class DD-792 and *Kidd*-class DDG-994 named in honor of Callaghan. *Fletcher*-class DD-793 named in honor of Young (and is now a museum ship in Boston). *Gearing*-class DD-765 named in honor of BM1 Keppler. *Knox*-class frigate FF-1084 named in honor of McCandless and his father, Commodore Byron McCandless. USS *Harmon* (DE-678) was the first warship named for an African-American, Mess Attendant First Class Leonard Roy Harmon, killed while shielding wounded with his body. The following destroyer escorts were named after *San Francisco* crewmen who were awarded a posthumous Navy Cross: William Finnie Cates—

Canon-class USS *Cates* (DE-763); Mark Hannah Crouter–*Evarts*-class USS *Crouter* (DE-11); *Buckley*-class USS *Damon M. Cumings* (DE-643); George Raymond Eisele–*Evarts*-class USS *Eisele* (DE-34); Jacques Rodney Eisner–*Canon*-class USS *Eisner* (DE-192); George Irvin Falgout–*Edsall*-class USS *Falgout* (DE-324); Andrew Jackson Gandy–*Canon*-class USS *Gandy* (DE-764); Eugene F. George–*Buckley*-class USS *George* (DE-697); *Butler*-class USS *Albert T. Harris* (DE-447); *Buckley*-class USS *Joseph Hubbard* (DE-211); Louis Marcel LeHardy–*Evarts*-class USS *LeHardy* (DE-20); Harry James Lowe Jr.–*Edsall*-class USS *Lowe* (DE-325); Jackson Keith Loy–*Buckley*-class USS *Loy* (DE-160); *Buckley*-class USS *William T. Powell* (DE-213); Frank O. Slater–*Canon*-class destroyer escort USS *Slater* (DE-766), now a museum ship in Albany, New York; Kenneth J. Spangenberg–*Buckley*-class USS *Spangenberg* (DE-223); *Butler*-class USS *John L. Williamson* (DE-370); Jean C. Witter–*Buckley*-class USS *Witter* (DE-636); Jack William Wintle–*Evarts*-class USS *Wintle* (DE-25).

### **7. USS Portland (CA-33), Captain Laurence T. DuBose commanding. Damaged; 16 KIA, 10 WIA.**

Following *San Francisco*, *Portland* initially opened fire on a Japanese destroyer, when at 0158 the cruiser was hit by one of eight torpedoes from the *Yudachi* on starboard side aft that severed the starboard screws and resulted in plate damage. This forced *Portland* into a starboard circle. She spent the rest of the battle churning in a circle, and, at the conclusion of the first (of many) circles, got a firing solution on *Hiei* with her forward batteries, hitting the battleship with 10 to 14 8-inch shells.

Meritorious Unit Commendation. Captain Du Bose awarded second Navy Cross.

### **8. USS Helena (CL-50), Captain Gilbert C. Hoover commanding. Damaged; 1 KIA, 13 WIA.**

*Helena* opened fire on the Japanese destroyer *Akutsuki*, which returned fire, causing minor damage to the cruiser. *Helena* then picked her way through burning ships, engaging several Japanese vessels, including the destroyer *Amatsukaze* (whose skipper, Commander Tameichi Hara, would write the book *Japanese Destroyer Captain* shortly after the war, one of the first Japanese accounts translated into English with wide distribution and in U.S. Naval Institute book catalog even now). *Helena* engaged *Amatsukaze* while she was pumping rounds into *San Francisco* after sinking *Barton*. *Amatsukaze* was hit 37 times, with 43 killed, but survived the battle due to three other destroyers that distracted *Helena*. *Helena* was hit five times with minimal damage, while her rapid-fire 6-inch guns inflicted much greater damage to the Japanese.

Navy Unit Citation (combined with later actions in Solomons). Captain Hoover awarded third Navy Cross. *Helena* would be sunk at the Battle of Kula Gulf on 6 July 1943.

### **9. USS Juneau (CL-51), Captain Lyman K. Swenson commanding. Lost in action; 683 KIA, 4 WIA.**

*Juneau* was hit by a torpedo before she even had a chance to fire more than a few rounds in the battle. Severely damaged, with her keel probably broken by the torpedo and her steering disabled, *Juneau* limped from the battle area after almost colliding with *Helena*. At 0159, the destroyer *Amatsukaze* claimed to have launched four torpedoes at a ship identified as *Juneau*, with one observed hit at 0202. However, *Juneau* may have been hit by a torpedo from the lead Japanese destroyer, *Yudachi*.

Captain Swenson awarded posthumous Navy Cross. *Allen M. Sumner*-class DD-729 named in

honor of Swenson. *Fletcher*-class DDG-537 and *Arleigh Burke*-class DDG-68 named in honor of the five Sullivan brothers.

