

H-Gram 022: Spanish Influenza Epidemic, Loss of British Transport HMT *Rohna*, Operation Leader, Loss of USS *Wahoo*, Battle of Vella Lavella, Operation Rolling Thunder Ends

31 October 2018

This H-gram covers the Spanish influenza outbreak of 1918-19, which killed 5,027 U.S. Navy sailors; the little-known sinking of the HMT Rohna by a German guided glide bomb, that resulted in the loss of over 1,000 U.S. Army troops; Operation Leader, the successful strike by USS Ranger (CV-4) north of the Arctic circle off Norway; the loss of USS Wahoo (SS-238) and her legendary skipper Mush Morton; the Battle of Vella Lavella, the last Japanese surface victory of World War II; and the end to Operation Rolling Thunder in the Vietnam War.

Back issues of H-grams (enhanced with imagery) can be found here [<https://www.history.navy.mil/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams.html>], along with a lot of other cool stuff on NHHC's website [<https://www.history.navy.mil>].

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100th Anniversary of World War I

The Worst Killer of All: The Spanish Influenza, 1918-19

During World War I, 431 U.S. Navy personnel were killed as a result of enemy action and 819 were wounded. However, 5,027 died as a result of the Spanish influenza epidemic between the fall of 1918 and spring of 1919, more deaths than at Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, or Okinawa. The peak of the epidemic in the U.S. Navy occurred from September to November 1918, during which 121,225 Navy personnel were admitted to the hospital, and many more were sickened. It is estimated that as many as 40 percent of the 600,000 sailors in the Navy in 1918 contracted the virus. The hardest-hit ship was the armored cruiser USS Pittsburgh (ACR-4) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in October 1918, on which 663 (80 percent) of her crew contracted the virus and 58 died. During the epidemic, at least ten U.S. Navy nurses died as a result of aiding the afflicted and three of them would be awarded posthumous Navy Crosses. Worldwide, the pandemic is now estimated to have killed between 50 and 100 million people (3 to 6 percent of the world's population at the time) and over 700,000 people in the United States, with a mortality rate of between 10 and 20 percent of those infected globally. (For more on the impact of the Spanish influenza on the U.S. Navy, please see attachment H-022-1.)

75th Anniversary of World War II

European Theater: Forgotten Valor—USS Pioneer (AM-105) and the sinking of HMT Rohna, the Worst Loss of U.S. Life at Sea

On 26 November 1943, a German Hs-293 radio-controlled, rocket-boosted glide bomb hit and sank His Majesty's Transport (HMT) Rohna off the coast of Algeria, resulting in the deaths of 1,149 crew and passengers, including 1,015 U.S. Army troops (plus

35 U.S. soldiers who subsequently died from wounds.) The loss of Rohna constituted the greatest loss of U.S. life at sea due to enemy action. (During the attack on Pearl Harbor, 1,077 U.S. sailors died in port aboard the USS Arizona [BB-39], and 879 sailors were lost at sea in 1945 in the sinking of the cruiser USS Indianapolis [CA-35]). Approximately 1,192 crew and soldiers were killed in an accidental boiler explosion and fire aboard the Mississippi steamboat Sultana at the end of the Civil War in April 1865.) Over 1,100 survivors of Rohna were rescued, 606 of them by the minesweeper USS Pioneer (AM-105) at great risk to the ship due to ongoing German air attacks and risk of submarine attack. Under the command of Commander LeRoy "Roy" Rogers, USN, Pioneer's crew repeatedly displayed acts of valor, diving into the cold water in the gathering darkness at great risk to their own lives to assist struggling soldiers. In order to keep the Germans from learning how successful the guided-bomb attack had been, a tight lid of secrecy was clamped down on the incident, which continued long after the war. The details of the sinking were not released until the late 1960s and remained obscure long after that. Presumably as a result of the secrecy, neither the crew of the Pioneer, nor the ship itself, ever received any kind of formal recognition from the U.S. Navy for their heroic actions in rescuing so many of their brother soldiers. (For more on the sinking of HMT Rohna and the subsequent rescue effort, please see attachment H-022-2.)

Arctic Strike: Operation Leader, the U.S. Carrier Raid on Norway, and "Diz" Laird

On 4 October 1943, the aircraft carrier USS Ranger (CV-4) launched two strike packages against German shipping targets along the coast of occupied Norway near Bodø (just north of the Arctic Circle) and Sandnessjøen, 100 miles to the south. Armed with excellent intelligence derived from breaking the German's Enigma code and from the Norwegian Secret Intelligence Service, the raid caught the Germans completely by surprise and was a success. At least five German (or German-controlled) ships, including a large tanker and a troopship, were sunk or beached, and an additional seven or so damaged to varying degrees, for a loss of three aircraft due to anti-aircraft fire and one other due to operational

mishap. Radar on Ranger detected German reconnaissance aircraft attempting to find the source of the strike, and two of three were shot down. One of the German aircraft was shot down by Lieutenant Junior Grade Dean S. "Diz" Laird and his flight lead, and the other by Diz alone. Diz would go on to be the only U.S. Navy ace to shoot down both German and Japanese aircraft, finishing the war with 5 ¾ kills. The raid on Norway, known as Operation Leader, was the first time U.S. Navy aircraft engaged German aircraft (aircraft from Ranger had engaged Vichy French aircraft during Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa in November 1942) and, although successful, it would be the last time U.S. aircraft carriers conducted a strike against Europe. So, as for Ocean Venture and Trident Juncture 18, those Navy Sailors who participated in Operation Leader would say, "been there, done that...long before." (For more on Operation Leader and Diz Laird, please see attachment H-022-3.)

Pacific Theater: Loss of USS Wahoo and Lieutenant Commander "Mush" Morton

On 11 October 1943, the submarine USS Wahoo (SS-238), under the command of the renowned Lieutenant Commander Dudley Walker "Mush" Morton, was sunk with all 79 hands by a sustained air and surface attack as she was attempting to exit the Sea of Japan via La Perouse Strait. At the time, all that was known was that Wahoo departed Midway Island on 13 September 1943 and was never heard from again, although intelligence derived from broken Japanese codes allowed her general movements to be tracked based on Japanese reporting of ship losses. She was listed as missing on 9 November after she failed to report as she was supposed to following her exit from the Sea of Japan. The commander of U.S. Submarines in the Pacific, Vice Admiral Charles A. Lockwood, recorded in his diary that, "This is the worst blow we have had." At the time, under the aggressive and inspirational leadership of Mush Morton, Wahoo was the most successful submarine in the Pacific (after the war, she would be credited with sinking 19 ships under Morton, and Morton would be the third-most-successful submarine skipper in the war, even when Wahoo's sixth war patrol was a complete bust due to defective torpedoes). Wahoo's executive officer on

five war patrols was Lieutenant Richard O'Kane, who would go on to be the most successful submarine skipper of the war.

After Wahoo was officially declared overdue on 2 December 1943, Lockwood put Morton in for a Medal of Honor (Morton already had three Navy Crosses), but the award was declined, possibly due to a controversial incident that occurred on Morton's first war patrol (Wahoo's third), in which Morton ordered Wahoo to fire on lifeboats with armed Japanese soldiers that had abandoned a ship (Buyo Maru) the submarine had sunk. It was not known until much later that many of those in the water and in the boats were British Indian Army prisoners of war being used as forced labor by the Japanese. There are some that argue that Morton committed a war crime (I'm not one of them), but the incident is a case study in the moral ambiguity that occurs in an existential war for survival and, in particular, with "unrestricted" submarine warfare. The wreck of Wahoo was found in La Perouse Strait in 2005, and subsequently conclusively identified; she was sunk as a result of a direct hit by a bomb from a Japanese aircraft. (For more on the Wahoo's extraordinary service life, please see attachment H-022-4.)

Battle of Vella Lavella: The Last Japanese Victory

On the night of 6-7 October 1943, a force of three U.S. destroyers attacked nine Japanese destroyers northwest of the island of Vella Lavella in the central Solomons. Despite advantages of radar, the new combat information centers (CIC) aboard U.S. ships, and improved doctrine, valor and audacity could not overcome numbers or the superior capabilities of Japanese torpedoes. Within a short span, the destroyer Chevalier (DD-451) had been hit by a torpedo, her bow blown off by a magazine explosion, and the destroyer O'Bannon (DD-450) got entangled in her wreckage, having collided from behind in the smoke of battle. Selfridge (DD-357), with squadron commander Captain Frank Walker embarked, continued to press the attack alone until she, too, was hit and crippled by a Japanese torpedo. With the three U.S. destroyers dead in the water and at his mercy, the Japanese commander

opted to disengage, having lost one destroyer, and having been fooled by a grossly inflated report from a scout aircraft. Nevertheless, the Japanese force accomplished its mission to evacuate the last 589 Japanese soldiers on Vella Lavella before U.S. and New Zealand ground forces closed in. The Battle of Vella Lavella would be the last major battle of the Central Solomons campaign, and would also be the last significant Japanese victory of the war. Following Vella Lavella, the Japanese navy embarked on a sustained losing streak as its extensive losses in the Solomon Islands had taken their toll, and as U.S. improvements in integrating new technology, overwhelming numbers, and sheer aggressiveness turned the tide. Vella Lavella is also the first case I know of in which the U.S. commander fought the battle from the CIC rather than the bridge, a paradigm shift in naval warfare. (For more on the Battle of Vella Lavella, please see attachment H-022-5.)

forces, and improved defenses unmolested by U.S. bombing. The United States would resume bombing of North Vietnam during the Nixon administration (operations Linebacker and Linebacker II), and would mine Haiphong Harbor when the North Vietnamese launched a major conventional offensive into South Vietnam (complete with tanks) in the spring of 1972. I will write more about the end of Rolling Thunder and the continuation of the war in Vietnam in future H-grams, but I would recommend reviewing H-grams 011 and 017, which discuss the beginning of Rolling Thunder. I would also commend Rear Admiral (ret.) "Bear" Taylor's Rolling Thunder blog. Bear took it upon himself to write a blog post every day for the duration of the 50th anniversary of Rolling Thunder (over 1,000 posts). It is a monumental and comprehensive work.

