

COMBAT NARRATIVES

Solomon Islands Campaign: IX
Bombardments of
Munda and
Vila-Stanmore

January-May 1943



~~Confidential~~

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Office of Naval Intelligence
U. S. Navy

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R. E. Schweigman.
REAR ADMIRAL, U. S. N.,
Director of Naval Intelligence.

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Foreword

8 January 1943.

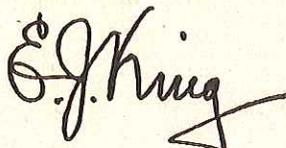
Combat Narratives have been prepared by the Publications Branch of the Office of Naval Intelligence for the information of the officers of the United States Navy.

The data on which these studies are based are those official documents which are suitable for a *confidential* publication. This material has been collated and presented in chronological order.

In perusing these narratives, the reader should bear in mind that while they recount in considerable detail the engagements in which our forces participated, certain underlying aspects of these operations must be kept in a secret category until after the end of the war.

It should be remembered also that the observations of men in battle are sometimes at variance. As a result, the reports of commanding officers may differ although they participated in the same action and shared a common purpose. In general, Combat Narratives represent a reasoned interpretation of these discrepancies. In those instances where views cannot be reconciled, extracts from the conflicting evidence are reprinted.

Thus, an effort has been made to provide accurate and, within the above-mentioned limitations, complete narratives with charts covering raids, combats, joint operations, and battles in which our Fleets have engaged in the current war. It is hoped that these narratives will afford a clear view of what has occurred, and form a basis for a broader understanding which will result in ever more successful operations.



ADMIRAL, U. S. N.,

Commander in Chief, U. S. Fleet, and Chief of Naval Operations.

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Bombardments of Munda and Vila-Stanmore

I

FIRST BOMBARDMENT—MUNDA

4-5 January 1943

THE month of December 1942 was a comparatively quiet one for American Naval forces in the Solomon Islands area. Following the Battle of Tassafaronga on 30 November, when United States ships opposed a strong enemy reinforcement attempt, both sides occupied themselves in strengthening their positions and preparing for the next major operation. For our part, this included continuing efforts to eliminate the Japanese from Guadalcanal Island and developing the defenses of the area. The enemy also continued to strengthen his positions to the north, and to hack new air bases out of the coconut forests on the islands of the New Georgia group.

Both sides made wide use of smaller surface craft and aircraft in efforts to hamper and harass each other's attempts at consolidation. In this field we were particularly successful. The cumulative effect of our submarine, aircraft, and surface ship attacks was a considerable total loss to the enemy at little cost to ourselves.¹

On Guadalcanal, the opposing lines were fairly well established between the Matanikau River and Tassafaronga, 12 miles west of Henderson Field. The main Japanese base was at Cape Esperance, near the northwest corner of the island, about 25 miles from Henderson. American surface and air patrols were constantly on the alert to prevent the passage of supply and reinforcement vessels through the Savo strait to the principal enemy landing points. The task was complicated, however, by the fact that the Japanese held all the islands to the north and west, and could land cargo and even troops around the cape on the west side

¹ At least 14 Japanese ships, including 2 cruisers, 6 destroyers, 4 cargo ships and 2 transports were believed to have been sunk. Eleven more—2 cruisers, 7 destroyers and 2 cargo ships—were damaged or possibly sunk. Two destroyers suffered possible damage.

of the island with relative impunity without running the strait. The well-known "Tokio Express," composed of fast cargo vessels and destroyers loaded in the nearby islands to the north, was still operating regularly to Guadalcanal, and was as regularly attacked by our aircraft and PT boats.

The enemy's intentions at this time were not clear. Reports of airfields under construction, new troop concentrations, and increasingly large convoys led to the conclusion that some major move was planned. From one point of view, it seemed possible that he might be building up a strategic defensive in the Solomons preparatory to a large-scale drive elsewhere.² On the other hand, his evident preparations and strenuous material developments in the Solomons indicated a possibility that he might initiate a strong offensive to recapture Guadalcanal.

Supporting this latter belief was the unusual Japanese activity at Munda on New Georgia Island. Late in November, information was received that the enemy had started construction of an airfield there. On 24 November, our heavy bombers practically destroyed the Munda warehouses and wharf, as well as the nearby enemy-occupied village of Lambeti, but saw no airfield. Aerial photographs on the 26th likewise revealed nothing, but the reports persisted. Logic seemed to back up the information, for the Munda area, lying only 150 to 200 miles from our bases on Guadalcanal, offered protected anchorages and terrain suitable for military installations. Finally, on 3 December, a photographic reconnaissance mission brought back proof that an airfield had not only been started, but was well along toward completion, although still screened by coconut trees. On the 9th of the month, the field was observed to be about 90 percent complete, with anti-aircraft positions, dispersal areas, and shelters in the process of construction.

The potential threat this airfield offered was obvious. After its discovery on 3 December, aircraft from Guadalcanal attacked it regularly, bombing and strafing gun emplacements, buildings, and runways. In one month, B-17's from Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal with lighter planes from Henderson Field dropped between 150 and 200 tons of bombs on Munda field and its environs, while small groups and single planes harassed the area by night. Despite this continuous attack, a fighter

² Early in December the Japanese began to increase their strength in New Guinea and the Dutch East Indies.

strip was completed and Zeros were operating from it by Christmas; and by 29 December it was operative for bombers.

Some of the aerial attacks on Munda seemed to promise spectacular success, yet none interrupted Japanese use of the installations for more than a day or two. On 24 December, American dive bombers and fighters carried out a particularly heavy attack, shooting down 4 Zeros over the field. Twenty more were caught taking off. Ten of these were shot down by our Grummans, while the remaining planes were destroyed at one end of the runway by dive bombers. Two more fighters were strafed in revetments, and SBD's silenced weak antiaircraft fire. All our planes returned.

At noon the same day American aircraft returned to bomb the runway, meeting no AA, and sighting only one undamaged Zero on the ground; and that afternoon a reconnaissance flight over the field saw no enemy planes and met no AA. Yet by the 31st it was seen that the field had not only been repaired for fighters but was also in use for the first time by medium bombers.

PREPARATIONS

The comparative ineffectiveness of our aerial bombing was but one of the factors CINCPAC considered when it was decided to carry out a ship bombardment of Munda. Incident to this decision was the necessity of insuring the uninterrupted landing of Army troops, who were by this time rapidly replacing Marines on Guadalcanal. The replacement officially began on 9 December, when Maj. Gen. Vandegrift of the Marine Corps turned over his command to Maj. Gen. Patch of the Army, and continued steadily throughout the month. By early January, approximately 58,000 American troops were stationed in the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area, of whom 31,600 were Army forces.

A particularly large movement of personnel was scheduled for 4 January, when a convoy which had left Noumea on New Year's Day was due to arrive at Guadalcanal. The group was made up of six transports and one cargo vessel, carrying the last increment of the 25th Division, U. S. Army. After unloading, the transports were to embark the 7th Marines, and depart late in the afternoon of 5 January for Melbourne. It was obviously desirable that the enemy learn as little as possible regarding this operation, and that the landing and loading be carried out speedily with a minimum of aerial or surface interference.

The South Pacific naval force was at this time stronger than it had been for some time, since powerful reinforcements had arrived during December and early January. Thus it was determined that a sizable fleet detachment could be made available to screen and provide a diversion for the troop movement.

The logical way to accomplish this, it seemed to COMSOPAC, would be by a heavy bombardment of Munda. Such an operation would serve the dual purpose of drawing any nearby Japanese fleet elements to waters more than 100 miles from Guadalcanal, and of striking a hard blow at the enemy's most immediate threat to our positions.

A dispatch from COMOSPAC on 30 December created the task organization for the operation. Task Force LOVE,³ with 3 battleships and 4 destroyers under Rear Admiral Willis A. Lee, Jr., was to cover the transport operation, while Task Force AFIRM, with 7 cruisers and 5 destroyers under Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth, was to assist in the coverage and provide the diversion. As a preliminary move, aircraft from Guadalcanal were to strike Munda and Buin repeatedly during the days immediately preceding the bombardment. When the weather permitted they were also to strike at Rabaul.⁴

For a time, on the night of 2-3 January, it seemed as if the American plans might be jeopardized when a large enemy destroyer force was reported operating off the northwest end of Guadalcanal, in an evident attempt to supply and reinforce Japanese troops on the island. Originally there were 10 destroyers in the formation. However, a fighter-escorted Flying Fortress sighted the group south of Shortland Island during the early afternoon of the 2nd, and several hours later the ships were intercepted by dive bombers about 20 miles southwest of Munda.

One enemy destroyer was left burning fiercely, and a second appeared to be sinking. A near-hit was scored on a third. One of 10 accompanying Zeros was shot down. Late in the evening of the 2nd, MTB's from Guadalcanal met the remaining vessels north of the island, scoring a hit on one destroyer and three probables on two others. The upshot was that the Japanese failed to land any troops, but did dump overboard, in the hope that they would drift ashore, a large amount of supplies, includ-

³ Task Force numbers have been omitted from Combat Narratives for reasons of security. In place of these numbers will be found the Navy flag names for the first letter of the surname of the commanding officer of a Task Force.

⁴ A total of 15 Japanese ships were hit in these operations, some of which were undoubtedly destroyed.

ing ammunition in watertight containers. MTB's and submarine chasers destroyed all visible supplies in the water the following morning.

Preparations for the bombardment of Munda were worked out by the various ship commanders at a conference held by Rear Admiral Ainsworth aboard the *Louisville* on 2 January, while the combined Task Forces were standing up from Noumea to the Solomons. Particularly careful planning was needed, since the operation would be the first in which the Navy would coordinate surface, submarine, and aircraft units in a night bombardment.

Two major factors had to be considered before detailed planning could begin. First, there was the problem of taking the enemy by surprise; secondly, maximum practicable retirement from Japanese land-based air forces had to be effected before daybreak the following morning, making use of American air coverage which would be provided both by the larger vessels and by Guadalcanal. The time and duration of the bombardment depended on these two factors. A study of these, as well as the distance tables from Guadalcanal, amount of destroyer fuel, and other points, led to the decision to open fire at 0100 on the 5th, and to bombard for about one hour.