**10. USS Aaron Ward (DD-483), Commander Orville F. Gregor commanding. Damaged; 15 KIA, 38 WIA.**

*Aaron Ward*, leading the trailing four destroyers, plowed into the mass of wrecked and burning ships on both sides. The trail destroyers could all see the carnage ahead, but none of them faltered. Opening fire on *Hiei* at 7,000 yards, *Aaron Ward* had to go to an emergency backing bell to avoid hitting a burning Japanese destroyer. The *Yudachi* (which seemed to be everywhere in the battle) was hit by either gunfire from *Aaron Ward* or by friendly fire from another Japanese destroyer, the *Asagumo*, which left her dead in the water. Two torpedoes passed under *Aaron Ward*, which probably hit the *Barton*. *Aaron Ward* attempted to launch torpedoes at *Hiei*, but *San Francisco* was then too close to *Hiei* and *Aaron Ward* checked fire before blasting her way through a couple of Japanese destroyers on both sides. Damaged by nine direct hits, including three 14-inch battleship shells, *Aaron Ward* lost power at about 0235 and went dead in the water.

Commander Gregor (future rear admiral) awarded Navy Cross. USS *Aaron Ward* would be bombed and sunk off Guadalcanal on 7 April 1943.

**11. USS Barton (DD-599), Lieutenant Commander Douglas H. Fox commanding. Lost in action; 165 KIA, 31 WIA.**

After firing at Japanese destroyers for about seven minutes, *Barton* nearly collided with an unidentified vessel. While she was momentarily stationary, she was hit by two Japanese torpedoes and exploded, broke in two, and sank in a matter of minutes, taking the great majority of her crew with her. *Barton* was probably hit by at least two of

eight torpedoes fired by the destroyer *Amatsukaze* at 0154.

Lieutenant Commander Fox awarded a second Navy Cross, posthumously. *Allen M. Sumner*-class DD-779 named in honor of Fox.

**12. USS Monssen (DD-436), Lieutenant Commander Charles E. McCombs commanding. Lost in action; 145 KIA, 37 WIA.**

*Monssen* followed *Aaron Ward* and *Barton* into the pile-up when a torpedo went under her keel and another missed ahead. *Monssen* then fired five torpedoes at the *Hiei* at 4,000 yards, with the usual result for American torpedoes: nothing. *Monssen* then engaged a destroyer to starboard with five torpedoes and another to port at a quarter mile with guns, including 20-mm. The destroyer was then illuminated by star shells, which McCombs believed came from a U.S. ship. He flicked on his recognition lights before being deluged by 37 hits from multiple ships, including three 14-inch shells. *Monssen* was abandoned at 0220.

Lieutenant Commander McCombs was awarded a Navy Cross.

**13. USS Fletcher (DD-445), Commander William M. Cole, commanding. 0 KIA, 0 WIA.**

Triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number 13) ran rampant on *Fletcher* as the 13th ship in a line of 13 ships going into battle on Friday the 13th, with a hull number that added up to 13. However, the skipper, Commander Cole (USNA '13) considered it a good omen, and he was right. *Fletcher* was the only U.S. ship to emerge from the battle completely unscathed. She fired on multiple Japanese targets. Although Cole and his

executive officer, Joseph Wylie, had created a space that functioned much like a combat information center (CIC) with the new SG radar, even that did not prevent them from firing five torpedoes at what was possibly the U.S. light cruiser *Helena*, which in this case fortunately worked as U.S. torpedoes usually did. Wylie would go on to play a major role in the Navy's development of the CIC.

Commander Cole awarded a Navy Cross.

By 0230, the battle was essentially over after 40 minutes of sheer hell for both sides. After determining that he was probably the senior surviving officer in the force, Captain Gilbert Hoover of *Helena* gave the order to withdraw and regroup. Only *O'Bannon*, *Fletcher*, and the badly damaged *San Francisco* were able to do so. Daybreak revealed a sea littered with sinking, burning, and crippled wrecks. On the American side, *Laffey* and *Barton* had gone down. The burning hulks of *Cushing* and *Monssen* were still afloat, but would sink during the day. *Atlanta* was dead in the water and slowly sinking; she would have to be scuttled late in the day despite intense efforts to save her. *Aaron Ward* was dead in the water. The badly damaged *Juneau* and *Sterett* limped away and were eventually able to link up with *Helena*. *Portland* continued to churn in high-speed circles. After nightfall, the tug *Bobolink* finally pushed *Portland* into Tulagi, but only after a U.S. PT-boat fired torpedoes at the cruiser. These, fortunately, had no effect. *Bobolink* had done heroic rescue work throughout the day. About 1,400 U.S. survivors were rescued and brought ashore to Guadalcanal, many badly wounded.