50th Anniversary of Vietnam War

End of Operation Rolling Thunder

On 31 October 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced the end of Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign against North Vietnam, effective 1 November. The cessation was the result of ongoing secret negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam to set up formal peace talks in Paris. These discussions had been occurring since the spring of 1968 and the North Vietnamese had finally agreed to a U.S. demand that South Vietnam be included in the talks. The United States conceded to a role for the National Liberation Front (NLF—the Viet Cong guerrillas in South Vietnam) at the talks, with the understanding that this would not constitute formal recognition by the United States of the NLF. The bombing halt and commencement of peace talks would be followed by months of negotiations over the shape of the conference table. The war was far from over, and fighting (and bombing) in South Vietnam would continue much as before as the negotiations dragged on for years (and North Vietnam repaired damage, reconstituted



Naval Training Camp Gulfport, Mississippi: Interior of isolation ward, Naval hospital during influenza epidemic, 1918/19 (NH 116532).

H-022-1: The Worst Killer of All—The Spanish Influenza, 1918–19

H-Gram 022, Attachment 1

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

October 2018

During World War I, 431 U.S. Navy personnel were killed as a result of enemy action and 819 were wounded. However, 5,027 died as a result of the Spanish influenza epidemic between the fall of 1918 and spring of 1919, more deaths than at Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, or Okinawa.

The misnamed “Spanish influenza” was one of the worst (and possibly *the* worst) outbreaks of deadly disease in human history. Although the bubonic plague (“Black Death”) in the 1300s killed a greater

number of those infected, and a greater proportion of populations infected (up to one third of the world’s population) the high end of estimated deaths from the Spanish influenza (100 million) exceeds those for the bubonic plague in the 1300s. The Spanish influenza killed in a year and a half what the bubonic plague killed in a century. At least 25 million people in the United States were infected (one quarter of the population) and more than 700,000 people died in the United States alone, mostly during September to November 1918. This was more than the combined wartime U.S. combatant deaths in both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam combined. The impact on U.S. society was profound—the later term, “Lost Generation,” did not apply exclusively to those who died in battle during the war.

The origin of the virus has not been conclusively identified. There have been numerous studies that exceed my medical knowledge; some indicate the origin was hog farms in Kansas, others in the

trenches of France, and still others suggest the Far East. What is certain is that it did not originate in Spain. The Spanish population suffered extensively from the outbreak, and Spain was one of the earliest areas hit. Because Spain was neutral and did not have wartime censorship in place, word of the extensive outbreak there spread very quickly, giving rise to the name. Other combatant nations, including the United States, deliberately tried to downplay and cover up the extent of the epidemic, so as not to give aid and comfort to the enemy. This also contributed significantly to slow and inadequate responses, resulting in an abundance of preventable deaths. For example, in September 1918, authorities in Philadelphia knew the virus had arrived in the city, but went ahead anyway with a planned major war bond-drive parade—partly because they had been kept in the dark about the extent of the new lethal variant due to wartime censorship—which resulted in a rapid spread of the virus (and deaths) throughout the city's population.

The spread of the disease was very complex, but there were two primary "waves" in the United States and Western Europe. The first wave in the spring of 1918 was comparatively mild, resulting in relatively few deaths, similar to a normal flu. However, one warning sign that made this virus different was those who suffered the most were between ages 15–40 years, rather than the typically affected elderly and very young populations. The first recorded instance of this significant flu outbreak in the U.S. Navy was aboard the cruiser USS *Minneapolis* (C-13) moored at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in January 1918. Many of the crew fell ill, but there were no fatalities. Although the initial spread of the flu was widespread, the relatively low mortality rate lulled medical, political, and military authorities.

The second, and far more lethal, wave of the disease was detected in multiple areas in July 1918. It picked up steam in August, with a major outbreak amongst French troops. By mid-September, the disease was a full-blown pandemic that encircled the globe, even to the remote Pacific islands. The number of deaths peaked in the United States and Western Europe between October and November 1918. In 1918, medical professionals had a good understanding of how epidemics spread and how to

stop them—quarantine being the most effective solution—but there was no treatment or cure, as there were no antibiotics then. Medicines were tried, such as anti-malarial quinine, with no effect. Some medical professionals quickly realized that minimizing the amount of medication delivered orally improved survivability. As in the first wave, the second wave mostly affected young, healthy people, and it was that population that made up the vast majority of deaths. In the U.S. Army and Navy, recruit and training camps were particularly hard hit due to the crowding of soldiers and sailors from all over the country.

Victims of the Spanish flu would basically drown in their own fluids, with the end accompanied by projectile nose bleeds. Other than trying to keep victims comfortable and hydrated, there was little that could be done. It is now believed that stronger immune systems were actually a disadvantage in this influenza; the harder the immune system tried to fight the virus, the more damage was done to internal organs, particularly the lungs. Recent studies suggest the majority of deaths were not caused by the virus itself, but by secondary bacteriologic infections. Many of the best medical professionals had volunteered or been drafted into the armed forces, so in many respects soldiers and Sailors got better care than the civilians at home. Deprived of timely and accurate information due to censorship, and inadequate medical care, the civilian population in the United States resorted to an "every man for himself approach." Streets were deserted. Public life came to a halt. Calls for volunteers to help with the sick went unanswered as people holed up in their homes. In some cases, entire families died not only from the virus, but from the lack of care (water/food) for those who might otherwise have survived. Some strains of distrust in the federal government that exist today can be traced to this period when many of those who survived felt they had been misled and abandoned.

The spread and effects of the virus were just plain freaky. For example, German soldiers on the Western Front were severely affected—contributing to their multiple defeats in the last months of the war—whereas British soldiers got the flu, but for the most part were not killed by it. British civilians in

Britain on the other hand suffered severely with high mortality rates. American troops on troop transports crossing the Atlantic suffered high mortality, whereas the Navy crews of those same ships did not. Over 36,000 U.S. Army troops died from influenza before they even got to France, with well in excess of 12,000 dying on the troop transports—compared to almost none killed by German U-boats. In France alone, 12,000 U.S. Army troops were killed by the disease.

Within the U.S. Navy, sailors in Boston and the Great Lakes were the earliest to get hit hard—before the flu spread to other installations. By the beginning of September, 31,000 sailors were sick and 1,100 had already died. Most of the sailors who died from the outbreak did so ashore, stateside. By the end of 1918, 4,158 sailors had died. Those on the battleships operating with the British Grand Fleet suffered many sick, but relatively few deaths, possibly due to better medical care. Aboard the battleship USS *Arkansas* (BB-33), 1,200 of the 1,500 crewmen became ill, and more than half the crews of the *Texas* (BB-35), *Wyoming* (BB-32), and *New York* (BB-34) were at some point unable to do their duty. Fewer than 30 in the battleship squadron died—14 or 15 of them on the flagship *New York*. The ports of Brest, France, and Queenstown and Bantry Bay, Ireland were hard hit, at times incapacitating many crewmen who were aboard U.S. destroyers. Sailors on the three U.S. battleships at Bantry Bay—*Utah* (BB-31), *Oklahoma* (BB-37), and *Nevada* (BB-36)—suffered numerous illnesses, and 11 aboard *Nevada* died. Even before the flu hit, liberty had been severely curtailed for the battleship crews following confrontations and fights between U.S. sailors and Irish townsmen. The Irish in that area were strongly anti-British since Ireland was not yet independent of Britain at that time. However, the liberty restrictions didn't stop the contagion from reaching the ships.

The worst outbreak of all U.S. Navy ships occurred aboard the armored cruiser USS *Pittsburgh* (ACR-4) while in port in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Pittsburgh* had formerly been named *Pennsylvania*—when she served as the platform for Eugene Ely's first shipboard landing by an aircraft in 1911. By 1918, *Pittsburgh* was the flagship for the U.S. South

Atlantic Squadron, guarding against German surface raider activity, under the command of Rear Admiral William B. Caperton. The skipper of *Pittsburgh* was Captain George "Blackjack" Bradshaw. The crew of *Pittsburgh* referred to the ship as "USS Madhouse" and "Blackjack Bradshaw's floating squirrel cage," perhaps suggesting not the best of command climates to begin with. Rear Admiral Caperton's opinion of the captain was questionable. Not related to influenza, but in January 1918, a sailor aboard *Pittsburgh* had been murdered (somewhat bizarrely as a result of trading sex for candy) and five men accused of his murder and several witnesses had been transferred to the collier USS *Cyclops* to be taken to the United States for trial. They were aboard when the *Cyclops* disappeared without a trace in March 1918—leading to one unlikely theory to explain her disappearance.

The flu reached Rio on 17 September aboard a merchant ship from Africa, which was not quarantined, and within a month 30,000 people in the city would be dead. Initially the flu seemed to be of the benign variety and Captain Bradshaw permitted working parties to go ashore and continued normal liberty, although it was apparent by 4 October that the lethal strain was in the city. The first case aboard the ship occurred 7 October and by the 11th there were 418 cases. The first death, Seaman E.L. Williams, occurred on 13 October. Within a short time, 663 of *Pittsburgh*'s crew would come down with the flu and 58 would die. Rear Admiral Caperton's account makes for particularly gruesome reading, as the extent of the illness quickly outstripped the ability of the ship to care for them or to deal with the bodies. Eventually, 41 of the crew would be buried ashore. Caperton's account stated, "The conditions in the cemetery beggared description. Eight hundred bodies in all states of decomposition, and lying about in the cemetery, were awaiting burial. Thousands of buzzards swarmed overhead." In other passages he describes the dead lying in the streets of the city untended, and bodies stacked like cordwood. Not surprisingly, the *Pittsburgh* was not capable of getting underway or performing any missions for over a month. Replacements were sent, and *Pittsburgh* did not return to the United States until March 1919. The bodies were eventually repatriated

to the United States on the light cruiser *Richmond* (CL-9). A monument erected in their honor in the cemetery in 1920 is still there.