The submarine *Grayback*,⁵ Lt. Comdr. Edward S. Stephan, had already received orders to take station as a navigational aid two miles to the northwest of Banyetta Point on Rendova Island. By using her bearings, the bombardment Task Force could more easily come up on its navigational track, the determination of which was facilitated by peculiarities in the outlying rocks and land masses of the coral reefs off Munda. One of these, a 70-foot nubbin named Beresford Island (Black Rock), just to the right of Kundukundu Island, formed a perfect range for the open fire bearing of 018° directly in line with the center of the target area.

Unit commanders involved in the operation were of the opinion that the Curtiss scout-observation planes carried by the cruisers were not well adapted for night work of this magnitude. Fortunately COMAIRSOPAC

⁵ This submarine had aboard at the time a seaman who was convalescing from one of the most unusual operations on record. His appendix had ruptured while the *Grayback* was on war patrol in enemy waters. The ship surfaced at night while a pharmacist's mate, assisted by a lieutenant as anaesthetist, opened the patient's abdomen and washed the peritoneal cavity with alcohol and sulfanilamide powder. A rubber band held the incision open, spoons from the galley served as retractors, and a pair of long-nosed pliers from the engine room was used to remove bits of the appendix. Ether was administered through a Morsen Lung. Post-operative condition was reported excellent.

had agreed to supply radar-equipped Black Cat planes⁶ for spotting during the bombardment. Lt. Comdr. Dennis S. Crowley, aviation officer on the staff of Rear Admiral Ainsworth, together with the operations officer for COMAIRSOPAC, drew up the coordinating plans for the spotting, and an aircraft radio set was obtained from the *Enterprise* for communication with the planes and the submarine.

Lt. Comdr. Crowley and two trained aviation spotters left Espiritu Santo for Guadalcanal on 2 January, and flew over Munda in their Black Cats on the nights of the 2nd and the 3rd in preparation for the big show on the 4th. The planes arrived over Munda Point at about midnight on each of these nights, and harassed the airfield area with 500-pound bombs, 30-pound demolition bombs, mortar shells, and flares. On both nights, the attacks lasted for a period of from 2 to 2½ hours. The planes experienced moderate to heavy AA fire from gun positions located approximately in accordance with information on charts issued to Commander Task Force AFIRM. On the night of the 3rd, the Black Cats sighted one or more aircraft with red and green lights over the target area, possibly float Zeros on reconnaissance from Rekata Bay. No attacks were made, however, and it was believed that the enemy was unable to sight the camouflaged PBV's.

The following was the Task Group organization for the bombardment:

Task Group Commander, Rear Admiral Ainsworth.

3 Cruisers:

Nashville (F), Capt. Herman A. Spanagel.

St. Louis, Capt. Colin Campbell.

Helena, Capt. Charles P. Cecil.

2 Destroyers, Capt. Robert B. Briscoe.

Fletcher, Lt. Comdr. Frank L. Johnson.

O'Bannon, Comdr. Edwin R. Wilkinson.

Fire control plans called for the ships to come on the range at 10-minute intervals, with a firing leg 3 miles long and a speed of 18 knots. After the vessels reached the "Commence Firing" position, they were expected to use the bearings of the islands previously noted, as well as a "Mark" from the patrol plane which would be stationed over the center of the firing area. Ships were to open fire on a generated bearing, elevation to be in stable element by plotting room director. All batteries were to

⁶ Consolidated PBV "Catalina" patrol bombers, painted black for invisibility at night, capable of longer flight and more sustained operations than the SOC's.

fire in automatic control, salvo fire to be followed by continuous rapid fire or rapid salvo fire when they were sure they were on the target. All spots by the spotting plane were to be to the center of the target area. After establishing the range and deflection to the center of the firing area, each ship was to cover the entire target area by shifting the mean point of impact to take the grid squares in succession and distribute the bombardment fire. The fire effect per hundred-yard square had been calculated to be the equivalent of four 75-mm. shots per minute. Since this was approximately one-fourth of the weight estimated to be required to neutralize hostile troops, it was considered fairly heavy for this type of operation. Actually, when the *Nashville* arrived at the rendezvous, it was discovered that the ships had more 6" ammunition aboard than was expected. After rounding up all the 6" bombardment projectiles available, the Task Force Commander found that he would have almost 1,100 rounds per vessel. The rate of fire, in this case, would be about 7 shots per gun per minute. Ten shots per gun per minute was set as the rate for the 5" 38-caliber guns of the destroyers.

THE BOMBARDMENT

The night of 4 January was very dark, with an overcast sky and passing showers. At 2000 local time,⁷ southwest of the Russell Islands in position 09°36' S., 158°38' E., Task Group AFIRM separated from Task Group TARE,⁸ and stood up toward Rendova Island at 26 knots, keeping well clear of the coast. Steaming order was the *Nashville*, *St. Louis*, and *Helena*, with the *Fletcher* and *O'Bannon* providing a screen.

The vessels navigated darkened, using SG radar for their fixes, echo-ranging gear to ascertain the approximate location of reefs shown on their

⁷ All times are Zone minus 11.

⁸ Task Group Commander, Rear Admiral Mahlon S. Tisdale.

4 Cruisers:

Honolulu (F), Capt. Robert W. Hayler.

Louisville, Capt. Charles T. Joy.

HMNZS *Achilles*, Capt. C. A. L. Mansergh.

Columbia, Capt. William A. Heard.

3 Destroyers, Comdr. Laurence A. Abercrombie:

Drayton (F), Comdr. Jacob E. Cooper.

Lamson, Comdr. Philip H. Fitz-Gerald.

Nicholas, Comdr. William D. Brown.

This Task Group was to spend the night patrolling the waters off Guadalcanal.

charts, and fathometers to verify soundings. A Catalina with radar searched ahead for enemy forces as far north as the approaches to Buin.

At approximately 2330, while still well clear of Munda, each of the cruisers launched one scout observation plane for standby purposes, illuminating ship momentarily to do so. The planes carried a total of 12 flares, to be dropped only if ordered. According to directions, they proceeded to a prearranged position behind Rendova Island and over Blanche Strait. When the surface bombardment started, they were to fly to seaward and over the surface formation to warn of the approach of enemy surface forces, and to radio any bombarding vessel which might be running into navigational dangers.

By this time a heavy black raincloud hanging in the direction of Munda was seen to be moving slowly to the eastward, and stars became dimly visible overhead. In the faint light, Rendova Island came up distinctly to starboard, and the *Nashville* was able to take approximate tangents on the entrance to Blanche Strait. Land masses showed up clearly on the SG radar as the vessels closed Banyetta Point, while positions taken were observed to check closely with the dead reckoning track.

The *Grayback*, which had been patrolling off Montgomery Island, had meanwhile surfaced and was proceeding to her rendezvous. At 0025 on the 5th she arrived on station. Shortly thereafter the darkened column rounded the point and stood up toward the agreed position. Radar showed both the area ahead and that to the westward to be clear, and the *Nashville* signaled by blinker tube to the ships astern to start opening distance for the bombardment. At 0032 the *Grayback* was picked up exactly in position. The submarine flashed her challenge, "AFIRM POSIT", which was answered by the flagship.⁹

Upon passing the *Grayback*, all vessels slowed to 18 knots for the approach. The islands and rocks on the coral reefs began to show up clearly on the position plotting indicator at about 7 or 8 miles distance. These together with Banyetta Point on the starboard quarter gave excellent bearings to determine accurately the ships' positions.

The *Nashville* made her turn to the firing course, 309° T., just before 0100. At that moment the Black Cat over the center of the Munda target area began calling out "Mark, Mark, Mark!"; but because of the presence of high land behind the plane, the *Nashville's* FC radar had

⁹ No blinker tube signals were made toward the beach at any time, and no TBS or voice radio was used from sunset until after the *Nashville* opened fire.

difficulty in distinguishing its bearing and IFF signals. The fire control radar, however, got excellent bearings on Beresford Island. The generated bearing was cranked in, and the *Nashville* opened up on the line. She fired her first salvo at 0102. The first spot from the Black Cat was "Up 500; no change in deflection."

The initial firing point was on bearing 198° at a distance of 13,400 yards from the center of the target area. The *Nashville*, moving down the firing line on the prescribed course, fired her second salvo which was spotted "No change." She then walked her pattern up and down the airfield runway and over both previously located dispersal areas. In about five minutes the flagship went to rapid continuous fire; observers reported that the stream of tracers from her guns looked as though she were playing a fiery hose on the enemy position. The Black Cat spotter estimated that 95 percent of her projectiles landed in the target area. At least one good fire was started south of the runway.

At 0113 the *Nashville* ceased firing and stepped up her speed to 25 knots as the *St. Louis* moved onto the line. The *St. Louis* commenced firing at almost the exact moment the *Nashville* ceased, but her first few salvos were some distance to the right of the target area. The Black Cat sent a left spot several times, and after a few moments the *St. Louis* shifted fire and dropped a salvo close to the runway. A "No Change" spot was transmitted over both circuits. The ship then distributed its fire along the target area, covering the installations thoroughly. By the time she moved off the line at 0124 she had started several large fires, one of which was still burning when the vessels left the area for the return trip. Spotters estimated that 65 percent of her fire landed on the target.

Some Japanese counterfire, which had broken out during the *Nashville's* bombardment, was directed at the *St. Louis*, but became more and more sporadic and unenthusiastic. The return fire was detected from the ships by observing tracers rise from the vicinity of the airfield, with an occasional slight flash as the guns fired. The tracers were all dull red in color. They travelled along the general line of the fire being delivered by our forces, in the opposite direction, slightly below the American 6" trajectories. The tracers could not be observed after mid-point, and no splashes were seen at any time. It is probable that all projectiles fell considerably short of the bombarding vessels.