On the Japanese side, *Hiei* was still afloat but rudderless, slowing trying to get out of the battle area using her engines to steer, firing on the *Aaron Ward*, but only straddling her before the *Bobolink* towed the destroyer to Tulagi. The other battleship, *Kirishima*, had been grazed by one 6-inch shell and escaped. *Akatsuki* had gone down. *Yudachi* was still afloat and burning, although her

207 surviving crew members had been taken aboard the destroyer *Samidare* during the night. *Samidare* fired one torpedo into *Yudachi* to scuttle her, which didn't do the job. However, although *Portland* was still trapped in her circular hell, her guns worked fine. She fired five 8-inch main battery salvos at *Yudachi*, the last hitting the after magazine and obliterating her in a massive explosion. The heavily damaged *Amatsukase* made good her escape, and most of the remainder of the Japanese ships withdrew with varying degrees of damage.

At 1100 on 13 November, Captain Hoover's ad hoc group of survivors, *Helena*, *Fletcher*, *O'Bannon*, and the damaged *Juneau* and *Sterett* were headed toward the relative safety of Espiritu Santo, when they encountered Japanese submarine *I-26*. *I-26* was the same submarine that had torpedoed and put the carrier USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) out of action for months at the end of September (and sent Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher to the States for good) and the same submarine that had failed to alert Rear Admiral Goto of Rear Admiral Turner's force, resulting in the Japanese defeat at the Battle of Cape Esperance. This time, *I-26* would get the job done, firing a spread of torpedoes at *San Francisco*. *San Francisco* maneuvered to avoid, but with all her communications gear destroyed in the battle, she could not provide warning. One torpedo that missed *San Francisco* hit *Juneau* instead, resulting in a catastrophic explosion that obliterated the ship. Parts of *Juneau* rained down on *San Francisco*. In Hornfischer's book, the chapter title "Cruiser in the Sky" pretty much sums it up. No one who observed the explosion believed that anyone could have survived, but approximately 100 of her crew of almost 700 did, initially including one of the five Sullivan brothers (George).

With only the *Fletcher* capable of ASW operations (*O'Bannon* had been temporarily detached from the group in order to communicate with higher headquarters—and not give away the location of

Hoover's force) and an effective Japanese submarine on the loose, Hoover had no real choice but to exit the area as fast as possible. Searching for survivors was not an option unless he wanted to get more of his ships sunk. Hoover signaled a passing B-17 bomber with flashing light, which passed on the coordinates when it arrived at Henderson field, which then became lost. After ten days adrift in the most horrific conditions, only 10 men from *Juneau* would ultimately be rescued; these did not include George Sullivan. In total, 683 crewmen were lost. Upon Rear Admiral Turner's recommendation, Halsey found Hoover's conduct deficient and he was relieved of command, which Halsey later admitted was an injustice, tarnishing the reputation of an officer who had just been awarded a third Navy Cross.

The *Hiei* could not get away fast enough. U.S. aircraft launching from Henderson field at first light were stunned to find a Japanese battleship only a few miles from Guadalcanal. Seventy sorties attacked *Hiei* throughout the day, hitting her with at least three bombs and four torpedoes (with many more claimed) and still *Hiei* would not go down. Captain Nishida resisted two orders from Rear Admiral Abe to abandon the ship. An incorrect report that his engines had been damaged finally caused Nishida to give the order over the vehement protestations of his crew, who still believed the ship could be saved. Destroyers came alongside and rescued most of her crew, but 300 had still died. U.S. aircraft hit *Hiei* with two more torpedoes during the abandonment operation. Around 1830, a message came in from Yamamoto ordering that *Hiei* not be scuttled, so that she could serve as a diversion from the transport convoy the next day. Sometime during the night of 13/14 November, *Hiei* finally succumbed.

*Hiei* had taken an enormous beating, but the guns of U.S. cruisers and destroyers lacked the power to inflict fatal damage on a battleship, as Captain Young had predicted. Had it not been for *San*

*Francisco's* hit that knocked out the battleship's steering, she probably would have survived. (One of the torpedoes that hit *Hiei* was dropped from a Torpedo Squadron Eight TBF Avenger flown by skipper Lieutenant Commander Harold "Swede" Larsen. Larsen had led the detachment of VT-8 that had transitioned from the TBD Devastator to the TBF and had arrived on Oahu the day after USS *Hornet* and the rest of VT-8 had left for the Battle of Midway. Six of Larsen's det flew on to Midway and five were lost in the battle, while all 15 of the squadron's TBD's on *Hornet* were lost. VT-8 subsequently cross-decked to the USS *Saratoga*, participated in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, and then operated from Henderson Field after *Saratoga* was torpedoed. In an epic tale of endurance, only three of VT-8's TBFs were still operational by mid-November, and Larsen's attack on *Hiei* would be the second-to-last combat mission flown by VT-8 before it was decommissioned.)