True heroes of the pandemic were the 1,500 nurses of the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps, which had been officially established in 1908 and was led during World War 1 by Superintendent Lenah H. Sutcliffe Higbee (namesake of the *Gearing*-class destroyer DD-806 and *Arleigh-Burke* destroyer DDG-123). Although there was no effective medicine, good care made a difference in survivability, but put the caregiver at great risk given how contagious the virus was. Sources conflict on how many nurses died from influenza during the war, but it was at least ten. Three nurses would be awarded the Navy Cross, posthumously, for their unwavering dedication in tending to the sick, at the cost of their own lives. Marie Louise Hidell, Lillian M. Murphy, and Edna E. Place, would receive the award in 1920—at the same time as Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee—which made Higbee the first living woman to receive the Navy Cross. Hospital Apprentice First Class Carey F. Miller would also be awarded a posthumous Navy Cross for his actions in caring for the sick during the pandemic.

The pandemic would continue at a slower pace into 1919, and in some places until 1920. By the time it was over, the official tally of U.S. Navy officers and Sailors who died from the Spanish influenza was 5,027. Of note, the U.S. Navy kept better records of the epidemic than just about any other organization in the world.

Sources include: "Everybody Sick with the Flu," by William N. Still, *Naval History*, April 2002 Vol. 16 No. 2; "The U.S. Military and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919" by Caril R. Byerly, PhD., *Public Health Reports*, 2010, 125 (Suppl. 3); "How the Horrific 1918 Flu Spread Across America" by John M. Barry, *Smithsonian*, November 2017; "Influenza of 1918 (Spanish Flu) and the US Navy," NHHHC archival document; "Personal Account by Rear Admiral William B. Caperton of the 1918 Influenza on Armored Cruiser No. 4, USS *Pittsburgh*, at Rio de Janeiro," NHHHC, 6 April 2015; "ACR-4 USS *Pennsylvania*/USS *Pittsburgh*" by Joe Hartwell, freepages.rootsweb.com.



Anti-aircraft fire over Algiers: One of the many nighttime German air raids on Allied shipping in port and off the coast of Algeria, 1943 (SC 182245).

H-022-2: Forgotten Valor: USS *Pioneer* (AM-105) and the sinking of HMT *Rohna*, the Worst Loss of U.S. Life at Sea, 26 November 1943

H-Gram 022, Attachment 2

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

October 2018

On 26 November 1943, a German Hs-293 radio-controlled, rocket-boosted glide bomb hit and sank His Majesty's Transport (HMT) *Rohna* off the coast of Algeria, resulting in the deaths of 1,149 crew and

passengers, including 1,015 U.S. Army troops (plus 35 U.S. soldiers who subsequently died from wounds.) The loss of *Rohna* constituted the greatest loss of U.S. life at sea due to enemy action.

Although the sinking of USS *Arizona* (BB-39) and USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35) are far better known, the greatest loss of U.S. life "at sea," due to enemy action, was actually suffered by U.S. Army troops aboard His Majesty's Transport (HMT) *Rohna* off the coast of Algeria on 26 November 1943, when *Rohna* was sunk by a German guided glide-bomb. The U.S. Army lost 1,015 troops, and another 35 subsequently died from wounds. *Indianapolis* lost 879 U.S. Sailors by a Japanese submarine attack in the Philippine Sea.

On 25 November 1943, *Rohna* departed Oran, Algeria, and joined Gibraltar-to-Suez Convoy KMF-

26. *Rohna* was an 8,600 ton, coal-burning passenger/cargo ship owned by the British India Steamship Company and requisitioned by the British for use as a troop transport. In addition to her Australian and British officers and mostly Indian crew, and 18-man British DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship) detachment, aboard were 1,981 U.S. Army Soldiers. The U.S. Soldiers were destined for India to build B-29 bomber bases, and were mostly from the 853rd Engineer Battalion (Aviation) along with the 322nd Fighter Control Squadron, 31st Signal Construction Battalion, the 44th Portable Surgical Hospital, and several other "filler" units.

One of the rationales for invading Italy at Salerno (see H-gram 021) was to knock Italy out of the war to ease pressure on the long, vital, and vulnerable supply line from Gibraltar to Suez. However, even though Italy dropped out of the war and officially switched sides, the Germans just occupied many of the Italian airfields and ports and continued to attack Allied shipping in the Mediterranean. In but one attack, on 6 November 1943, the destroyer USS *Beatty* (DD-640) was hit by a German aerial torpedo while defending Convoy KMF-25A from a 25-plane German air raid off Algeria. The two planes that attacked *Beatty* were actually showing American Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) signals, but were correctly identified as German Ju-88 bombers. *Beatty* engaged, but in the smoke and haze, one was able to get close enough for a torpedo launch. Although the torpedo explosion broke the ship's back, *Beatty*'s crew fought valiantly for more than four hours to save their ship, but the damage was too severe and she finally went down; the majority of her crew were saved.

On the late afternoon of 26 November, off Bougie, Algeria, Convoy KMF-26 was attacked by about 30 Luftwaffe bombers, mostly Heinkel He-177A "Greif" ("Griffin") long-range bombers, in two major waves. Four Free French Spitfire fighters put up spirited defense, followed later by several British RAF fighters. German bombers dropped many bombs in a horizontal mode, with the usual lack of success for that kind of attack. However, the He-177As dropped 42 Hs-293 radio-controlled, rocket boosted, glide bombs (also see H-Gram 021) against the convoy.

(The Hs-293 had a 650 lb. warhead and a range of about 6.5 NM when dropped from about 4,600 feet, which achieved high speed with a 10-second burn by a liquid-fueled rocket motor, and was designed for use against unarmored ships.)

Despite the size of the attack, extensive anti-aircraft fire from the convoy and prolific use of smoke and maneuver all served to spoil the Germans' aim. In addition, at least six of the guided bombs were successfully drawn off target by new radio-jamming equipment on some of the convoy escorts. The German operators had to keep both the bomb and the target ship in sight throughout the bomb's entire flight, a significant weakness. The German's paid heavily for the attack. Four of the new He-117As were shot down with the group commander aboard one of them, and three more made it back to base but were not flyable afterwards. Several other German aircraft were shot down as well by determined and effective anti-aircraft fire from the convoy ships (even the old *Rohna* was festooned with a variety of AAA weapons and contributed to the barrage).

At about 1715-1725, during second wave attacks, *Rohna* was hit by an Hs-293, the only one of the 42 launched to score a direct hit on its target, although there were numerous other near misses on the escorts and the convoy ships. The bomb hit *Rohna*'s port side, penetrated deep into the ship on delayed-fuse, and blew holes in the starboard side, quickly causing the ship to list to starboard. About 300 U.S. Army troops were killed in the blast or never made it off the ship. The bomb hit about 15-inches above the waterline, but nevertheless the starboard holes flooded the engine room, knocking out electrical power, including to the pumps, and set the Number 4 hold on fire. The blast also destroyed six of 22 lifeboats, and buckled plates on the port side so that no boats on the port side could be launched. Ultimately, only eight lifeboats could be launched, which turned out not to be in very good condition to begin with. All but two of the lifeboats that did get in the water were quickly overloaded, swamped and sunk. Although 101 rafts of various kinds (and condition) went into the water, most of the Army troops had to swim.

Although accounts of 15- to 20-foot seas are probably exaggerated, there was a stiff breeze and significant swell, and the water was cold, resulting in the quick onset of hypothermia. Some later accounts accused some of the Indian crewmembers of unprofessional conduct, contributing to additional deaths, but accounts by Lieutenant Colonel A. J. Frolich, the senior U.S. Army officer, and other witnesses indicated that the Indian crew behaved as well as could be expected under the circumstances, most of them were manual labor not trained for such a situation. *Rohna's* British-manned anti-aircraft guns continued to fire even as the ship was sinking. The ship's Australian master, Captain T. J. Murphy, the chief, 2nd officer, 3rd officer, and four U.S. Army personnel were the last to abandon the ship before she broke up and sank by the stern about 90 minutes after being hit.

Convoy KMF-26 had a pre-planned response in the event of the loss of a ship, with specific ships designated to conduct rescue operations. As the burning and sinking *Rohna* fell behind the convoy, in accordance with the plan, the *Auk*-class minesweeper USS *Pioneer* (AM-105), under the command of Commander LeRoy "Roy" Rogers—in command since 27 August 1943—immediately swung into action despite continuing German bomb and strafing attacks. *Pioneer* had barely missed being hit by a bomb during the attacks, and she had put up such a volume of anti-aircraft fire thought she was on fire. Other designated ships dropped behind the convoy as well, including the cargo ship *Clan Campbell* and the corvette *Holcomb* to assist in rescue operations. The British destroyer HMS *Atherstone* laid a smoke screen and provided protection against air or submarine attack when the other ships were vulnerable while rescuing survivors. The wind and sea state were bad enough that it was not possible to launch boats, and the rescuers were racing the clock in the gathering darkness as survivors succumbed to hypothermia.

Pioneer mounted a very aggressive rescue effort, aided by a lower freeboard than *Clan Campbell*. Sailors in *Pioneer's* 122-man crew demonstrated extraordinary courage as many dove into the cold water and rough seas, some tied with rope and some not, to assist soldiers who were quickly

becoming too weak to climb ropes or cargo nets. The evolution was dangerous, as a number of Soldiers were killed by *Pioneer's* props, or were sucked under the ship as she heaved up and down. Nevertheless, the crew of *Pioneer* worked into the night, bringing 606 survivors on board, quickly causing the ship to become top-heavy. Despite the risk, *Pioneer's* skipper ordered the use of searchlights and continued rescuing survivors until no more could be found in the dark, and there was literally no more room to bring any more aboard. Among the survivors brought on board was Frolich (misspelled Frolick in *Pioneer's* log,) who was the senior Army officer aboard *Rohna*. Six of the survivors would die from wounds or the effects of exposure in the water before they could reach hospitals ashore.

Clan Campbell, despite the challenge of her high freeboard, rescued 110 survivors. *Atherstone* joined in after dark, rescuing another 70. British sailors on *Atherstone* performed the same kind of heroics to rescue U.S. soldiers as those on *Pioneer*. Several other ships, including the tug *Mindful*, rescued a number more, also displaying great determination and courage to rescue as many as possible. In the end, 1,149 personnel were lost in the sinking of the *Rohna*. This included five officers and 117 Indian sailors of *Rohna's* 195-man crew, one member of the British DEMS detachment, and one hospital orderly. U.S. casualties included 1,015 lost during the sinking. Afterward, another 35 U.S. Army personnel died, making the total U.S. loss 1,050. Of 30 officers and 793 enlisted men in the 853rd Engineer Battalion, 10 officers and 485 enlisted men were lost.