Meanwhile a curious phenomenon had occurred. While the *Nashville* was nearing the end of her firing course, lookouts on the *Fletcher*, at

the head of the destroyer column, reported a large ship dead ahead at a distance of 4,000 to 5,000 yards, in line with Point Rhodes. The sighting was verified by several officers and men, but the SG radar, trained on the object, persisted in a negative report. Immediately the sighting was communicated over TBS to the OTC, while the *Fletcher's* torpedo battery was trained to firing bearing, speed was increased to 25 knots, and course changed left with hard rudder. With this maneuver the bearing of the phantom began to draw rapidly to the left, although the target angle remained constant. Puzzled by this impossible behavior, the Squadron Commander and the *Fletcher's* captain ordered torpedo fire held up. At about this time the *Nashville* ceased fire, and the phantom immediately disappeared.¹⁰ Tension relaxed as the only possible explanation of the contact became apparent—that what the *Fletcher* had picked up was her own shadow created by reflection of the *Nashville's* gunfire on the light haze to seaward. As the *St. Louis* took up the bombardment, however, a similar phenomenon appeared to the *Nashville*, and for a few moments she opened fire with her five-inch and automatic weapons at a “phantom torpedo boat on the starboard bow.”¹¹

At 0125, a minute after the *St. Louis* moved off the line, the *Helena* opened fire, her first salvo falling short and to the left. The Black Cat sent “right” and “up” spots, and the *Helena* shifted accordingly until the projectiles began to hit on the point. She then started a thorough coverage of the target area, to the accompaniment of spots of “beautiful, excellent,” from the Black Cat, and about midway through her firing period caused a large explosion near the field. The *Helena* then sprayed the beach area to the north of the point, causing another large explosion on a hillside north of the runway. Finally, as she steamed down the line, she scattered a few salvos to the eastward of the strip. Eighty percent of her shots had struck home when she ceased firing at 0136.

Now it was the turn of the destroyers. Moving in on a course 500 yards outside their previously assigned 11,000-yard line,¹² the *Fletcher*, which had doubled back astern of the *Helena*, and the *O'Bannon* opened

¹⁰ A radarman 3/c on the *Fletcher* was seen to shake his fist at the SG screen, and heard to shout, “Oh, you bastard, if you let us down now!”

¹¹ Intelligence reports of a Japanese bombardment of Guadalcanal in October revealed that the enemy had experienced similar troubles. Captured documents included reports of a Japanese destroyer squadron chasing American destroyers and torpedo boats out of the area. None of our light forces was in the area during the bombardment.

¹² A sound sweep had indicated that the shoals southwest of Kundukunda Island extended farther to sea than charts revealed.

fire almost simultaneously at 0140, the *O'Bannon* in position approximately 750 yards astern. Their first salvos landed directly in the target area, and as they steamed along their firing course they effectively covered the beach areas south of the runway along Munda Point and well up to the north of the point along the coast. One large explosion, probably from a gun position or an ammunition dump, was noted just north of the point, and five small fires were started. The enemy replied weakly and caused no damage.

RETIREMENT

At 0150 the *Fletcher* and the *O'Bannon* ceased fire and stepped up their speed to 32 knots as they raced to take station ahead of the cruisers. All ships closed up rapidly. At 0225 the destroyers arrived in position, and the group zigzagged on course 125° T., with many minor course changes, toward the assigned rendezvous with Task Group TARE, covered by the spotting Black Cats which searched the area ahead with radar until dawn. The retirement course was laid well to the southward to give a wide berth to a reported nest of midget submarines off the southern end of New Georgia Island. Fighter coverage from Guadalcanal, consisting of four F4F's, was picked up and identified by radar shortly before 0700, when the vessels were about 30 miles south of the Russell Islands, and arrived overhead a few moments later. The bombardment group, which had frequently changed speed as well as course, then settled down to a pace of 28 knots.

At 0900, in latitude 10° 00' S., longitude 159° 40' E., the Task Groups made their rendezvous. Each group at this time had three planes in the air as close-in antisubmarine patrol, and the bombardment group was momentarily expecting the arrival of its three SOC's which had been used at Munda and which had proceeded to Tulagi after the retirement began. Task Group AFIRM, when contact was made, was steaming at 28 knots and zigzagging, while Task Group TARE, which had spent the night patrolling off Guadalcanal, was approaching from the east-southeast. When the two had come within signalling distance, Task Group AFIRM hoisted the signal "I am recovering planes," and slowed to 15 knots on course 135° T. Task Group TARE hauled around astern of the bombardment group, paralleling it well clear on the port hand, and also proceeded to launch and recover planes.

Suddenly at 0936, just south of Cape Hunter, Guadalcanal, six of a

group of about 10 Aichi 99 dive bombers attacked the combined groups. There had been absolutely no realization of the presence of enemy planes until the attack began. Some of the ships were in Condition ONE,¹³ some in Condition THREE,¹⁴ furthermore the *Honolulu* was holding battery and fire control drills which included dives by her own planes. The surprise element was due to several factors. In the first place, most of the vessels had apparently not been informed that they were to have fighter plane coverage; and after the friendly fighters arrived, they did not know the total number assigned. Thus little attention was paid to the Japanese planes because of their resemblance to the covering Grummans. Secondly, a PBY passed over the formation through the Grummans just before the attack, adding to the impression of purely American air activity. Thirdly, the enemy approached from the direction of Henderson Field, whence our planes would normally come. And in the fourth place, the proximity of high land on Guadalcanal made radar detection extremely difficult. Noteworthy in this connection was the fact that all SC radars on all our ships were operating at the time of the attack. There was no way for them to distinguish our planes from the Japanese, however, because few of the Grummans were showing IFF signals. Some of the ships had been tracking the Grummans for some time, and on the *Achilles*,¹⁵ at least, observers were certain that they saw the enemy planes in advance, but mistook them for our own. Whatever the reasons might have been, it was only a matter of seconds before the Aichis had made their approach and were coming down over the formation in a 75° glide.

At the time of the attack, the *Honolulu*, *Achilles*, *Columbia*, and *Louisville* of Task Group TARE, which seemed to be the principal objective of the dive bombers, were in column in that order. They were heading on course 120° T. at about 15 knots, almost directly into the sun which bore 112° T. at 47° altitude. A second or two before the attack, speed of the guide was increased to 27 knots and the rudder swung hard left to bring the ship to 100° T., as the Task Force guide on which the *Honolulu* was taking station had just zigged to port. At this moment the *Honolulu's* Sky Forward was returning to its ready position from the drill action, when the director picked up four planes in their dive

¹³ Complete readiness.

¹⁴ One-third readiness.

¹⁵ This was the same *Achilles* which helped harry the *Graf Spee* into the River Plata in December 1939.

and the control officer gave the dive bomber attack local control signal on the warning howlers. Commence firing was not given.

The three lead planes screamed into their low dive from almost directly ahead of the *Honolulu*. They had already loosed their bombs when the *Honolulu* managed to fire one ineffective round each from guns No. 2 and 8. The first bomb landed about 25 yards from the vessel's port side, almost exactly abreast of Turret No. 1, temporarily drowning out the communications of Sky Forward with a towering pillar of water. The ship was turning to port at the time, and when the blast column had subsided, the forward guns would not bear. The after director and the starboard battery picked up the planes as they came over the ship, the starboard battery firing in local control, shifting to director control on receipt of word from the director.

The second bomb was also a near-hit, landing about 50 yards from the bow and slightly to starboard. Almost immediately a third bomb exploded between 25 and 50 yards from the starboard beam, directly abreast of No. 3 5" gun.¹⁶ Meanwhile the 1.1" mounts on the port side which had been holding loading drill were frantically shifting clips, but the planes were out of range before they were able to fire. The starboard battery, however, got off 20 rounds, while the starboard 1.1" mounts fired 96 rounds and the 20-mm.'s expended 237 rounds. These may possibly have shot down one bomber, since observers saw machine gun bullets entering a wing of the last attacker, and a Japanese plane caught fire soon afterward and dived into the water.

As the bombers passed over the *Honolulu*, they headed for the *Achilles*, second ship in line, astern and somewhat to port. The New Zealand cruiser had sighted the Japanese planes a few minutes earlier flying at 12,000 to 15,000 feet in a diamond formation, but had identified them as Grumman "Wildcats" and had assumed them to be a defensive formation from Guadalcanal. The first sign of hostile character noted was when the enemy broke formation and peeled off into their dives, leaving the *Achilles* barely time to man her AA guns.

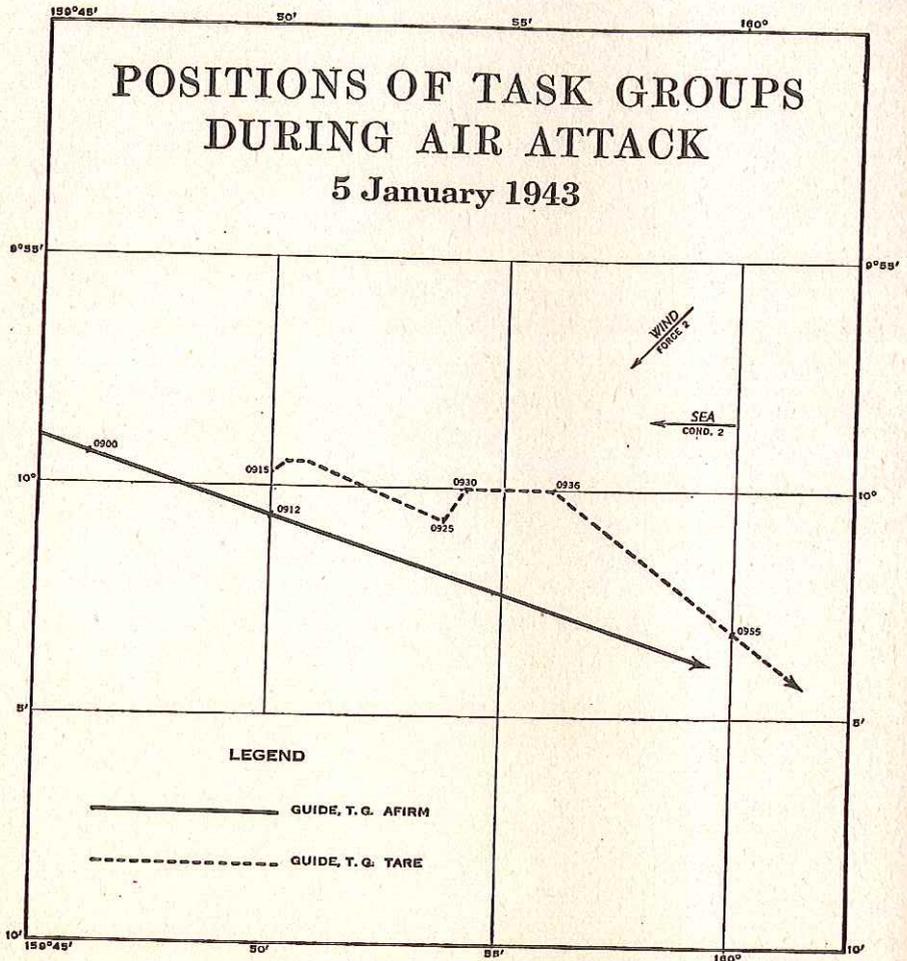
The third bomber in the formation¹⁷ dived through what fire could be thrown up from the three already-manned 20-mm. guns and dropped one bomb, probably 250 pounds,¹⁸ which struck squarely on the roof of the

¹⁶ These explosions littered the *Honolulu's* decks with bomb fragments.