At a cost of 1,429 men and six ships, Callaghan and TG 67.4 had bought one day's respite for Henderson Field from a major bombardment, and so delayed the Japanese transport force that it would be vulnerable to daylight air attack. Whether the sacrifice was worth it remains open to debate. Even if all 7,000 Japanese troops had made it to Guadalcanal, the Japanese army forces lacked the power to drive the Marines into the sea (and U.S. forces had just been reinforced with 5,500 troops). What is not debatable is the extraordinary valor of the U.S. Sailors who went into battle against overwhelming odds and never wavered in their dedication to duty. If anyone ever exemplified the Navy core values of honor, courage, and commitment, it was the Sailors of TG 67.4.



*Navy Art Collection painting depicting destroyer Laffey just after she has crossed under the Japanese battleship Hiei's bow and is engaging the battleship with 5-inch and 20-mm guns—and sidearms—at near-point-blank range on 13 November 1942 off Guadalcanal.*

## **H-012-2: *Laffey and Hiei***

*H-Gram 012, Attachment 2*  
*Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC*  
*November 2017*



*USS San Francisco Memorial in San Francisco, California, showing damage to her port bridge wing sustained on 13 November 1942. The ship's damaged bridge wings were removed after the battle and used to create a memorial to her crew.*

## **H-012-3: *Laffey and Hiei***

*H-Gram 012, Attachment 3*  
*Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC*  
*November 2017*



USS South Dakota (BB-57), showing shell hole in ship's side starboard, at frame 29-31. Taken after the naval battle off Guadalcanal, 15 November 1942 (19-N-42754).

## H-012-4: Guadalcanal, 1942—The Battle of Saturday the 14th

*H-Gram 012, Attachment 4*  
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC  
November 2017

The Japanese weren't very good at quitting. Despite being thwarted in their plans to bombard Henderson Field on Guadalcanal on the night of 12/13 November, the operation to reinforce and retake Guadalcanal continued. The loss of the *Hiei*, the emperor's favorite battleship, came as a profound shock to the Admiral Yamamoto and the Japanese navy leadership, perhaps even greater than the loss of the carriers at Midway. The purpose of the carriers, cruisers, and destroyers was to whittle down the American fleet

before the ultimate clash of battleships that would decide the war, according to two decades of Japanese naval planning and doctrine. Losing some of them was expected. Losing a battleship was unacceptable. Rear Admiral Abe and Captain Nishida paid for the loss of *Hiei* with their careers and were promptly retired.

During the day of 13 November, both Admiral Yamamoto and Vice Admiral Halsey made plans for follow-on action. Yamamoto ordered Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo to take the battleship *Kirishima* (which came through the battle before dawn that morning virtually unscathed), two heavy cruisers (*Atago* and *Takao*), and escorts to shell Henderson Field on the night of 14/15 November. Due partially to an increasingly acute Japanese fuel shortage, Kondo's other two battleships, *Kongo* and *Huruna* (which had shelled Henderson Field in mid-October), were held back north of the Solomon Islands.

With the battered remnants of the late Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan's force in no condition to give battle, Halsey had few options. He had ordered the damaged USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) to get underway even with her forward elevator still jammed and get into the fight; *Enterprise* arrived in time for her aircraft to participate in the bombing of the *Hiei* and Japanese transports on 13 and 14 November, and some of *Enterprise*'s aircraft operated from Henderson Field due to the carrier's reduced operational capacity. Although Halsey absolutely could not afford to lose *Enterprise*, the last operational U.S. fleet carrier in the Pacific, he took a major risk by detaching her two battleship escorts (USS *Washington* and USS *South Dakota*) and four destroyers, and violating every lesson learned from U.S. Naval War College war games (as Halsey later said), sending them into the confined waters of Iron Bottom Sound to oppose the next Japanese thrust. The four destroyers were all from different divisions, had never trained together before, and were picked because they had the most fuel. *Washington* and *South Dakota* had minimal experience working together as well. This completely ad hoc task force was designated TF 64, under the command of Rear Admiral Willis A. "Ching" Lee.