Following the landings at Salerno in September 1943, the Allies had become painfully aware of the development and employment of German guided bombs and the limited means to counter them. In order to prevent the Germans from learning how effective the guided bomb had been against *Rohna*, the entire matter was classified, and wartime censorship was used to delay any public revelation of the number of casualties and to prevent specific details from becoming public knowledge. The secrecy prevailed for many years after the fact, and until the 1960s, only those who were involved in the

incident had significant knowledge. The tragedy was not covered in the standard histories of World War II. For example, Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II* does not mention it. In some cases, veterans of the sinking had difficulty proving that their injuries resulted from the sinking, because there was no publically available documentation that the event even occurred. In addition, neither the commanding officer of *Pioneer*, the crew, nor the ship received any formal recognition from the U.S. Navy for their valor in rescuing so many of the survivors (few if any would have survived the night). Not until the passage of House Concurrent Resolution No. 408 in October 2000 did the soldiers and sailors aboard *Rohna* and USS *Pioneer* receive U.S. government recognition for their courage and sacrifice.

Of the 4.5 million U.S. troops transported to Europe during the war, 3,604 were lost, including the 1,015 on *Rohna*. *Pioneer* was incorporated into the Mexican navy in 1972, and sunk by that service in 2006.

(Sources include, *Forgotten Tragedy: The Sinking of HMT Rohna* and *Allied Secret* both by Carlton Jackson, Naval Institute Press (1997), and University of Oklahoma Press (1997), respectively; *Soldiers Lost at Sea: A Chronicle of Troopship Disasters* by James E. Wise and Scott Barron, Naval Institute Press (2003); unanimously passed House Concurrent Resolution No. 408, October 2000.



Aircraft from Ranger (CV-4) attacking German shipping at Bodø Harbor, Norway, during the first strike wave of Operation Leader on 4 October 1943. The image was annotated following the operation (NH 84252).

H-022-3: Arctic Strike— Operation Leader, the U.S. Carrier Raid on Norway, and “Diz” Laird

H-Gram 022, [Attachment 3](#)

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

October 2018

On 4 October 1943, the aircraft carrier USS Ranger (CV-4) launched two strike packages against German shipping targets along the coast of occupied Norway near Bodø (just north of the Arctic

Circle) and Sandnessjøen, 100 miles to the south. Armed with excellent intelligence derived from breaking the German’s Enigma code and from the Norwegian Secret Intelligence Service, the raid caught the Germans completely by surprise and was a success.

The strikes by USS *Ranger* (CV-4) aircraft against targets along the Norwegian coast—north of the Arctic Circle, near Bodø, Norway—on 4 October 1943 were the first Allied carrier strikes against Norway in over two years. Although the German invasion of Norway in April-May 1940 had cost the German navy dearly, it was a debacle for the British and the Royal Navy as well. The Germans lost more sailors (2,375) than soldiers in the invasion of Norway. In the first days of the invasion, Norwegian

coastal defense batteries (particularly torpedo batteries) and the British Royal Navy sank one of two heavy cruisers, two of six light cruisers and ten of 20 destroyers in the German navy, including a daring attack right into the Narvik fiord by the battleship HMS *Warspite* that destroyed eight German destroyers on 13 April 1940. However, the Royal Navy's attempt to defend Norway ended badly on 8 June 1940 when the German battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* caught the British aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious* and her two escorting destroyers *Acasta* and *Ardent* in the Norwegian Sea, sinking all three ships, with the loss of 1,519 British sailors and only 40 survivors—one each from the two destroyers, which had valiantly tried to protect the carrier to the bitter end. After that, the Royal Navy stayed clear of Norway, which became a base for German U-boats and surface combatants, including the battleship *Tirpitz*.

By late 1943, with the battleship *Bismarck* sunk in 1941 and the battle-cruiser *Gneisenau* badly damaged during the "Channel Dash" from Brest, France to Germany in 1943, the remaining German major combatants—battleship *Tirpitz*, battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst*, and "pocket-battleship" *Lutzow*—were based in the far north of Norway (along with 14 destroyers and over 20 U-boats) where they could threaten the convoy route to the Soviet Union. The Royal Navy had to keep extensive forces based at Scapa Flow to guard against a breakout into the Atlantic by the German "fleet in being" based in Norway.

In May 1943, a U.S. Navy force augmented the British Home Fleet, freeing some British battleships to participate in Mediterranean operations. This U.S. force, under the command of Rear Admiral Olaf M. Hustvedt—who was embarked on heavy cruiser USS *Tuscaloosa* (CA-37)—consisted of two new battleships, USS *Alabama* (BB-60) and USS *South Dakota* (BB-57), which was recently repaired from her damage at Guadalcanal, and five destroyers. Operating with the Royal Navy, this force "trolled" several times to bait the Germans into coming out to fight, but the Germans refused the offer, and in August 1943, CNO King had gotten tired of it and sent the two battleships to the South Pacific. He replaced them with *Ranger*, a carrier of an obsolete

design not considered survivable in Pacific combat, and the heavy cruiser USS *Augusta* (CA-31). Rear Admiral Hustvedt remained in command aboard *Tuscaloosa*.

In September 1943, the German navy sortied in force from Norway (feeling a need to justify their continued expenditure of resources to Hitler). *Tirpitz*, *Scharnhorst*, *Lutzow* and 10 destroyers, using gross overkill, shelled and put troops temporarily ashore on 8 September 1943 to destroy the small Allied outpost and weather station on the Norwegian Arctic island of Spitsbergen, far north of the Arctic Circle. A week later, *Tuscaloosa* and destroyer USS *Fitch* (DD-462) landed Free Norwegian troops to re-occupy the island.

On 22 September 1943, a force of six British X-Craft midget submarines attacked *Tirpitz* in Altafiord, Norway in a daring operation. Two of the X-Craft were lost while being towed across the Norwegian Sea—one aborted its attack due to mechanical problems—although its target, *Scharnhorst*, was underway and out of the fiord. The other three were lost while laying bottom mines under the *Tirpitz*. The X-Craft inflicted enough damage that *Tirpitz* was out-of-action for many months—until she was bombed and sunk by British bombers. The cost was nine British sailors killed and six POWs. Two crewmen were awarded Britain's highest award, the Victoria Cross.

With the *Tirpitz* out of action, the commander of the British Home Fleet determined that the time was right to try a carrier attack on Norway. The timing of the strike was driven by Ultra code-breaking intelligence and radio-intelligence that indicated the large tanker *Schleswig* would be making a run to supply the German warships in northern Norway. Extensive force and weather intelligence was provided by Norwegian Secret Intelligence Service agents via radios inside occupied Norway. The British carrier HMS *Furious* was undergoing re-fit, and the carrier HMS *Formidable*'s participation was cancelled because of forecast weather conditions; i.e., the forecast wasn't bad enough; there was insufficient cloud cover to protect her torpedo bombers from superior German fighter aircraft. The prospect of clear skies, however, did not stop

Ranger, which was under the command of Captain Gordon Rowe. The carrier's air group was still flying older F4F Wildcats (27), and SBD Dauntless dive bombers (27), but did have 18 of the newer TBF Avenger torpedo bombers.

The *Ranger* task force departed Scapa Flow on 2 October 1943, covered by British battleships HMS *Duke of York* and HMS *Anson*, and was not detected by the Germans during the transit to the far north of the Norwegian Sea. *Ranger's* strike consisted of a Northern Attack Group (20 SBD dive bombers, escorted by eight F4F Wildcat fighters) and a Southern Attack Group (ten TBF torpedo bombers, carrying bombs, escorted by six F4Fs) with a Norwegian navigator flying in the lead plane of each attack group.

The Northern Attack Group launched first, commencing at 0618 on 4 October 1943. At 0730, as the group approached the Bodo area, four dive bombers and two fighters peeled off to attack 8,000-ton German freighter *La Plata*, which was badly damaged and beached to prevent sinking. As the other aircraft approached Bodø at 0730, a German convoy was sighted, escorted by the German minesweeper *M 365*. Two dive bombers attacked *Kerkplein*, while eight others went after the large tanker *Schleswig*. The earlier intelligence was right. *Schleswig* was also badly damaged and had to be beached—but was later salvaged. The eight remaining dive-bombers attacked four small German cargo ships near Bodø, sinking one, seriously damaging two, and strafing the fourth. Two dive bombers were shot down by German anti-aircraft fire; the two aircrew in one were killed and the two in the other became POWs. During the first raid, the Germans jammed their own radios with so much chatter that they were unable to get warning through to other units.

The Southern Attack Group launched 50 minutes after the Northern Group at 0708 and targeted shipping around Sandnessjøen, about 100 miles south of Bodo. The strike bombed the Norwegian (German-controlled) cargo ship *Topeka*, and set it on fire, killing three Norwegian crewmen and several members of the German anti-aircraft detachment, which had succeeded in downing one

of the Avengers—only the pilot survived. The aircraft also bombed and sank the Norwegian cargo liner *Vaagen*, whose crew had already abandoned ship after witnessing the attack on *Topeka*, so there were no Norwegian casualties. The U.S. aircraft also bombed and sank the 4,300-ton German navy troopship *Skramstad*—which had been "requisitioned" from Norway. Accounts vary wildly as to how many German troops went down with the ship. Norwegian intelligence claimed 360, but some modern accounts citing official German records say as few as 37. Samuel Eliot Morison, in his *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, also claiming to cite official German records, put the death toll at 200. U.S. aircraft also strafed the German cargo ship *Wolsum* and bombed an ammunition barge—which blew up—for good measure.