¹⁷ This plane is believed to have dropped no bombs at the *Honolulu*.

¹⁸ The extremely localized damage led some observers to believe that it was a smaller bomb, or possibly one which failed to detonate completely.

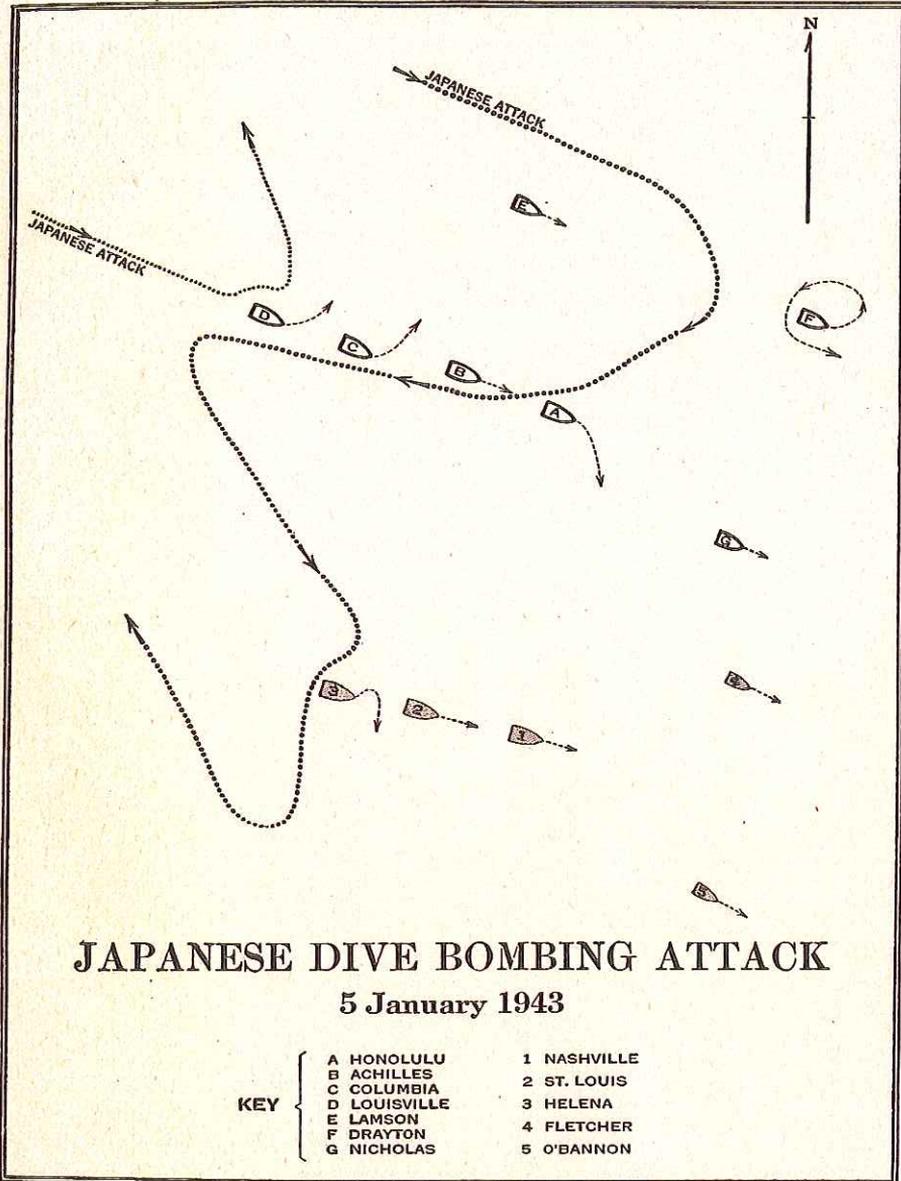
Achilles' No. 3 Turret, penetrating and exploding on the cradle of the right gun. The gun house was completely wrecked, and nine of the personnel were killed. Two were missing and presumed killed, two later died of wounds, and at least eight were wounded. The explosion blew the right side of the turret, made of one-inch plate, into the sea, and split



the roof, also of one-inch plate, into its component halves. One half was thrown onto the quarter-deck, the other half tossed vertically into the air where it turned upside down and landed on the turret again. The left gun was undamaged, but the bore of the right was distorted.

Fortunately the remote effects of the blast and fragmentation aboard the *Achilles* were practically nil. Fires were confined to the turret and

were easily extinguished. There was no damage whatever in No. 4 Turret, although the front glass of the after searchlight was broken, several wireless aerials carried away, and a few small fragments reached as far as the foremast. The pedestal of the 20-mm. gun mounted on top of No. 3 Turret remained attached to half the roof by one bolt, and landed



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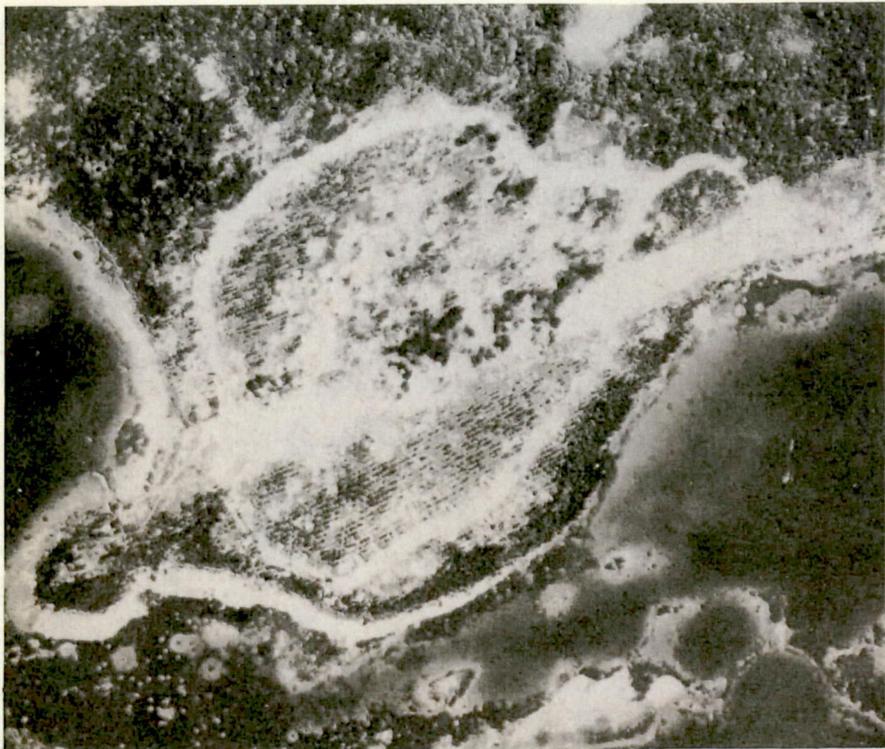
with it on the quarterdeck. The *Achilles* took the damage in her stride, and never lost position. Her AA fire continued throughout the brief engagement. The quick extinguishing of the fire was especially fortunate, as she had several boats in close proximity to the bombed turret and had not been de-painted to the same extent as the American ships.

The *Columbia*, third vessel in line, put her rudder over full left and went to flank speed as the bomb struck the *Achilles*. As she did so, one Aichi, which apparently was just beginning its dive on her, was intercepted by a Grumman, and fell smoking into the sea. After swinging left about 45 degrees, the *Columbia* reversed her rudder and opened fire with her 20-mm. and 40-mm. batteries on two planes to starboard. At this moment a single plane was observed heading toward the ship from starboard, and was immediately taken under fire by the 5" battery. Luckily the *Columbia* scored no hits, for the plane was soon identified as friendly.

The *Louisville*, which was trailing the *Columbia*, zigged radically to port and opened fire as soon as the attacking planes came within range. One of the planes peeled off in a high, fast gliding dive to starboard directly into the *Louisville's* fire from 5" batteries, 20-mm.'s and 1.1" quadruples. It never got a chance to drop its bombs, because at about 800 yards distance, before it reached the release point, 20-mm. shells ripped into its fuselage. The Aichi immediately began to lose altitude, and crashed about 5,000 yards from the starboard quarter. A few moments later another dive bomber came in low and fast from directly astern, with the evident intention of strafing the *Louisville's* decks. Like its predecessor, this plane never reached the ship, but in the face of heavy AA fire maneuvered violently, turned away, and retired to port after being hit by a few shells. Unfortunately one of the *Louisville's* 1.1" shells was a premature and exploded the barrel of the gun, wounding one of the crew.

As the remaining planes passed over the rear of the column, they swung hard left and attempted to attack the *St. Louis* and the *Helena* of the bombardment group 4,000 yards away. These vessels, however, had already had sufficient warning, and put up a terrific AA barrage. The first plane came in a low, fast glide, directly into the curtain thrown up by six of the *St. Louis' 5" 38-caliber* guns. The second salvo struck the plane directly, just as it wildly released its bomb. In a matter of seconds, the Aichi was in the water.

The remainder of the attackers swung on past the *Helena*, which first turned left to unmask the port battery then right to unmask the starboard.