Lee was considered a master of naval gunnery, was extraordinarily technically adept, and reputed (rightly) to know more about radar than the radar operators. Lee was also a shooting enthusiast and was tied for the most medals (seven, including five golds) earned in Olympic competition (1920), a record that stood for 60 years. He had also put his shooting skills to use during the naval landings at Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, deliberately exposing himself to draw fire and then shooting three snipers at long range. Lee also had an advantage in that both *Washington* and *South Dakota* were equipped with the latest SG search radar, and Lee had invested great time and effort on *Washington* (and before), developing the basic principles of radar-directed gunfire.

On the night of 13/14 November, shortly after midnight, two Japanese heavy cruisers, the *Suzuya* and *Maya*, shelled Henderson Field with almost 1,000 rounds, but succeeded in destroying only two Wildcat fighters and two SDB dive bombers, and damaging 15 other Wildcats, a far cry from what battleships *Kongo* and *Haruna* had done in October and what *Hiei* and *Kirishima* could have done the night before, but for the sacrifice of Callaghan's ships. Two U.S. PT-boats tried, but were unable to disrupt the cruiser bombardment.

*Maya* and *Suzuya* subsequently rendezvoused with other Japanese heavy cruisers (*Chokai* and *Kinugasa*) under the command of Rear Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, but did not get far enough away from Guadalcanal before daylight and paid for their failure to effectively suppress Henderson Field. Marine and Navy planes attacked the Japanese cruisers, claiming several hits, but probably achieving no direct hits. However, at 0815 on 14 November, two SBD scout bombers from *Enterprise* located the Japanese cruisers. Flight lead Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert D. Gibson and his wingman shadowed Mikawa's force for over 90 minutes. Gibson then conducted a solo dive-bombing attack on the heavy cruiser *Kinugasa* (which had nearly sunk USS *Boise* at the Battle of Cape Esperance), accurately planting his bomb just forward of the bridge and killing *Kinugasa*'s captain and executive officer (and others). Gibson was awarded a Navy Cross. A second set of *Enterprise* SBDs attacked Mikawa's force. *Maya* shot down one of them, flown by Ensign P. M. Halloran, which crashed into the cruiser, igniting ammunition and a fire which killed 37 of her crew. Meanwhile, a strike of 17 SBDs from *Enterprise*, reacting to Gibson's sighting reports, rolled in on Mikawa's force with damaging near misses on the heavy cruiser *Chokai* and light cruiser *Isuzu*. Other SBDs severely damaged *Kinugasa* with multiple near-misses, resulting in flooding that caused the cruiser to capsize and sink at 1122, taking 511 of her crew down with her.

Meanwhile, as U.S. aircraft concentrated on Mikawa's cruiser force, a 23-ship troop convoy under the command of Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka was proceeding virtually unmolested toward Guadalcanal under the mistaken impression that Henderson Field had been suppressed. The convoy's luck ran out at 1250, when 18 Marine SBD dive bombers from Henderson and seven *Enterprise* TBF torpedo bombers (flying from Henderson) attacked. More waves of aircraft from the airfield and yet more from *Enterprise* also attacked. Bombers from Henderson turned around as fast as they could for more strikes until dusk. Even B-17s got in on the action: The large numbers of bombs they dropped got Tanaka's attention, but, as usual, horizontal high-altitude bombing hit nothing. The dive bombers and torpedo bombers were a different story. Of the 23 ships (which included escorts), six transports were sunk and one turned about along with two destroyers after rescuing 1,562 survivors. Four other Japanese destroyers rescued another 3,240 survivors during the night. Despite the slaughter of troop transports, only 450 soldiers were lost thanks to the Japanese rescue operation, but none of those 4,500-plus troops made it to Guadalcanal. Tanaka was ordered to press on with four remaining transports and five destroyers, despite being certain he could not reach Guadalcanal before dawn on 15 November.

Japanese search planes sighted Lee's battleship force heading toward Guadalcanal, but bungled the identification, reporting them as cruisers, giving Vice admiral Kondo a false sense of security. Conversely, during the day-long attacks on Mikawa's cruisers and Tanaka's transports, Kondo's force had remained undetected. The U.S. had radio-intelligence intercepts that indicated the *Kirishima* was coming, just not exactly where or when. In typical Japanese fashion, Kondo came up with a complex battle plan. Flying his flag in the heavy cruiser *Atago*, he intended to personally lead the Bombardment Group of battleship *Kirishima* and another heavy cruiser *Takao*. Rear Admiral Kimura would lead a Screen

Group of light cruiser *Nagara* (survivor of the Friday the 13th battle) and six destroyers to protect the Bombardment Group. Taking a lesson from Rear Admiral Abe's failure two nights earlier, the Bombardment and Screen Groups would hang back west of Savo Island, and a Sweep Group, consisting of the light cruiser *Sendai* and three destroyers, would go into Iron Bottom Sound to see what was there first, this time expecting to find a few cruisers and destroyers.