The mission achieved surprise and was assessed as a great success, particularly in that it severely disrupted shipment of critical iron ore from northern Norway to Germany for several months, and especially since it was the first combat mission for 60 percent of the aircrews. A total of four U.S. aircraft were lost—three to anti-aircraft fire—and one Wildcat to accident (the pilot survived). Six aircraft were damaged by anti-aircraft fire. Commander J. A. Ruddy, the commander of *Ranger* Air Group and of the Southern Attack Group, would be awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross. The downed Avenger was located in 1987 and the remains of the two aircrewmembers were recovered. A blade from the propeller is now in the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola. One of the two Dauntlesses shot down near Bodø was found in 1990, and the remains of the pilot and gunner were recovered. There is a memorial near Bodø in honor of the crews and casualties of Operation Leader. *Ranger* returned to the United States in December 1943 and served the rest of the war as a training carrier.

At around 1400 on 4 October 1943, radar detected three German aircraft approaching *Ranger*. By then, the unlimited visibility of the morning had given way to extensive cloud cover. Two pairs of *Ranger* fighters belonging to VF-4 "Red Rippers" played cat and mouse with the German aircraft in the clouds. Finally, Lieutenant Junior Grade Dean S. "Diz" Laird and his flight leader located a Ju-88D twin-engined

bomber and took turns shooting it full of holes—unlike Japanese bombers, German aircraft did not immediately burst into flame when hit—before the plane finally crashed into the ocean. Laird subsequently sighted an He-115B twin-engined float plane flying at very low altitude and hit it. The float plane attempted to land on the water, but one of the float pylons collapsed and it cartwheeled into the sea. These were the first German aircraft shot down by U.S. Navy aircraft.

After *Ranger* returned to the states, VF-4 transitioned to the new F6F Hellcat fighter. Flying from USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), Laird shot down two Japanese Kawasaki “Tony” fighters near Manila on 25 November 1944. on 16 January 1945, near Hainan Island, China—after VF-4 had cross-decked to the USS *Essex* (CV-9)—Diz was flying in great pain with what turned out to be an inflamed appendix when he shot down a Mitsubishi “Hamp” fighter while protecting a U.S. Navy aircraft on a reconnaissance mission. On 16 February, flying near the Japanese Home Islands, Diz shot down a Mitsubishi Ki-21-II “Sally” twin-engined bomber and, the next day, shot down two more fighters. Diz would be credited with 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ kills at the end of the war. In April 1945, Diz was sent back to the States where he served in Experimental Fighter Squadron 200 (XFV-200) flying kamikaze strike profiles on U.S. ships.

Diz continued serving in the U.S. Navy, including in the Navy’s first jet fighter squadron (VF-171) and first squadron to carrier-qualify in jets, finally retiring in 1971 as a commander. While still on active duty, Diz was one of the pilots flying the simulated Japanese aircraft in the movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, taking part in the most technically demanding scenes, including the first take-off of a “Val” dive bomber from the carrier *Akagi* (USS *Yorktown*—CV-10—with a fake “Japanese” deck overlaid on the flight deck) and the “Kates” dropping torpedoes over Southeast Loch at Pearl Harbor while attacking “Battleship Row.” At age 95, Diz took the controls of a T-34C, the 100th type aircraft he had flown, flying over 8,000 hours. I had opportunity to speak with Diz aboard the museum carrier *Hornet* (CV-12) in Alameda, California, in the fall of 2016. He was incredibly

sharp and is still alive and well so far as I know. What an extraordinary career, and what a hero he is!

Sources include: *Atlantic Battle Won: May 43–May 45, History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol. 10, by Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison; “An Ace in the Hole: ‘Diz’ Laird,” by Mark Carlson, *Aviation History*, 4 May 2018.



USS Mississinewa (AO-59) sinking at Ulithi, 20 November 1944, after being struck by a Japanese Kaiten Type 1 manned torpedo. The capsized ship's bottom can be seen at the base of the flames and smoke pillar, with bow or stern toward the left (80-G-K-5510).

H-022-4: Loss of USS *Wahoo* (SS-238) and Lieutenant Commander "Mush" Morton

H-Gram 022, [Attachment 4](#)

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

October 2019

On 11 October 1943, the submarine USS *Wahoo* (SS-238), under the command of the renowned Lieutenant Commander Dudley Walker "Mush" Morton, was sunk with all 79 hands by a sustained

air and surface attack as she was attempting to exit the Sea of Japan via La Perouse Strait. At the time, under the aggressive and inspirational leadership of Morton, *Wahoo* was the most successful submarine in the Pacific. *Wahoo's* executive officer on five war patrols was Lieutenant Richard O'Kane, who would go on to be the most successful submarine skipper of the war.

At the time of her loss in October 1943, the Gato-class submarine USS *Wahoo* (SS-238) was the most storied boat in the fleet. In her seven war patrols, *Wahoo* would earn six battle stars and a Presidential Unit Citation. The boat would be credited with sinking 20 Japanese ships, 19 of them during her last five war patrols under the command of the legendary Lieutenant Commander Dudley M. "Mush" Morton. During her first five patrols, *Wahoo's* executive officer was the equally legendary

Lieutenant Richard H. "Dick" O'Kane. (O'Kane would finish the war as a Japanese POW and as the most successful skipper of the war, while his mentor, Mush Morton, would finish third.) Under Morton's aggressive leadership, *Wahoo* would be the first submarine to penetrate a Japanese harbor (Wewak, in New Guinea), the first submarine to hit a Japanese destroyer with a "down the throat" torpedo shot, and she sank more ships in less time on her first three patrols under Morton than any other U.S. submarine. Morton would be awarded four Navy Crosses, the last one posthumously. O'Kane would complete five war patrols on *Wahoo*, and five in command of USS *Tang* (SS-306), would participate in more successful attacks than any submarine officer in the war, and would be awarded the Medal of Honor, three Navy Crosses, three Silver Stars, and the Legion of Merit with Combat "V."

In 1995, a private group known as the *Wahoo* Project began searching for the wreck of the submarine. In 2005, surveys detected a sunken submarine in La Perouse Strait, between the Japanese island of Hokkaido and the Russian island of Sakhalin. In 2006, a Russian team, "Iskra," surveyed the submarine and conclusively determined that the submarine was not the Soviet *L-19* (which had been sunk in La Perouse Strait in 1945, probably by an un-swept Japanese mine after the war was actually over). The Iskra team determined the submarine was *Wahoo*, a finding that was subsequently verified by the U.S. Navy in October 2006 based on the photographic evidence. The submarine was sitting upright on the bottom, almost entirely intact, and had been sunk by a direct bomb hit near the conning tower.

During the search, extensive Japanese documentation was located, including photos and film of the attack. According to Japanese records, *Wahoo* was sighted on the surface and fired upon by Japanese shore batteries in daylight on the morning of 11 October 1943. The boat was transiting east, exiting the Sea of Japan, on the day that the pre-mission plan had called for. *Wahoo* had been under strict radio silence since departing Midway on 13 September, and she was scheduled to break silence once she cleared the Kuril Islands chain, which she never did. Upon being fired

upon, *Wahoo* submerged and possibly struck a Japanese mine and was damaged, because she reversed course to the west back into the Sea of Japan. (It's also possible she was already damaged, which might explain why she was on the surface in daylight, or that she would have better chance of detecting mines on the surface in daylight.) Regardless, Japanese aircraft sighted a trailing oil slick, tracking *Wahoo* back to the west.

Between 0945 and 1330, *Wahoo* was attacked by ten sorties of five aircraft, as well as surface depth charge attacks, before the trailing oil went dead in the water at 1330. Attacks continued until 1630. At least 40 bombs and 69 depth charges were dropped on *Wahoo*. There were no survivors from *Wahoo*'s 79-man crew. *Wahoo* would later be credited with sinking four ships while she was in the Sea of Japan, including the 8,100 ton *Konron Maru* on 5 October 1943, sunk off west coast of Honshu with the loss of 544 lives, including two Japanese members of the Japanese House of Representatives. The loss of *Konron Maru* was announced by the Japanese press at the time, and the sinking was a great humiliation to the Japanese navy, which launched a massive operation to hunt down the submarine that caused it. When *Wahoo* entered La Perouse, Japanese forces were on high alert. With the loss of *Wahoo*, U.S. submarines did not go into the Sea of Japan again until 1945 when new mine-detection gear was installed.

Wahoo's Previous War Patrols

First Patrol: *Wahoo*'s skipper on her first war patrol between August and October 1942 in the general vicinity of Truk Island was Lieutenant Commander Marvin "Pinky" Kennedy and her executive officer was Richard O'Kane. (I don't know the origin of Kennedy's nickname, but it may have fit.) The patrol was frustrating due to defective torpedoes, but O'Kane would later say that several missed opportunities were due to Kennedy's insufficiently aggressive approach. *Wahoo* was unable to get into firing position for an attack on the seaplane tender *Chiyoda* (which was being used as a mother ship for midget submarines) and for an attack on an unidentified light carrier (misidentified as *Ryujo*, which had already been sunk in the Battle of the

Eastern Solomons.) *Wahoo* was credited with sinking one freighter after firing many torpedoes, only one of which exploded.

Second Patrol: Kennedy was still in command for *Wahoo*'s second war patrol between November and December 1942 in the general vicinity of the Northern Solomon Islands near Bougainville and Buka. Lieutenant Commander Morton was onboard as prospective commanding officer. Morton had, in fact, been relieved of command of the USS *Dolphin* (SS-169) earlier in 1942 by the squadron commodore due to the boat's poor material condition, which Morton had maintained was unfixable. Morton's nickname of "Mush" was actually short for his academy nickname of "Mushmouth," bestowed apparently because of his propensity for telling tall tales. Relief would have normally ended his career in submarines, but by a fortuitous set of circumstances (one being Kennedy's lack of aggressive spirit) led to his selection to command of *Wahoo*. On this patrol, Kennedy claimed to have sunk a freighter and a submarine (misidentified as *I-15*), neither of which were verified after the war.