Bombs bursting on Munda airstrip



Munda runway in the rain

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NEW GEORGIA
ISLAND

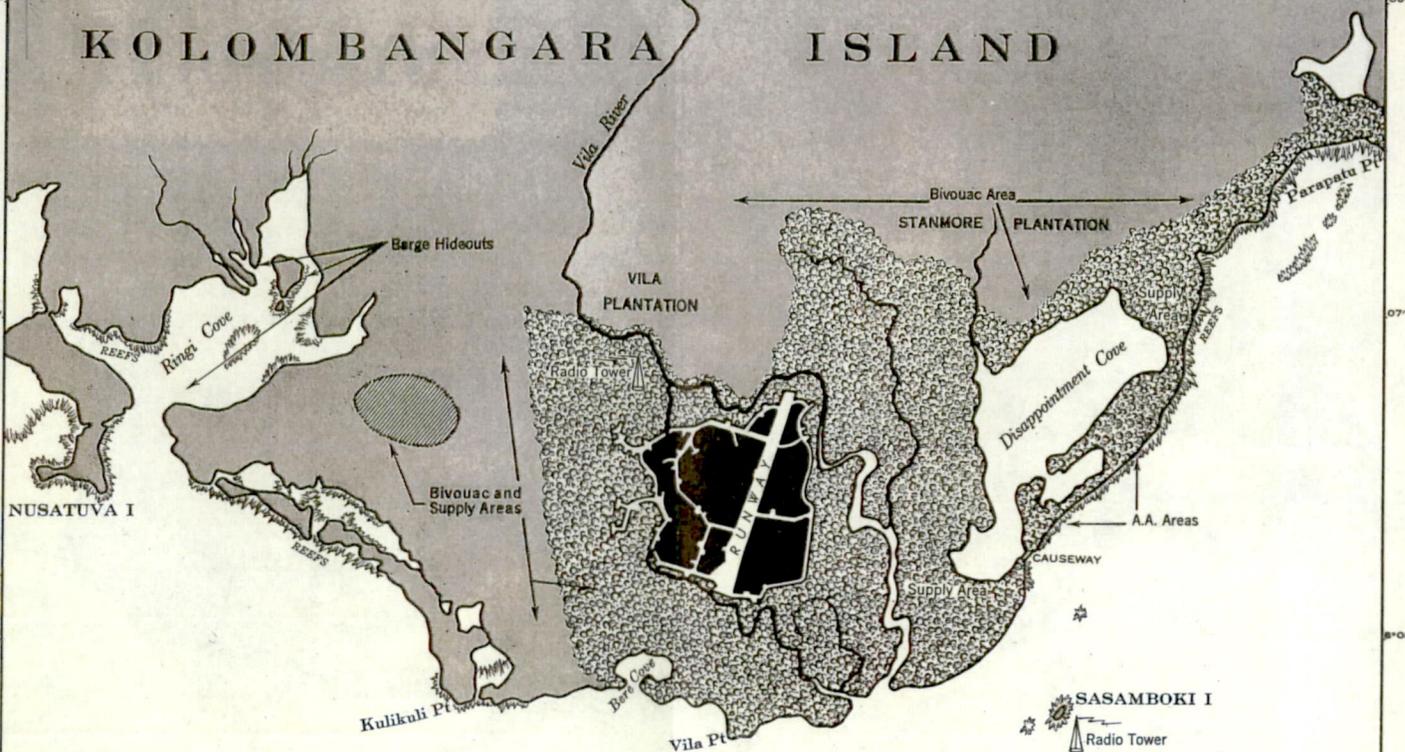
THE AIRFIELD
AT
MUNDA POINT



07° 157° 08' 09° 10'

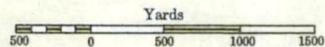
VILA-STANMORE PLANTATIONS AND AIRFIELD

KOLOMBANGARA ISLAND



BLACKETT STRAIT

ARUNDEL ISLAND



07° 157° 08' 09° 10'



CONTINUED

Kula Gulf, showing Vila-Stanmore airfield and Blackett Strait in center foreground, New Georgia in background

One of the planes came in high and fast over the *Helena's* stern from port. The ship immediately opened up with her 20-mm. and 40-mm. batteries, but it was several seconds after "Commence Firing" before the dive bomber came within range. In barely a minute, the *Helena* had scored a definite hit, and the bomber crashed near its predecessor, having jettisoned its bomb harmlessly from an altitude of approximately 2,500 feet. The *St. Louis*, meanwhile, continued to fire. It is believed that one of these vessels damaged a third Aichi before driving the rest off.¹⁹

This phase marked the end of the enemy attack. After crossing the *Helena's* stern, the remaining Aichis turned abruptly and fled to the north, hotly pursued by Grummans and Lockheed P-38's from Guadalcanal.

RESULTS

Because of the thorough planning, careful preparation, and efficient execution of the first bombardment of Munda, it was disappointing to learn that enemy aircraft were using the field again in less than 18 hours.²⁰ This must be attributed, however, rather to excellent repair work by the Japanese than to any ineffectiveness on the part of the ships involved, for photographs of the target taken the next morning showed that the area had been "thoroughly worked over." Pilots on reconnaissance at that time reported they met practically no AA fire from the locations bombarded. Automatic weapon fire was received from the islands just south of the airfield, and from the woods just to the east of the field. None of the AA was as heavy as three-inch. Spotters and observers agreed that the bombardment was the most destructive and efficient—available targets considered—which had been delivered to the Japanese up to that date.

Perhaps the best interpretation of the bombardment was given by CINCPAC when he said, "As a diversion . . . and as a deterrent against air attack on Guadalcanal during troop replacement, the operation was of value."

He qualified this statement, however, by adding, "The damage to airfields or other land positions is so transient that ships should not ordinarily be risked to bombard airfields and other positions except in close support of ground operations."

¹⁹ The *O'Bannon* reported seeing a total of five planes burning in the water.

²⁰ On the afternoon of 5 January coast watchers heard aircraft warming up at Munda.

II

SECOND BOMBARDMENT—VILA-STANMORE

23-24 January 1943

During the month following the first bombardment of Munda, American troops rapidly consolidated their positions and strengthened their reserve bases in the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area. The development of Port Purvis and Tulagi as fleet harbors afforded increasingly satisfactory sites for fueling and repairing ships, while the completion of a million-gallon bulk gasoline stowage area on Guadalcanal facilitated air operations from Henderson Field.

Meanwhile our campaign to drive the enemy from the island slowly got underway. Ground forces, supported by ship and air bombardments, methodically reduced many Japanese strong points, and by the fourth week of January had overcome resistance on the high land southwest of Henderson Field, captured Kokumbona, and were approaching Tassafaronga to the west. By midmonth, operations were proceeding so favorably that plans were developed for outflanking the enemy by a troop landing on the northwest coast of Guadalcanal. Tank landing vessels were brought in to Tulagi, and on the 19th and 20th of the month Maj. Gen. Patch, commander of the ground forces in the area, visited Beaufort Bay on reconnaissance in the destroyer *Nicholas*.

Aerial reconnaissance had revealed considerable enemy activity in the Japanese island bases to the north and west, with heavy shipping concentrations at Rabaul, smaller groups at Buin, and vigorous base development projects in the New Georgia Islands. There was still no evidence, however, to clarify the direction of the next enemy thrust. Many indications still pointed to New Guinea, where Japanese air and ground strength were steadily on the increase, despite losses from Allied air attacks. One important movement from Rabaul to Lae, for example, consisted of four transports escorted by two cruisers and four destroyers. It reached its destination despite the loss of one or more ships and damage to several others. On the other hand, the continued possibility existed that the Japanese would endeavor to regain Guadalcanal. They were going to

considerable effort to keep their airfields at Munda and elsewhere in serviceable condition under continuous aerial bombardment, and the "Tokio Express" still ran periodically with supplies for the remaining troops on Guadalcanal.

Japanese destroyers at this time were particularly active in the waters northwest of the American bases. Early in the morning of 11 January, off Cape Esperance, eight PT boats tackled a Japanese force of 10 destroyers, sinking 1 and scoring possible hits on two others. Two more destroyer groups were sighted off Savo Island on the night of the 14th, and American search planes scored at least one hit on one of the vessels. On the morning of the 15th PT boats torpedoed three of these destroyers, and dive bombers later scored bomb hits on two more. On the nights of 20 and 21 January small groups of enemy reconnaissance planes bombed Espiritu Santo, and for three successive nights, beginning 20 January, the enemy harassed Henderson Field from the air, making as many as eight attacks in one night.²¹

Meanwhile our aircraft from Guadalcanal carried out several heavy attacks on the Japanese airfield at Munda, but did not succeed in seriously impeding its progressive development or hindering enemy air operations. On the contrary, not only did enemy shipping to Munda increase, but the base at the Vila-Stanmore Plantations on nearby Kolombangara Island²² assumed increasing importance as a staging point for the advanced Munda Field. Evidence that an airstrip was also under construction at Vila-Stanmore was verified by photographs on 22 January, showing a 6,000-foot runway 90 percent cleared. Such a development had been suspected for some time, and its portent thoroughly considered and discussed. Both protected by and sustaining the field at Munda, an air base at Vila-Stanmore could constitute a highly effective menace, both offensively and defensively, to future American operations throughout the Solomon Islands area.

PREPARATIONS

A close study of available information led to some interesting conclusions concerning actual and potential Japanese activity at the base at Vila-Stanmore. The first report of Japanese occupation on 31 December

²¹ It was perhaps not coincidental that the Secretary of the Navy and CINCPAC were inspecting these bases at the time.