Lee's force got to Iron Bottom Sound first, and, based on intelligence and reconnaissance reports from aircraft and submarine, fully expected to encounter a major Japanese force that could include as many as three battleships, ten cruisers, and a dozen or more destroyers. Halsey had given Lee free rein once Lee's force reached Guadalcanal, so Lee's decision to engage a possible overwhelming force with his own hodge-podge force represented boldness and courage every bit as great as that of Callaghan and Scott. Because his force had not trained together, especially in night fighting, Lee opted to use the same single-column line-ahead formation as Callaghan had done two nights earlier and Scott had done at Cape Esperance. The advantages were the same as before: simplified control and decreased risk of fratricidal engagements with his own forces. The disadvantage, still not clearly grasped even by Lee, was that it presented a great target for long-range Japanese torpedoes. Lee's force was arrayed in the following order: the four destroyers *Walke*, *Benham*, *Preston*, and *Gwin*, with a large 5,000-yard gap between the destroyers and the flagship *Washington*, which was followed by *South Dakota*. The column was nearly attacked by three U.S. PT-boats, which were unaware of Lee's force.

At 2200 on 14 November, Kondo's force (14 ships) executed the planned three-way split. Lookouts on destroyers in the Japanese Sweep Group quickly spotted Lee's force, reporting "new-type cruisers." At 2231, the Japanese flagship *Atago* spotted the U.S. force, but then

Kondo quickly received a series of contradictory reports that confused his picture of the situation. One of the reports, from a float plane, stated the U.S. forces included "heavy cruisers or battleships," while others were still reporting cruisers. Kondo decided that his light forces could handle the U.S. ships, and turned the Bombardment Group (still prepared for shore bombardment rather than with ready ammunition more suited for a surface engagement) to pass north of Savo Island rather than encounter the westerly-heading U.S. force head-on in the strait south of the island.

At about 2252, *Washington's* SG search radar detected the Japanese Sweep Group at a range of about nine miles to starboard, well after Japanese lookouts had sighted them. By 2315, both *Washington* and *South Dakota* had the Sweep Group in sight, still to starboard. Lee's destroyers, two miles ahead of the U.S. battleships, had yet to detect Japanese ships. At 2316, Lee gave the order to open fire when ready. Both U.S. battleships opened fire on the light cruiser *Sendai* at 18,500 yards, completely startling the Japanese as radar showed U.S. rounds straddling the *Sendai*. *Sendai* and the two destroyers accompanying her quickly reversed course. Another destroyer in the Sweep Group, *Ayanami*, had proceeded independently through the strait south of Savo Island.

At 2322, *Walke*, the lead U.S. destroyer (which, like the other three destroyers, did not have SG radar), sighted and engaged *Ayanami*. *Benham* also quickly took *Ayanami* under fire. As the two lead U.S. destroyers blazed away at *Ayanami*, the *Preston* (third in line) sighted the light cruiser *Nagara* and four destroyers of the screen force coming up behind the *Ayanami* at 2327 and opened fire on *Nagara*. The well-alerted Japanese cruiser and destroyers quickly demonstrated their night-fighting superiority, adhering to their doctrine to launch torpedoes before opening fire. Using the backdrop of Savo Island (and flashless powder) to their advantage, the Japanese quickly

began registering hits on the U.S. destroyers while the unseen torpedoes were on the way. (U.S. doctrine was to save torpedoes for high-value units, which had yet to be spotted. Most of the U.S. torpedoes would go down with their ships.)

The *Preston* was staggered by multiple shell hits from *Nagara*, killing all hands in both firerooms and igniting torpedo warheads. More hits devastated the ship aft, killing the executive officer. (There is also some strong evidence that *Preston* was hit by "friendly fire" from *Washington* at the same time.) By 2336, Commander Stormes had to give the order to abandon ship, and only about 30 seconds later, the ship rolled over and then sank by the stern, taking 116 men and Stormes with her.

At 2332, *Gwin* (fourth in line) was hit by two shells in the after engine room, which also caused several torpedoes to slide out of their tubes overboard. *Gwin* swerved to port to avoid the sinking *Preston*, which shielded her from Japanese torpedoes that began to strike. *Walke*, already being staggered by multiple shell hits, was hit by a Long Lance just forward of the bridge. The torpedo detonated *Walke's* forward magazine and blew the bow clean off. Sinking rapidly, *Walke's* skipper, Commander Fraser, gave the abandon ship order. As *Walke* sank, her depth charges exploded, killing many of the men who had made it into the water, including Fraser. At the same time, another Long Lance struck *Benham* in the bow, causing no casualties, but structural damage that would quickly prove fatal to the ship. However, the Japanese destroyers had expended many more torpedoes than had actually hit, which were that many fewer that could be fired at *Washington* and *South Dakota*. So, the sacrifice of the destroyers might well have saved the U.S. battleships.