Third Patrol: Under the command of Morton, *Wahoo* got underway from Australia on 19 January 1943, with orders to reconnoiter Wewak Harbor in Japanese-held New Guinea. There were no charts of Wewak, and *Wahoo* navigated using an Australian school atlas that one of the crewmen had picked up by fluke while in Australia. On 24 January, *Wahoo* penetrated into Wewak Harbor, sighting the Japanese destroyer *Harusame* nested with several *Ro*-type Japanese submarines. *Harusame* was getting underway, so Morton fired three bow torpedoes at her from 1,200 yards, all of which missed (or failed to function properly). With her position given away by the torpedo wakes, and the Japanese destroyer turning to attack, Morton fired another torpedo, which the *Harusame* successfully evaded. The destroyer turned to attack again (with Morton reporting that it seemed as if the entire Japanese crew was topside acting as lookouts). Morton waited until the last moment and fired his last bow torpedo (which had been loaded) "down the throat" at the Japanese destroyer. Had the *Harusame* maintained course, the torpedo probably would have missed, but she turned and caught the torpedo amidships. *Harusame* beached herself to

avoid sinking, and was later re-floated, repaired, and returned to service, which is why *Wahoo* is not credited with sinking her.

The Buyo Maru Incident: On 26 January 1943, while operating between New Guinea and Palau, *Wahoo* sighted two Japanese freighters. (Of note, unlike other submarines, executive officer O'Kane manned the periscope during attacks, while skipper Morton analyzed the plots and set up the attacks.) *Wahoo* fired two bow torpedoes at the lead freighter (*Fukuei Maru No. 2*) and two at the second smaller unidentified freighter. Two torpedoes hit *Fukuei Maru* and one hit the other freighter. As *Fukuei Maru* was sinking, the damaged unidentified freighter turned on a course probably intending to ram *Wahoo*, but her speed was severely limited. At this point, *Wahoo* sighted a large transport (*Buyo Maru*) and a tanker. As the unidentified freighter continued its slow-motion ram attempt, *Wahoo* fired three torpedoes at *Buyo Maru* and the second and third hit, which caused *Buyo Maru* to go dead in the water. Turning to deal with the oncoming unidentified freighter, *Wahoo* fired two torpedoes down the throat. One hit, but the freighter kept coming, forcing *Wahoo* to evade. When *Wahoo* returned to periscope depth, *Fukuei Maru* had sunk, *Buyo Maru* was still dead in the water, and the unidentified freighter, having difficulty steering, had joined up with the tanker and was moving away. *Wahoo* fired another torpedo at *Buyo Maru* to finish her off. The torpedo passed directly under *Buyo Maru* and failed to explode. *Wahoo* fired another torpedo, which was a direct hit, which led *Buyo Maru* to begin sinking. Morton broke off pursuit of the unidentified freighter and the tanker, figuring he could catch up and deal with them later. After surfacing to recharge his batteries, the submarine returned to *Buyo Maru* to find many men in the water, and about 20 lifeboats filled with disciplined men in life jackets.

At this point accounts begin to differ about what happened next, with official accounts and other accounts (including some by *Wahoo* crewmen) differing on who fired first. Morton's account admits firing on the boats, but not on individuals, and grossly over-estimated the number of Japanese troops lost in the sinking (1,500-6,000 were

claimed). O'Kane's account states that Morton gave the order to fire on a lifeboat to force the Japanese troops to abandon the boats, but that individuals were not targeted and the Japanese returned fire. Vice Admiral Lockwood (COMSUBPAC) reports that the Japanese army troops fired on *Wahoo* first with machine guns, and that such resistance was not uncommon (and Lockwood was right about that: By that time of the war, Japanese sailors and soldiers would almost always refuse rescue, kill themselves, or resist if they could, sometimes killing U.S. sailors after being brought aboard). All agreed that the soldiers in boats were legitimate targets, since if they reached shore they would resume fighting and kill other Americans. However, author Clay Blair, relying on some accounts by some *Wahoo* crewmen, states that *Wahoo* opened fire first and the Japanese returned fire with handguns, and that by some accounts it became a "massacre." In one account, a man in the water attempted to wave a white flag to no avail, and one man who attempted to board *Wahoo* was gunned down.

What none of them knew at the time (and what was kept under wraps for over 50 years) was that many of the survivors of the *Buyo Maru* were Indian soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 16th Punjab Regiment, who had been captured by the Japanese in Southeast Asia and were being taken to New Guinea as forced labor. There were 1,126 personnel aboard *Buyo Maru* and 491 of them were Indian POWs. A total of 195 Indians and 87 Japanese (of the 26th Field Ordnance Depot) died in the sinking of *Buyo Maru*, including the initial torpedo explosions. Most of the Japanese survived the sinking, and were rescued by Japanese ships in the following days, along with more than half of the Indians. (The Japanese would go to great lengths to rescue their own sailors and soldiers, but were less than fastidious with POWs, so how many Indians were killed by the torpedoes, or by *Wahoo*, or were left behind by the Japanese will likely never be known. That as many survived as did, suggests that the official accounts indicating the firing was somewhat restrained and targeted at boats and not people was true, although there were likely exceptions in the heat of firing, given the hatred that existed toward the Japanese at that time—which was mutual.) Nevertheless, if you search the web for "*Wahoo*

massacre" or "Morton war crime," you will find quite a raging debate.

Under the Hague Convention of 1907, it was a violation of international law to deliberately kill survivors of shipwrecks, and the statement is pretty unequivocal. Nations were also obligated to rescue and care for survivors (and leaving them in lifeboats was not an acceptable "safe" option), although there was a "so far as military interests permit" clause to rescuing survivors. The "war crime" adherents argue that Morton's action in sinking the lifeboats and killing at least some of the Japanese survivors was a flagrant violation of international law. Defenders of Morton's actions (including me), would argue that armed Japanese troops in barges were fair game and were slaughtered by the thousand in the Solomons. Yet, armed Japanese troops in lifeboats, who had a reasonable chance of getting ashore to resume fighting, were somehow to be protected? The Japanese troops aboard the transport were every bit as "defenseless" from the torpedoes as those in the lifeboats were from submarine gunfire. The Japanese themselves would have considered this distinction to be ludicrous, and examples of them machine-gunning U.S. survivors in the water are extensive. By that time in the war, "no quarter," was not an official policy, but was a fact of life in the war zone, for both sides. The flag flown by *Wahoon* on her return from her third war patrol probably summed it up: "Shoot the Sunza Bitches."

As unlikely as it would have been for the United States to have ever charged Morton with a war crime (the U.S. Navy did court-martial a submarine skipper for sinking a hospital ship later in the war, and found him guilty of negligence—he still went on to make flag rank, by the way), the entire U.S. unrestricted warfare campaign against Japan was technically a violation of international law and treaty (and U.S. Navy regulations, for that matter). A follow-on to the 1907 Hague Convention was the Declaration of London in 1909, which stated that submarines were required to abide by the traditional "prize rules" (sometimes called "cruiser rules") in that civilian merchant ships were not to be sunk unless first warned and crews allowed to abandon ship in an orderly fashion, and were to be taken to a place of safety. On the flip side, merchant ships were not to

be armed, and resistance negated the protection of the prize rules. All the Great Powers signed the Declaration of London, but none of them, including the United States, actually ratified it. During World War I, the United States kept insisting that the British and Germans abide by the declaration, to no avail.

After World War I, there was great revulsion against the German's use of "unrestricted" submarine warfare (which enabled any ship to be sunk without warning) and the U.S. Navy assumed it would never be allowed to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare and therefore did not train for it during the inter-war years. The London Declaration rules were further codified in the London Naval Treaty of 1930 and Article 22 (the Submarine Protocol) of 1936, which required submarines to abide by the traditional prize rules (which wouldn't do much for the life expectancy of submarines).

In the months leading up to the outbreak of war in the Pacific, senior Navy leaders, particularly CNO Harold Stark, and Chief of War Plans Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, had resolved among themselves (and with no coordination with the rest of the U.S. government) that upon the outbreak of war with Japan, the U.S. would initiate unrestricted submarine warfare despite the fact U.S. submarines were not trained for the mission. (Neither were Japanese submarines, for that matter.) And, true to expectation, about four hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, CNO Stark gave the order to execute unrestricted submarine warfare against the Japanese without consulting the rest of the U.S. government, although Stark said he read the contents of the execute message to President Roosevelt before sending the orders and got no objection. For the most part, the view of most senior Navy officers (and most of the country) was that the Japanese "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbor violated the laws of war and forfeited any right to protection under international law. Nevertheless, initial U.S. submarine patrols carried written orders authorizing them to conduct unrestricted submarine warfare, which theoretically would protect the submarine commander from being treated as a pirate by the Japanese in the event of capture—sort of quaint. And as late as 1944, official U.S. Navy regulations still stated that submarines were to abide by the London

Treaty. There was actually quite a bit of ambiguity in what was permissible or not in U.S. execution of unrestricted submarine warfare with much left up to the conscience of individual skippers. For example, some skippers would sink Japanese civilian fishing trawlers or junks and sampans with gunfire, while others would refuse to do so.

There is no record that I could find that states that the denial of a Medal of Honor for Morton after the loss of *Wahoo* was due to the *Buyo Maru* incident, but it is the subject of speculation and the incident was kept secret for a very long time. Nevertheless, Morton received a Navy Cross for the third war patrol. General MacArthur awarded Morton an Army Distinguished Service Cross for eliminating so many Japanese army troops, and *Wahoo* received a Presidential Unit Citation.

Meanwhile, the third war patrol wasn't over. After *Buyo Maru* was finished off, Morton pursued the tanker and the damaged unidentified freighter and sank both with torpedoes, the freighter being hit by four torpedoes in three attacks before going down. (Of note, Japanese records and post-war analysis indicate only three Japanese ships were sunk in this action, so presumably somehow that tanker survived.)

The fact that *Wahoo* was out of torpedoes didn't stop Morton from attacking another convoy. His plan was to surface behind a lagging Japanese tanker, inducing panic and causing the convoy to scatter, which would enable him to sink the tanker with guns. It almost worked, until a Japanese destroyer came charging out of a rain squall, forcing *Wahoo* to run for it. *Wahoo* arrived at Pearl Harbor on 7 February after expending all her torpedoes in a 23-day patrol (normal was 60–75 days.) Morton's example was a huge boost to morale for the U.S. submarine force.

Fourth Patrol: On the sub's fourth war patrol from February through April 1943, Morton was ordered to take *Wahoo* into the far northern reaches of the Yellow Sea, near the mouth of the Yalu River, where no U.S. submarine had previously operated. Surprise was complete and the Japanese were unprepared. *Wahoo* sank numerous cargo ships and freighters, and sank a trawler using home-made

Molotov cocktails (a gift from the Marines on Midway). While returning, *Wahoo* was ordered to the Kurils to intercept a major Japanese effort to defend their garrison on Kiska Island in the Aleutians, which the Japanese aborted after deciding to evacuate the garrison.