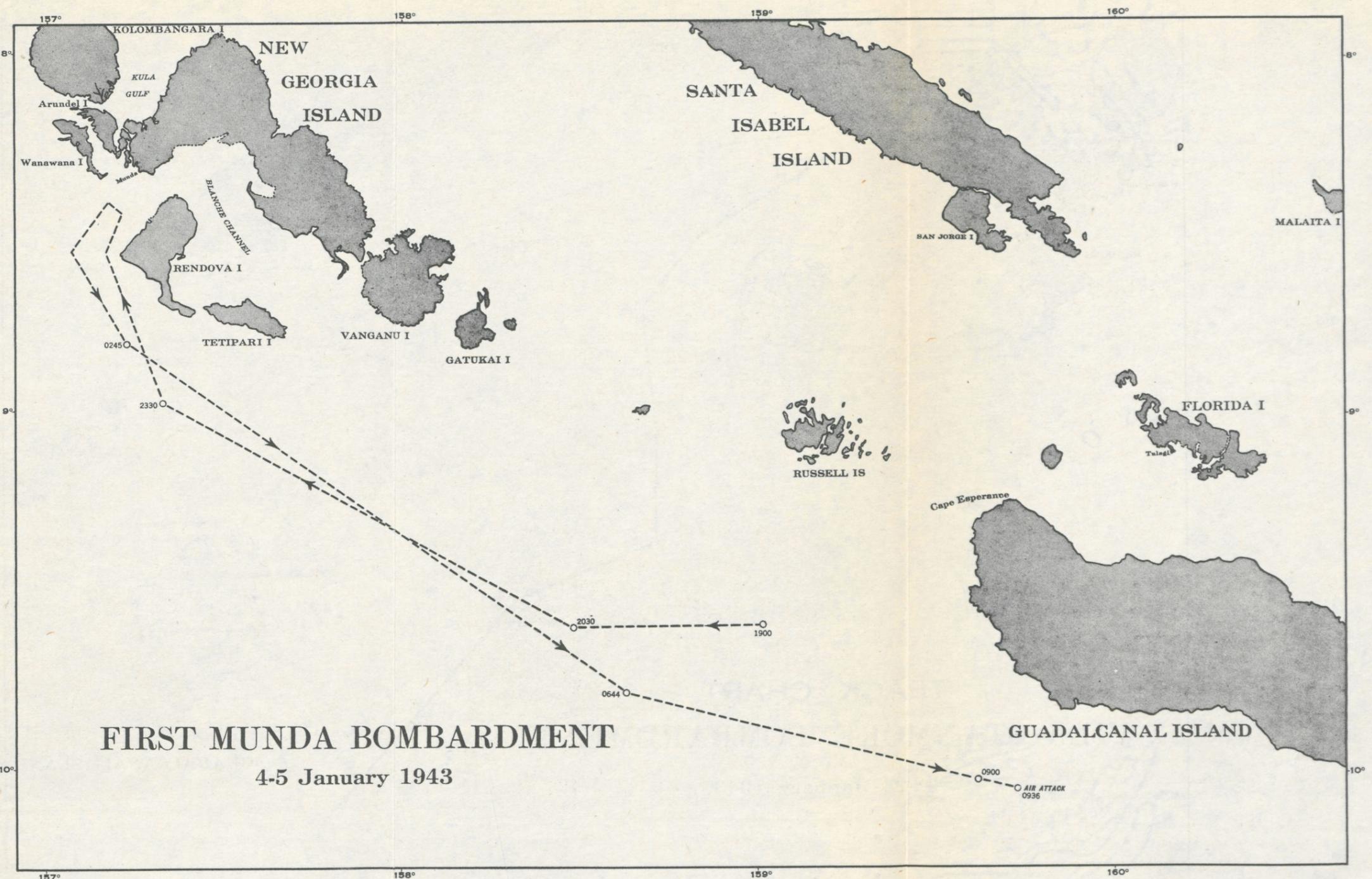
²² The plantations were situated on opposite banks of the mouth of the Vila River—Stanmore Plantation to the west and Vila Plantation to the east. (See chart.)

revealed that the enemy had stationed 400 troops in the area. Two weeks later, on 13 January, detailed reports by native scouts revised the number to 4,000, indicating that the Japanese considered the base to be of increasing importance. The first enemy troops evidently used the plantation houses, which were easily visible from the sea and air, as quarters; later, however, the main plantation house at Vila was dismantled and rebuilt in the bush near the western boundary of the cultivated land. Slit trenches were dug in the nearby jungle, and two guns of unknown size were moved from their exposed positions on Vila Point to the better cover of the plantation. The Japanese evidently used a considerable number of barges to supply the base, unloading them at night and hiding them under cliffs along the shore during daylight. Frequent reports were received of barge and cargo vessel traffic to the island. Two particularly large movements were noted—one on 28 December when 28 barges were reported moving through Diamond Narrows, the other on 10 January when 22 more were seen in the same area. Larger ships apparently came in from Faisi, unloaded, and returned to Faisi the following day. Some of their cargo would then be loaded on the hidden barges, and sent down to Munda under cover of darkness.

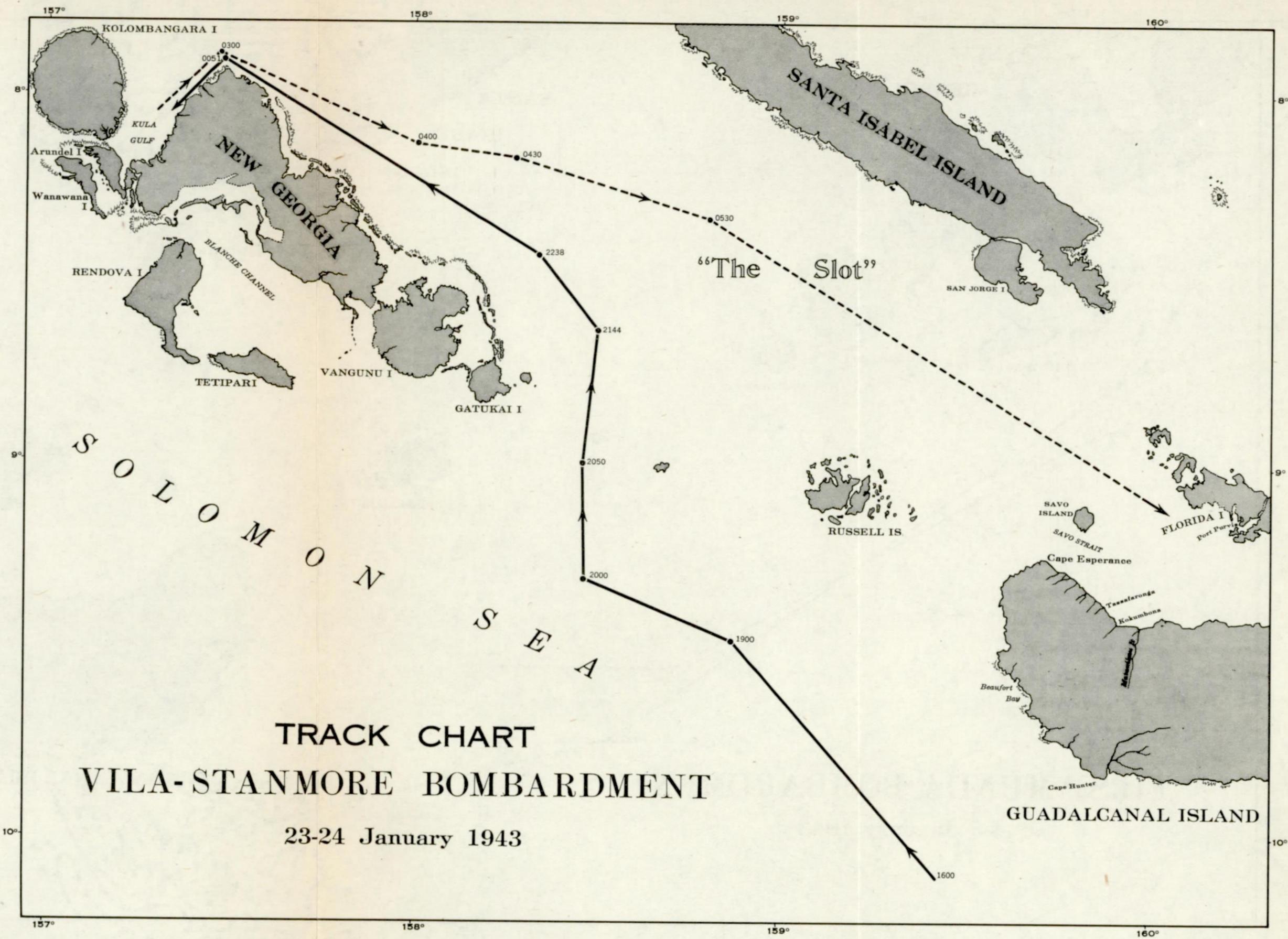
The experience gained in the first Munda bombardment was not particularly conducive to optimism over the lasting effect of ship bombardments on land bases and airfields. As diversionary actions and screening operations for more important moves in other areas, however, they had been shown to possess considerable value. It should be remembered that at this time extensive troop replacements were still going on in Guadalcanal. Furthermore, it was necessary that preparations for the anticipated amphibious operations on the northwest coast of the island be effected with as much secrecy as possible. Our advanced Solomons bases had been lately receiving a good deal of unpleasant enemy attention which, if continued for any length of time, might prove embarrassing to our plans. Accordingly, on 19 January, COMSOPAC issued operation orders to bombard Vila-Stanmore on the night of the 23rd and 24th, paying particular attention to plantation buildings, bivouac areas, ammunition supply dumps, storehouses, gun emplacements, docks, and any ships or barges present.

Task Force AFIRM, which had so ably shelled Munda, was once again assigned to furnish the bombardment group.²³ After studying operational

²³ The Task Force was now at Espiritu Santo.



~~CONFIDENTIAL~~



TRACK CHART
VILA-STANMORE BOMBARDMENT

23-24 January 1943



The Nicholas

CONFIDENTIAL

plans, Rear Admiral Ainsworth chose for this purpose his flagship, the *Nashville* (Capt. Spanagel), the *Helena* (Capt. Cecil), and the destroyers *Nicholas* (Lt. Comdr. William D. Brown), *DeHaven* (Comdr. Charles E. Tolman), *Radford* (Lt. Comdr. William K. Romoser), and *O'Bannon* (Lt. Comdr. Donald J. MacDonald).²⁴ Capt. Robert P. Briscoe in the *Nicholas* commanded the destroyer unit.

The support section of the Task Force was composed of the *Honolulu*, (Capt. Robert W. Hayler), the *St. Louis* (Capt. Colin Campbell), and the destroyers *Drayton* (Comdr. Jacob E. Cooper), *Lamson* (Comdr. Philip H. Fitz-Gerald), and *Hughes* (Lt. Comdr. Herbert H. Marable). Destroyers were under the command of Comdr. Laurence A. Abercrombie. With Task Force ROGER²⁵ under Rear Admiral DeWitt C. Ramsey, it was to protect the bombardment; Task Force ROGER was to remain southeast of Rennell Island, and Comdr. Abercrombie's group was to operate around Guadalcanal, protecting convoys moving in to the island. An air group from the *Saratoga*, based on Henderson Field, was to be in the air at the time, ready for possible action against attacking enemy planes.