With all four U.S. destroyers sunk, sinking, or essentially out of action, the Japanese Screen Group slipped away almost unscathed. *Ayanami*,

however, pressed home her attack on the crippled U.S. destroyers, but in doing so stood out from the backdrop of Savo Island, which gave *Washington* a clear target. *Ayanami* was quickly turned into a burning wreck dead in the water.

At 2330, after initially firing on the Japanese Sweep Group, *South Dakota* suffered a massive self-inflicted power failure, which knocked out her radars, communications, most of her guns, and the situational awareness of her skipper, Captain Gatch. As *Washington* passed the line of burning destroyers, she proceeded on the far side from the Japanese and remained unobserved. *South Dakota* passed on the near side and was silhouetted by the flames, but this also put her in *Washington's* radar blind spot aft of the ship and caused Lee to lose track of where *South Dakota* was. When she restored electrical power, she opened fire again on the Japanese Sweep Group, which was now astern. The blast from number three turret set all three float planes on the quarterdeck on fire, briefly pinpointing *South Dakota's* position to the Japanese before the concussion from the battleship's next salvo blew two planes overboard; a third snuffed the flames.

Vice Admiral Kondo's view of the situation was not very accurate, either, and only after about 2350 did he start receiving reports that consistently indicated U.S. battleships were involved. Even then he refused to believe it. Convinced that the screen group had decimated the U.S. force (and they had decimated the destroyer force), Kondo began to press into the strait south of Savo intent on executing the bombardment mission. By 2335, *Washington's* SG radar was tracking *Kirishima*, but because of the uncertainty regarding *South Dakota's* actual location, Lee withheld opening fire until he could sort it out.

At about 2358, the two cruisers of the bombardment group fired Long Lance torpedoes at the *South Dakota*, which had inadvertently closed to within three miles as she grappled with her power and other material problems. At 0000

on 15 November, *Atago* illuminated *South Dakota* with a searchlight and a shocked Kondo only then became convinced he was facing battleships. Other searchlights caught *South Dakota* in their beams, and, in a matter of a few minutes, she was hit by 27 shells from five different Japanese ships, one of which was a 14-inch shell from *Kirishima* that failed to penetrate the battleship's belt armor. However, damage to *South Dakota's* topside was extensive, with many hits in the forward superstructure. Among other things, these destroyed the radar plot, disabled gun directors, set over 20 major fires, killed 39 crewmen, and wounded 59 more. Another Japanese destroyer fired four more torpedoes at *South Dakota*. Astonishingly, given the range, every torpedo fired by the Japanese missed. *South Dakota* fought back with her secondary armament, but her main battery got off only a few rounds due to lack of target data (two of the three guns in turret two were inoperative anyway due to the bomb that hit turret one at Santa Cruz).

When the Japanese opened fire on *South Dakota*, Lee no longer had any ambiguity about the large radar target *Washington* had been tracking, and the Japanese lost track of where *Washington* was. From a range of 8,400 yards, and in a matter of minutes, *Washington* smothered the *Kirishima* with at least nine and probably 20 radar-directed 16-inch shells that penetrated *Kirishima's* armor into vital spaces; some penetrated below the waterline. Forty or more 5-inch shells from *Washington* also devastated *Kirishima's* topsides, while one pair of 5-inch mounts also engaged the flagship *Atago*, which was still bore-sighted on engaging *South Dakota*. By the time Kondo figured out he was under fire from another battleship, it was too late for *Kirishima*. At 0013, the two Japanese heavy cruisers fired a total of 16 torpedoes at *Washington*, and, at 0020, *Atago* fired three more torpedoes. As in the case of *South Dakota*, every torpedo fired at *Washington* missed.

As *South Dakota* and the two damaged destroyers cleared the battle area, *Washington* was alone against 14 Japanese ships (including crippled *Kirishima*), still with dozens of lethal torpedoes. The situation did give Lee the advantage of knowing that every other contact was hostile, solving the fratricide problem. Meanwhile, Japanese command and control degenerated into chaos. Nevertheless, Kondo maneuvered his two heavy cruisers to boldly pursue *Washington*. *Washington* also had to maneuver to avoid two Japanese destroyers that were closing in on her position for a torpedo attack. Here, the speed of the new American fast battleships paid dividends. At this point, Lee opted to withdraw, and he proceeded well west and then south with about six Japanese destroyers in pursuit (the westerly course was to draw the Japanese away from the limping *Benham* and *Gwin*, which Lee had previously ordered to withdraw, and the battered *South Dakota*, which had already elected to withdraw).