Fifth Patrol: Operating in the vicinity of the Kuril Islands between April and May, *Wahoo* fired ten torpedoes at eight different targets, but faulty torpedoes reduced the number sunk by half. *Wahoo* hit the seaplane tender *Kamikawa Maru*, which survived the attack.

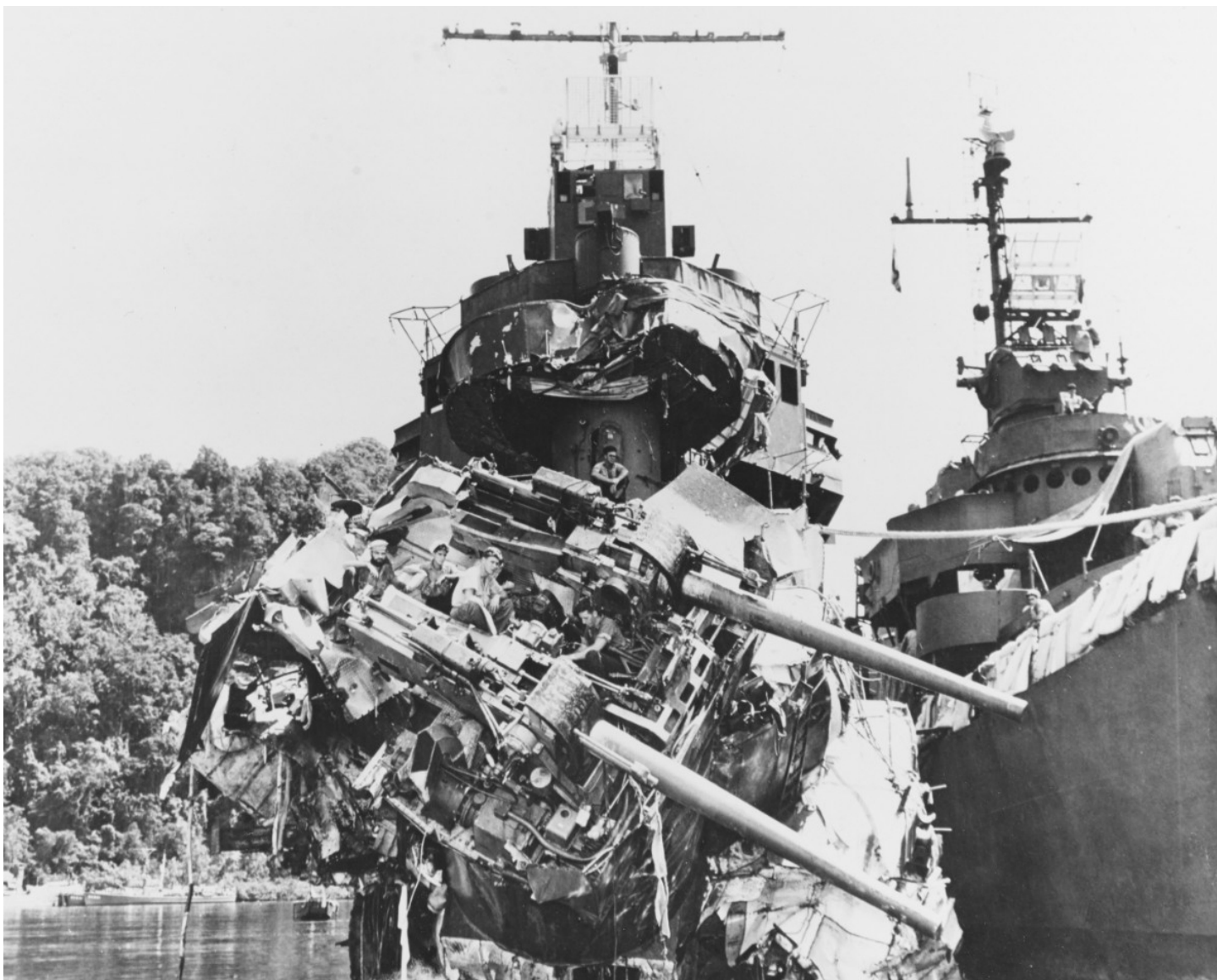
Sixth Patrol. Penetrating into the Sea of Japan via the Sea of Okhotsk and La Perouse Strait during August 1943 (without Dick O’Kane on board), this patrol was a total bust due to faulty torpedoes. In her first four days, *Wahoo* sighted and pursued 12 targets and attacked nine of them, with nothing to show for it. Ten torpedoes definitely broached, had erratic runs, or were duds. Others missed and may have been defective too. This patrol was terminated early.

Seventh (and Last) Patrol: Armed with the new Mark 18 electric torpedo, instead of the Mark 14 steam torpedoes that had proven so unreliable, Morton had lobbied and been given permission to return to the Sea of Japan. According to the plan, *Wahoo* was to maintain complete radio silence and enter the Sea of Japan via La Perouse Strait on 20 September and transit La Perouse outbound on 11 October. She was to transmit after she passed through the Kuril Islands chain.

Of note, one officer who was not aboard *Wahoo* on this patrol was future intelligence rear admiral and mentor to countless naval intelligence officers (and I was his funeral commander in 2013), Donald “Mac” Showers, whose orders to embark on *Wahoo* had been cancelled just before departure. As an ensign, Mac was a member of Commander Joe Rochefort’s code-breaking team (as an intelligence analyst, not a code-breaker) in the run up to the Battle of Midway. He would become an intelligence briefer for Admiral Nimitz in the later part of the war. He had volunteered for submarine duty (since all

“intelligence officers” at the time were line officers) and was to embark on *Wahoo* for a “familiarization” ride. With impending operations in Bougainville, Mac’s boss, Commander Jasper Holmes, had Mac’s orders cancelled. The officer whose place Mac was supposed to take, Jack Griggs, was already unavailable, and by that fluke survived as well.

For this piece, I consulted numerous sources, particularly trying to find verification of aspects of the *Buyo Maru* incident. These include the classic *The Wake of the Wahoo* by Forest J. Sterling (1961) with VADM Lockwood’s foreword, as well as Dudley Morton’s original report, “USS *Wahoo* (SS-238) 1942-1943—Third War Patrol, January-February 1943.” *Silent Victory* by Clay Blair (1975, reprint in 2001) was one of the first to offer accounts differing from earlier official accounts, and accounts that Morton fired first. I must offer high praise for Lieutenant Commander Joel Holwitt’s Ohio State University Ph.D. dissertation, “Execute Against Japan,” which is the most comprehensive treatment of the history of unrestricted submarine warfare. (Holwitt also won first prize in the inaugural CNO History Essay Contest in 2017, and second place in 2018.) Other sources included *Submarine!* by Edward L. “Ned” Beach, (reprinted in 2001 by Naval Institute Press), as well as various accounts by Lockwood and O’Kane.



The badly damaged USS Selfridge (DD-357) after the Battle of Vella Lavella. Her bow had been wrecked by a Japanese destroyer's torpedo during the engagement. Note the 5-inch/38-caliber twin gun mount in the remains of the forward turret. Alongside is USS O'Bannon (D-450), which damaged her bow in a collision with USS Chevalier (DD-451) during the action (80-G-274873).

H-022-5: Battle of Vella Lavella—The Last Japanese Victory, 6–7 October 1943

H-Gram 022, [Attachment 5](#)

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

October 2019

On the night of 6-7 October 1943, a force of three U.S. destroyers attacked nine Japanese destroyers

northwest of the island of Vella Lavella in the central Solomons. Despite advantages of radar, the new combat information centers (CIC) aboard U.S. ships, and improved doctrine, valor, and audacity could not overcome numbers or the superior capabilities of Japanese torpedoes. The Battle of Vella Lavella would be the last major battle of the Central Solomons campaign, and would also be the last significant Japanese victory of the war.

After the costly campaign to take the island of New Georgia in the central Solomon Islands chain, the Third Fleet commander, Vice Admiral William Halsey, had to decide what to do next. Having fought a pretty effective delaying action on New

Georgia, the Japanese had pulled another disappearing act (as at Guadalcanal) and withdrawn the remains of their forces across the Kula Gulf to the island of Kolombangara to the northwest of New Georgia, which had also been reinforced. Halsey was concerned that at the current rate of advance up the Solomon chain, it would take years to get to the major Japanese base at Rabaul, let alone Tokyo. With the approval of both Admiral Chester Nimitz and General Douglas MacArthur, Halsey opted to leap-frog over Kolombangara to the relatively lightly defended island of Vella Lavella, which lies to the northwest of Kolombangara across Vella Gulf. Over the next months, numerous naval battles with no names occurred as the Japanese tried to withdraw their forces from Kolombangara and reinforce Vella Lavella. Most of these involved U.S. PT-boat attacks on Japanese barges, along with near-constant air battles overhead, during which the Japanese suffered increasingly disproportionate losses as better U.S. aircraft, and attrition of the best Japanese pilots, had their effect.

During an engagement sometimes referred to as the Battle of Horaniu on 17 August 1943, a force of four U.S. destroyers (*Nicholas* [DD-449]), *O'Bannon* [DD-450], *Taylor* [DD-468], and *Chevalier* [DD-451]) under Captain Thomas J. Ryan, attempted to engage a force of four Japanese destroyers that were protecting about 20 barges and small auxiliaries attempting to withdraw Japanese troops from Kolombangara. The result was an ineffective exchange of torpedos and gunfire as the Japanese commander, Rear Admiral Baron Matsui Ijuin (92nd in his class of 96 at the Japanese naval academy), opted to flee rather than fight—uncharacteristic of Japanese commanders and to the frustration of Ryan who was itching for a fight. As in many of the other lesser actions, going after the barges was like stomping cockroaches and Ryan's force sank four small auxiliaries, but most of the barges got away. Despite the inconclusive nature of the battle, the skipper of *Chevalier*, Lieutenant Commander George R. Wilson, was awarded a Navy Cross for his aggressive actions during the battle. Ultimately the Japanese would successfully evacuate 9,000 troops (most of their force) from Kolombangara despite constant air and PT-boat attacks on the barges.