The proposed bombardment presented, in general, the same problems of approach and retirement which had been encountered in the Munda expedition. Certain important differences, however, had to be taken into account. In the first place, the fact that the Vila-Stanmore operation was to be a second venture in the same direction, together with the possibility that visibility would be good, made Rear Admiral Ainsworth "quite dubious" as to the likelihood of arriving at the bombardment point undetected. Secondly, the narrow confines of Kula Gulf—the only feasible firing area—offered little room for maneuvering, and would leave the ships increasingly liable to "boxing in" as they penetrated deeper to an effective bombardment line. In order that these difficulties might be minimized as much as possible, it was decided that the Force should steam into the Gulf in column, two destroyers leading the cruisers and two screening behind. The *O'Bannon* was to take the lead, 5,000 yards in advance of the *Nicholas*, and make a sweep of the Gulf following the general path which the other vessels were to take. In no case, however, was she to awaken enemy suspicions by going farther south than latitude

²⁴ Only 2 cruisers were assigned because of a local shortage of 6" high capacity ammunition.

²⁵ Task Force ROGER was composed at this time of the carrier *Saratoga* (F), the cruiser *San Juan*, and the destroyers *Sausley*, *Maury*, *McCall*, and *Fanning*. The *Case* joined the Force on the morning of 23 January.

08°05'—little more than half the distance from Visuvisu Point to the firing line. Without joining the bombardment, the *O'Bannon* was then to take station off Waugh Rock, avoiding detection if possible, and cover the firing group by preventing the approach of enemy surface units from the north. Upon completion of the *O'Bannon's* sweep, the bombardment vessels, still in the same order, were to turn to the firing course—slowing to 15 knots because of the restricted waters and prospective navigational difficulties—and open fire after they were headed out.

No submarine was available for the navigational duties which the *Grayback* had performed during the bombardment of Munda; but because of easily identifiable landmarks and the proven accuracy of radar navigation, it was not felt that one was needed. Nor were scout observation planes from the cruisers to be used, the Munda experience having shown that Black Cats were far superior for spotting on this type of operation. However, in addition to the two Black Cats required for spotting the bombardment, a Catalina equipped with radar was to be used for screening purposes during the firing and retirement.

The difficulties presented, when considered in the light of aerial photographs of the Vila runway and dispersal areas, led Rear Admiral Ainsworth to decide on a firing plan rather different from that employed at Munda. The two cruisers—the flagship leading—were to come on the firing leg in column, where the *Nashville* would take as her point of aim the north end of the cleared runway where it met the Vila river. The *Helena*, scheduled to arrive at the “open fire” bearing two minutes later, was to concentrate on the plantation buildings. This plan provided about 2,500 yards separation between the “open fire” points of the two cruisers—a spread which they were to eliminate by working their fire toward one another's targets. It was believed that the separation, together with the difference in “open fire” time, would give the Black Cats a good opportunity to distinguish the separate salvos. The average range this plan afforded was between 11,000 and 13,000 yards.

After the *Helena* stood on to the range, the *DeHaven* and the *Radford* were to close to about 7,500 yards to take the plantation buildings and the adjacent river areas under fire. Upon turning off the range, the destroyers were to increase speed to 30 knots to cover the flank of the retiring cruisers. As they steamed out of the Gulf, they were to pour a heavy fire into Buki and Bambari Harbors, small bays north of the plantations, on the chance that some enemy shipping might be there. By this almost

simultaneous bombardment, as contrasted with the separate firing employed at Munda, it was hoped that any enemy resistance would be smothered, while the stay of the ships in hostile waters would be considerably lessened.

Early on 21 January, Task Force ROGER left Noumea to transport the *Saratoga's* air group to Henderson Field. On the following day, having fueled and taken on ammunition, Task Force AFIRM sortied from Espiritu Santo, laying course to the west of Guadalcanal. While both Forces were en route, on the night of 22-23 January, Black Cats carrying the spotters for the firing group went out on a harassing mission over Munda, partly to deceive the enemy as to our intentions toward Vila-Stanmore, and partly to familiarize the spotters with the procedure to be followed the next night. The following day, from dawn until mid-afternoon, planes from Henderson Field repeatedly attacked the air base at Munda, bombing and strafing runways and revetments, seeking to neutralize the field for the bombardment that evening.

THE BOMBARDMENT

Task Force AFIRM, including the bombardment and support groups, took cruising formation after leaving Espiritu Santo and zigzagged west of Guadalcanal. All during the day and night they steamed at 21 knots, the cruisers in line of divisions, the destroyers forming an antisubmarine screen. Japanese reconnaissance planes picked up the ships at about 1030 the morning of the 23rd, southwest of the island, and shadowed them off and on during the remainder of the day, keeping for the most part just out of sight. During this time Henderson Field provided fighter coverage ranging between 7 and 12 planes. On several occasions sector radar coverage reported bogies on the screen, and the fighters were vectored out after the snoopers. Occasionally various vessels of the Force caught glimpses of the shadowers, and reported to the fighters that they appeared to be flying quite low; but our planes were never able to locate the elusive Japanese. The ships could see the fighters go out and could hear them talking to one another; but the shadowers would always come back on the screen after short intervals, and undoubtedly made frequent reports of the position of the Force.

Finally, at 1840, the fighter escort left to return to Guadalcanal. Five

minutes later, another Japanese reconnaissance plane appeared from the West.²⁶

Immediately after sunset, clouds shut in from the east and the whole sky became overcast. By 1900 the Force had reached latitude $09^{\circ}30' S.$, longitude $158^{\circ}50' E.$, just southwest of the Russell Islands, and had turned once again toward the west in the hope that enemy shadows would mistake its destination. At 2000, in position latitude $09^{\circ}25' S.$, longitude $158^{\circ}31' E.$, the support group turned about and steamed back toward the south around the southern end of Guadalcanal. Although the moon had risen, the overcast made the night very dark. Amid scattered rain squalls, the bombardment group swung due north into New Georgia Sound and, satisfied that its change of course had gone undetected, set out at 26 knots for Vila-Stanmore.

Assuming Condition of Readiness TWO, with full boiler power, the bombardment group steamed to the north for an hour and three-quarters, the cruisers in column and the destroyers forming a circular screen. At 2144 course was changed to $326^{\circ} T.$, and at 2238 to $298^{\circ} T.$ At about 0014 on the 24th, while the ships were standing along and well out from the north New Georgia coast with the objective less than two hours away, they were picked up by three planes showing small white wingtip lights and large white lights in the tail portions of their fuselages. For a few moments these were thought to be the spotting Black Cats, and the CTF "inwardly cursed" them for their display of lights. It was soon noticed, however, that they were somewhat too straight in the fuselage to be Catalinas. A moment later they began challenging the vessels, using the single letter character UNCLE. For more than an hour they circled the *O'Bannon*, finally disappearing just as the leading destroyers turned into Kula Gulf. By this time they had been definitely identified as Mitsubishi twin-engined bombers. Apparently, however, they remained in doubt as to the identity of the Force (although they must have thought it excessively cautious in not answering the challenge), for they did not attack, despite being in position to do so many times.

The navigational problem involved in entering the Gulf in the blackness offered little difficulty because of the excellent functioning of the SG radar. Sasamboki Island, low and close to the land, did not stand out

²⁶ At about this time one of the Black Cats passed over the Force and headed toward Munda, thereby possibly giving the Japanese the impression that this was our objective.

with the boldness of the offshore rocks at Munda, but nevertheless was picked up clearly. Tunguirili Point, on the other hand, stood out sharply, and gave an excellent cross bearing. As the Force entered the Gulf, the *O'Bannon* and the *Nicholas* swept ahead of the other ships for enemy vessels, but encountered none. At 0128 the *O'Bannon*, satisfied that the bay was clear, turned northward toward her station off Waugh Rock, and the bombardment vessels, having slowed to 17 knots, steamed unopposed toward the firing line.

At 0155, as the *Nashville* turned to the bombardment leg, both cruisers made contact with their spotting planes, already over the target, on voice and keyed secondary frequencies. At 0200, exactly on schedule, the *Nashville* opened fire, her point of aim being the north end of the runway at the junction of the Vila River. The spotters' task was complicated at first, because their orientation point was the tip of land at the east bank of the river mouth some 2,800 yards south of the initial target. Fast salvo fire (7.5 seconds) was employed for a minute or two until the first spot reported that the shells were landing near the center of the air strip. After correcting down 6, left 150, the *Nashville* shifted to continuous fire, setting parallax range on infinity and using vigorous rocking in deflection to effect wider lateral displacement of fire. She then covered the area from the center of the runway south and west through the dispersal areas, and walked her fire over the two reported dump areas west of the south end of the runway and north of the plantation buildings, starting numerous small blazes of short duration. The spotters estimated that 95 percent of her projectiles struck in the target area, only one salvo landing in the water.

Two minutes behind the *Nashville*, at 0202, the *Helena* swung onto the line and fired two ranging salvos with her main battery. The first salvo landed in the water a little short of the Vila plantation buildings. The second, however, struck in the plantation building area. On receipt of a spot, the *Helena* shifted down 5 and opened fire with her 5" battery, the main battery going to continuous fire. Thereafter the *Helena's* salvos covered the land area north and west of the plantation buildings from 1,800 yards north to 1,000 yards west of the south end of the runway. She also worked over the area east of the plantation as far as the Vila River. As in the case of the *Nashville*, 95 percent of the *Helena's* fire was spotted in the target area. Material and personnel on both cruisers

functioned smoothly and efficiently—so efficiently that the commanding officer of the *DeHaven*, waiting his turn to begin bombardment, noted six salvos from the *Nashville* alone in the air at one time.²⁷

The *Nashville* had been firing for about 6 minutes when her Black Cat suddenly interrupted its spots to report an unidentified vessel attempting to escape through Blackett Strait.²⁸ The *Helena* was immediately ordered to attack, but could not locate the ship, either visually or by radar. The *DeHaven*, which at this time was within 3½ miles of the beach, was also notified by TBS. She, too, made a radar search, but found nothing and reported that she “couldn’t have helped seeing a ship had there been one there.”²⁹

Eight minutes after the *Nashville*’s initial salvo, the *Nicholas*, whose primary mission was to act as a screen ahead of the heavy ships, opened fire on the causeway at the entrance to Bambari Harbor. She had previously learned from the Black Cat that both cruisers were placing their salvos in the proper target area, and had determined by radar sweep that Buki and Bambari Harbors were free of enemy shipping. In the next 3 minutes she fired 65 rounds of 5” projectiles, and when the *Nashville* ceased firing and turned to 052° for the retirement, the *Nicholas* also broke off her bombardment and resumed her screening station on the cruiser’s starboard bow.