At about 0040, two pursuing Japanese destroyers each fired a salvo of torpedoes at the retreating *Washington*, which required the battleship to take evasive maneuvers. At 0045, Kondo ordered *Kirishima* to withdraw and got no answer. A search party of two destroyers found *Kirishima* about five miles west of Savo Island in grave trouble. Her power plant was still functional, but her rudder was jammed over. Although her crew fought mightily to save her, they could not control the fires and flooding, and, at 0325, she capsized and sank. Many of her crew were rescued by three destroyers standing by. Another destroyer rescued much of the crew of the badly damaged *Ayanami* before she blew up and sank.

At 0215, *South Dakota* was finally able to restore some communications. Her topside fires had been so severe that Lee was concerned she had been lost. As *Benham* steamed slowly to the south, it became increasingly apparent that she was no longer structurally sound, and would have already broken apart had it not been for the

relatively calm seas. However, the sea state was increasing rapidly enough that *Gwin* could not come alongside, but all of *Benham's* crew were successfully transferred to *Gwin* by small boat. *Gwin* then attempted to scuttle *Benham* with a spread of four torpedoes, all of which typically malfunctioned. However, a 5-inch round into *Benham's* magazine did the job.

The remnants of Rear Admiral Tanaka's convoy reached Guadalcanal around 0400 and the four remaining troop transports deliberately ran themselves aground. The five destroyers then departed in an attempt to avoid the inevitable air attacks at dawn, taking with them many ground troops that had been rescued from the water the day before. Waves of U.S. aircraft from Henderson pounded the beached transports while others polished off abandoned, but still floating, transports from the previous day's attacks. The destroyer USS *Meade* (DD-602), which had escorted a cargo ship to Tulagi, found herself in sole command of Iron Bottom Sound. *Meade* spent the day blasting the beached transports and Japanese positions ashore before rescuing survivors from *Walke* and *Preston*.

In the end, only about 2,000 Japanese troops made it ashore on Guadalcanal, with very little of their ammunition and supplies. Although fighting would continue on Guadalcanal for months, this marked the last major attempt by the Japanese to retake the island. Japanese operations transitioned to just trying to hold their part of the island and keep their troops from starving. The cost to the Japanese of the two major sea battles and the air attacks was two old (but fast) battleships, one heavy cruiser, three destroyers, 40 aircraft, and about 1,900 sailors, soldiers and aviators. The U.S. lost two anti-aircraft cruisers, seven destroyers, 26 aircraft, and 1,732 Sailors, Marines, and airmen. Although the price tag in blood was roughly even, the American losses would be replaced and the Japanese losses would not. The result of the battles of mid-November was a decisive victory for the United

States that turned the tide of the Guadalcanal campaign in favor of the U.S. forces. America held the initiative for the rest of the campaign and the rest of the war. Nevertheless, the U.S. Navy was about to find out in two weeks that even just a handful of Japanese destroyers were extremely dangerous, resulting in yet another disaster at the Battle of Tassafaronga.

WIA. Fellows awarded a Navy Cross. *Gwin* sunk at the Battle of Kolombangara in July 1943.

***Summary of U.S. ships engaged in the battle of 14/15 November:***

USS *Washington* (BB-56), Captain Glenn B. Davis commanding. Rear Admiral Willis A. "Ching" Lee (Commander TF-64) embarked. No damage. No casualties. Lee awarded a Navy Cross (subsequently promoted to vice admiral and dying of a heart attack days before the Japanese surrender).

USS *South Dakota* (BB-57), Captain Thomas L. Gatch commanding. Damaged; 39 KIA (including 1 Marine), 59 WIA. Gatch awarded a second Navy Cross. The battleship awarded a Navy Unit Citation for combined Santa Cruz and Guadalcanal actions.

USS *Walke* (DD-416), Commander Thomas E. Fraser commanding. Lost in action; 80 KIA, 48 WIA. Fraser awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyer DD-736 (converted to DM-24) named in his honor.

USS *Benham* (DD-397), Lieutenant Commander John B. Taylor commanding. Lost in action; 0 KIA/8 WIA. Taylor awarded a Navy Cross.

USS *Preston* (DD-379), Commander Max C. Stormes commanding. Lost in action; 117 KIA, 26 WIA. Stormes awarded a posthumous Navy Cross. *Allen M. Sumner*-class destroyer DD-780 named in his honor.

USS *Gwin* (DD-433), Lieutenant Commander John B. Fellows Jr., commanding. Damaged; 6 KIA, 0