After the Allied landing on Vella Lavella, the Japanese quickly reached the conclusion that reinforcing the island would be a loser, so they opted to hold the island as long as possible with the relatively few forces there, with the intent to withdraw them at the last moment, which they mostly succeeded in doing. By the beginning of October 1943, Japanese forces on the island were down to just under 600 men, and U.S. and New Zealand troops were closing in on the Japanese foothold on the northwest side of the island. Accordingly, Ijuin received orders to withdraw the last of the Japanese troops on Vella Lavella.

Ijuin assembled a relatively strong force of three older destroyer-transport and 20 barges and small auxiliaries, protected by six modern destroyers, to accomplish the mission. U.S. Navy intelligence, as well as sighting reports by scout planes and coast watchers, assessed that a force of nine destroyers would be coming down the "Slot" on the night of 6-7 October to Vella Lavella. This presented the commander of Task Group 31.2, Rear Admiral Theodore S. Wilkinson (who had relieved Rear Admiral Kelly Turner in July) with a dilemma as only three U.S. destroyers (*Selfridge* [DD-357], *Chevalier*, and *O'Bannon*) were patrolling in the Slot at the time. Wilkinson opted to detach three additional destroyers from convoy duty south of the Solomons and have them rendezvous with the other three destroyers to interdict the Japanese force. Unfortunately, the Japanese got to the rendezvous point first.

The U.S. destroyer force was under the command of Captain Frank R. Walker, Commander Destroyer Squadron 4, who had distinguished himself as commanding officer of the destroyer *Patterson* (DD-392), one of the few destroyers that managed to get underway during the attack on Pearl Harbor. The force consisted of *Selfridge* (with Walker embarked), *Chevalier*, and *O'Bannon*. All three ships were battle veterans. All three had the latest, most capable SG-type surface-search radar, and, although the combat information center concept was still a work in progress, all three had some version of a CIC. The ability to integrate radar and all sources of information into a coherent plot had progressed to the point that Walker opted to fight the battle from

CIC rather than the bridge, a “first” from what I have been able to find.

The CIC concept had progressed rapidly since the commanding officer of USS *Fletcher* (DD-445), Commander Cole, and his executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Wiley, had created an ad hoc CIC prior to the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal on 13 November 1942. *Fletcher* had emerged unscathed from that horrific battle as well as from the debacle at Tassafaronga that followed two weeks later, partly due to superior situational awareness afforded by the CIC. Although *Fletcher* was the first to create a CIC, others had already been thinking about the concept, and, in November 1942, Admiral Nimitz issued “Tactical Bulletin 4TB-42,” which directed all Pacific Fleet ships to create a CIC aboard ship. Initially, how to do this was left up to the individual ship’s commanding officer, which resulted in a variety of approaches, some of which worked better than others. CNO King held a conference in Washington, DC, in January 1943, with the intent to extend the CIC concept from the Pacific Fleet to the entire Navy. Throughout 1943, Nimitz’ staff officer for destroyers, Rear Admiral Mahlon S. Tisdale, led the effort to create CICs aboard ship. Tisdale, a survivor of the defeat at Tassafaronga, had learned and incorporated many lessons from that and other battles around Guadalcanal. In June 1943, Tisdale issued a new manual, the “CIC Handbook for Destroyers,” which codified the CIC concept, but still left ample opportunity for experimentation by ships’ commanding officers. At Vella Lavella, Walker’s ships had rapidly incorporated as much of the CIC concept as they could (without going into a shipyard). The improved situational awareness was a major factor in Walker’s decision to give battle, despite the odds.

The basic set-up for the battle was that the Japanese force approached Vella Lavella from the northwest, while Walker’s destroyers were transiting westerly north of the island. Southwest of Vella Lavella and transiting northerly were three destroyers under the command of Captain Harold O. Larson, USN. The *Ralph Talbot* (DD-390), with Larson embarked, *Taylor*, and *La Vallete* (DD-448) had been detached from convoy duty, intending to rendezvous with

Walker’s force northwest of Vella Lavella before the Japanese arrived. Larson’s force did not get there in time.

The Japanese split their force, with the three destroyer-transport, escorted by two destroyers, proceeding ahead, while the pack of barges and auxiliaries transited in a third group. Walker’s force was dogged by a Japanese “Pete” scout float plane that kept dropping flares over the U.S. force. Walker made the correct assumption that he had lost any element of surprise.

Radar in Walker’s group detected the lead Japanese force at 2231 at a range of 10 miles. Japanese lookouts sighted Walker’s force at 2235. Walker attempted to raise Larson via TBS (talk-between-ships) without success, as the distance between two U.S. destroyer groups was still too great. Believing he was up against nine Japanese destroyers, Walker decided to attack anyway with the intent to herd or draw the Japanese toward Larson’s destroyers, which would make the odds two to one instead of three to one. In reality, the odds were better than Walker assumed as soon as Walker’s force was sighted, the three destroyer-transport were ordered to exit the area to the northwest. The two escorting destroyers, *Shigure* (veteran of many battles and sole survivor of two) and *Samidare*, made haste to rejoin the other four Japanese destroyers, but hadn’t quite done so when battle was joined. So, at the start of the engagement, it was three U.S. destroyers versus one group of two Japanese destroyers and another group of four Japanese destroyers.

Rear Admiral Ijuin believed he was up against a much larger force than he actually was. The Japanese scout plane had reported four U.S. cruisers and three destroyers. As the battle commenced, Ijuin blew a chance to cross the U.S. “T” because he misjudged the size of the U.S. ships (thinking they were cruisers) and therefore misjudged distance. In the confused maneuvers that followed, the Japanese destroyer *Yugumo* charged the U.S. destroyers by herself, a brave act that, however, fouled the range for the other Japanese destroyers, preventing them from launching torpedoes at the optimum time. As the closest

target, *Yugumo* drew fire from all three U.S. destroyers. At 2255, the U.S. destroyers fired 14 torpedoes at *Yugumo*, and opened fire with guns at 2256. *Yugumo* fired eight torpedoes at the U.S. destroyers before she was hit at least five times by U.S. shells, which knocked out her steering. At 2301, the *Chevalier* (second in line) was hit by one of *Yugumo*'s torpedoes. Shortly after, at 2303, *Yugumo* was hit by one of the slower U.S. torpedoes (which actually worked,) and she sank at 2310.

The torpedo that struck *Chevalier* detonated the forward magazine, which blew the whole bow off forward of the bridge. *Chevalier*'s stern jackknifed into the path of the trailing *O'Bannon*, which, blinded by the smoke of battle, was unable to avoid colliding with *Chevalier*'s wrecked stern. The two ships were entangled and locked together, taking both out of the battle. Walker, aboard *Selfridge*, the lead destroyer, continued to press the attack against what he now assumed were nine-to-one odds. *Selfridge* engaged the group of two Japanese destroyers until 2306, when she was hit by one of 16 torpedoes fired by *Shigure* and *Samidare*. Although not quite as devastating a hit as that on *Chevalier*, *Selfridge* went dead in the water with severe damage to her bow and forward sections (that her magazine didn't explode was extraordinary luck—see photo above).

With all three U.S. destroyers dead in water, and five of his own destroyers still pretty much unscathed, Ijuin decided it was time to quit. His decision was bolstered by a sighting report from a Japanese float-plane scout that reported the approach of Larson's three destroyers from the south, again misidentified as a cruiser-destroyer force. At 2317, Ijuin's destroyers fired a parting shot of 24 torpedoes at the crippled U.S. destroyers, all of which missed. Ijuin's "victory" would be the last surface victory for the Imperial Japanese Navy for the rest of the war. Ijuin would claim that his force sank two U.S. cruisers and three destroyers. Walker, on the other hand, reported sinking three Japanese destroyers and believed that he was the victor. However, in the heat of the destroyer battle, the Japanese barges and auxiliaries had managed to get into Vella Lavella and successfully extract the last 589 Japanese troops on

the island. Thus, the Japanese accomplished their mission at the cost of one destroyer and 138 dead.

Larson's destroyer force arrived at 2335, but the Japanese were already gone. Despite heroic damage control on the *Chevalier*, it quickly became apparent that she could not be saved. *O'Bannon* took aboard about 250 survivors from *Chevalier* (made easier with *O'Bannon* alongside). After *O'Bannon* untangled from *Chevalier*, the *La Vallette* dispatched *Chevalier*'s stern with a torpedo at 0300 and then sank her floating bow with depth charges. *Selfridge* regained power and backed out of the battle area. U.S. casualties were 54 killed on *Chevalier* and 13 killed on *Selfridge*, with an additional 36 missing from the two ships, who would eventually be declared dead. *O'Bannon* left behind boats that rescued 25 Japanese sailors the next morning; another 78 Japanese were rescued by U.S. PT boats—an unusually large number who gave themselves up. Although heavily damaged, *O'Bannon* would continue her charmed life and go through the entire war, earning 17 Battle Stars (including for the bloody 13 November 1942 battle off Guadalcanal), the most of any destroyer, a Presidential Unit Citation, and not a single Purple Heart.

Captain Frank Walker would be awarded the Navy Cross for his audacious action against a much larger Japanese force. The skipper of *Selfridge*, Lieutenant Commander George E. Packham, in command for all of four days, would receive a Silver Star. Rear Admiral Ijuin would survive the sinking of the Japanese light cruiser *Sendaï* during the Battle of Empress Augusta Bay in November 1943, being rescued by a Japanese submarine, but his luck would run out when his flagship (a patrol boat) at Saipan was torpedoed and sunk in 1944.

Sources include: *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. VI: Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier* by Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison; "The Evolution of the US Navy into an Effective Night Fighting Force During the Solomons Islands Campaign 1942-1943," Jeff T Reardon, Ph.D. dissertation, August 2008, University of Ohio; *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the US Navy, 1898-1945* by Trent Hone (2018),

Naval Institute Press; *Information at Sea: Shipboard Command and Control in the US Navy, from Mobile Bay to Okinawa* by Captain Timothy S. Wolters, USNR, (2013), Johns Hopkins University Press