The *DeHaven* and the *Radford*, trailing the cruisers, continued on their entrance course for 4 minutes after the *Helena* had turned to the firing line. At the end of this time the *DeHaven* swung to 270° T., and maintained that heading for another 4 minutes, the *Radford* continuing as before. On the expiration of this second period, the *DeHaven* turned to the firing course (340° T.), and at 0209, with Sasamboki Island bearing 269° T., opened fire on the Vila plantation buildings. No fires were visible in this area until the *DeHaven* began her bombardment, but im-

²⁷ CTF stated later that he believed that the cruiser fire killed or injured many of the reported 4,000 Japanese troops on the island.

²⁸ Observers on the *Nashville* reported sighting “the usual torpedo wake.” Upon interrogation the next day, however, several of them changed their minds.

²⁹ After conferring with the spotters following the bombardment, CTF reported that in all probability an enemy vessel was entering Blackett Strait when the bombardment started, then turned around and stood out. The spotters were apparently in error in assuming that the ship was standing out of Vila River and into the strait. After the bombardment force had left the area, reconnaissance planes saw a cargo vessel and a small unidentified ship steaming out of the bay. A destroyer and a cargo ship arrived at Faisi the following morning.

mediately thereafter flames shot up in tall pillars.³⁰ The *DeHaven* continued salvo fire for 30 seconds waiting for a spot from the Black Cats. When this was not forthcoming, she shifted to rapid fire, convinced that she was hitting in the right place.³¹ At 0219 she changed course to 030° T., and increased speed to 30 knots, opening fire on Buki Harbor, at 0220. After two minutes she shifted her fire to Bambari Harbor, and at 0226 ceased firing and changed course to 055° T., to regain the formation.

The *Radford*, close on the heels of the *DeHaven* as they entered the Gulf, held to her original course of 216° T. until 0207, when she swung to the firing leg coincidentally with the *DeHaven's* turn. By this maneuver, she lengthened the distance between her and her sister ship, and set her bombardment line somewhat farther offshore than that of the *DeHaven*. At 0209 she, too, opened fire, her first salvos hitting in the assigned areas east and west of the plantation buildings. Bombardment was begun by using the tangent of land at Stanmore Plantation as a point of aim in train, and 9,000 yards range was set on the computer for elevation. From this initial range setup, generated ranges were used and arbitrary deflection and range spots of 100-yard steps were applied every 3 seconds to cover the target area. The large fire which broke out as the destroyers began their shelling spread further with each impact, punctuated every few seconds by tremendous explosions and billowing flames reaching high above the tops of the coconut trees. By the time the destroyers left the area, the conflagration had spread over an area 300 yards square, centering on the plantation buildings. As they completed the bombardment, one of the Black Cats increased the devastation by dropping two 500-pound bombs just north of the edge of the blaze, adding considerably to the flames and causing the fire to spread inshore. The second Cat dropped two bombs near the plantation buildings with unobserved results.

At 0220, following the lead of the *DeHaven*, the *Radford* ceased firing, swung to course 030° T., and increased her speed to 30 knots. Two minutes later, while speeding out of the bay, she commenced firing into Buki Harbor, shifting targets in a few moments to Bambari Harbor. At 0229

³⁰ Comdr. Tolman later reported to CINCPAC: "We naturally assumed that we had hit the jackpot with the first nickel, but have since been informed that the fires were actually started by the cruisers. I find my crew a little hard to convince."

³¹ It was learned after the *DeHaven* ceased fire that no spots were received because all the plugs in the transfer panel in Radio Central jumped out with the first salvo, and continued to jump out with succeeding salvos.

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she ceased fire and changed course to 055° T. to take her station astern of the retiring group.

Throughout the bombardment, enemy counterfire was weak and completely ineffective—so weak that only two of the vessels reported it, and none thought it worthy of reply. The *DeHaven* noted slight anti-aircraft fire from the beach during her initial run. Although some of the bursts appeared directly above her, she assumed that they were directed at the Black Cats. The *Nashville*, some minutes after she opened fire, observed anti-aircraft shells bursting a thousand or more yards short of the ship. At times her tracers, with those of the *Helena*, almost converged on the enemy gun positions in deflection, but the range was obviously too great to hit.

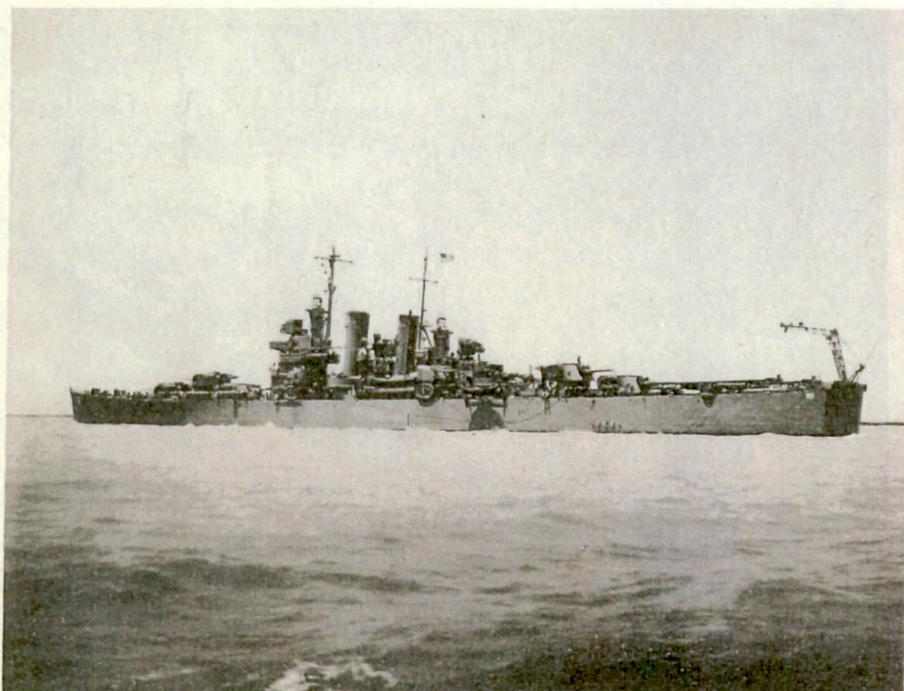
RETIREMENT

The formation for retirement called for the *O'Bannon*, after leaving her picket station off Waugh Rock, to join the *Nicholas*, one on either bow of the *Nashville*, while the *DeHaven* and the *Radford* closed up on either quarter of the *Helena*. In this arrangement, the group would present a boxed anti-aircraft formation. Events soon proved the wisdom of this plan.

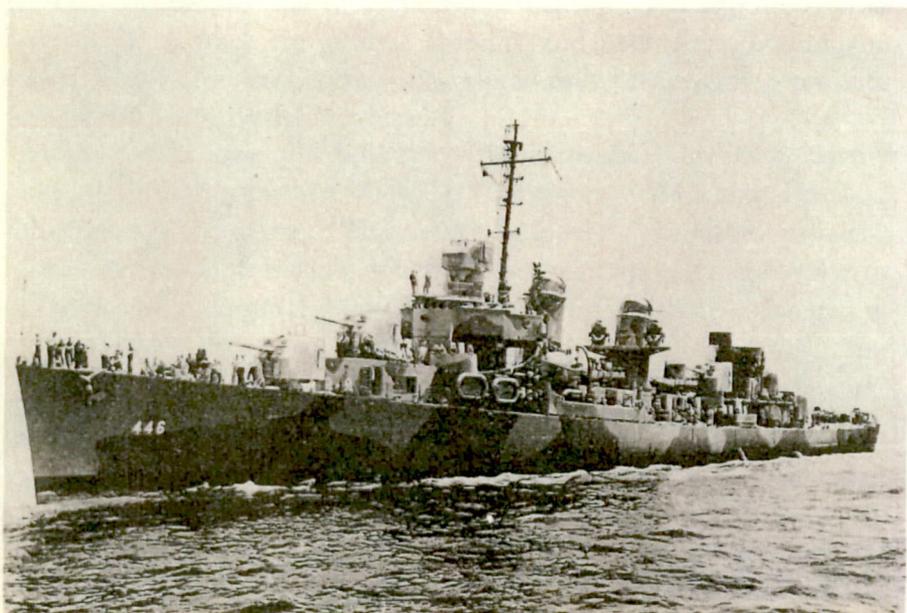
At approximately 0230, when the *DeHaven* and the *Radford* had just passed Bambari Harbor about 4,000 yards offshore, they ceased fire and swung to course 055° T. to close the cruisers. Behind them near Stanmore Plantation the flames were growing, overshadowing the conflagration at Vila. As they rushed to take their assigned positions in the screen, a green glow lit the sky over Kolombangara Mountain. A moment later a bright white flare dropped astern. Although no planes were seen, it was apparent that the Japanese had discovered the bombardment group's position and could be expected to attack.

For the next half hour, flares fell in quick succession from enemy planes invisible in the overcast. The patterns and colors of the pyrotechnics seemed to indicate a hitherto unencountered Japanese method of tracking the course of the vessels and marking off points from which to start an attack. Green and red aerial flares, burning very brightly, would box the formation, and would be followed by light floats which illuminated the surface of the water.

At 0259 the *O'Bannon* took her prescribed station on the *Nashville's* port bow, and the flagship increased her speed to 29 knots. Almost

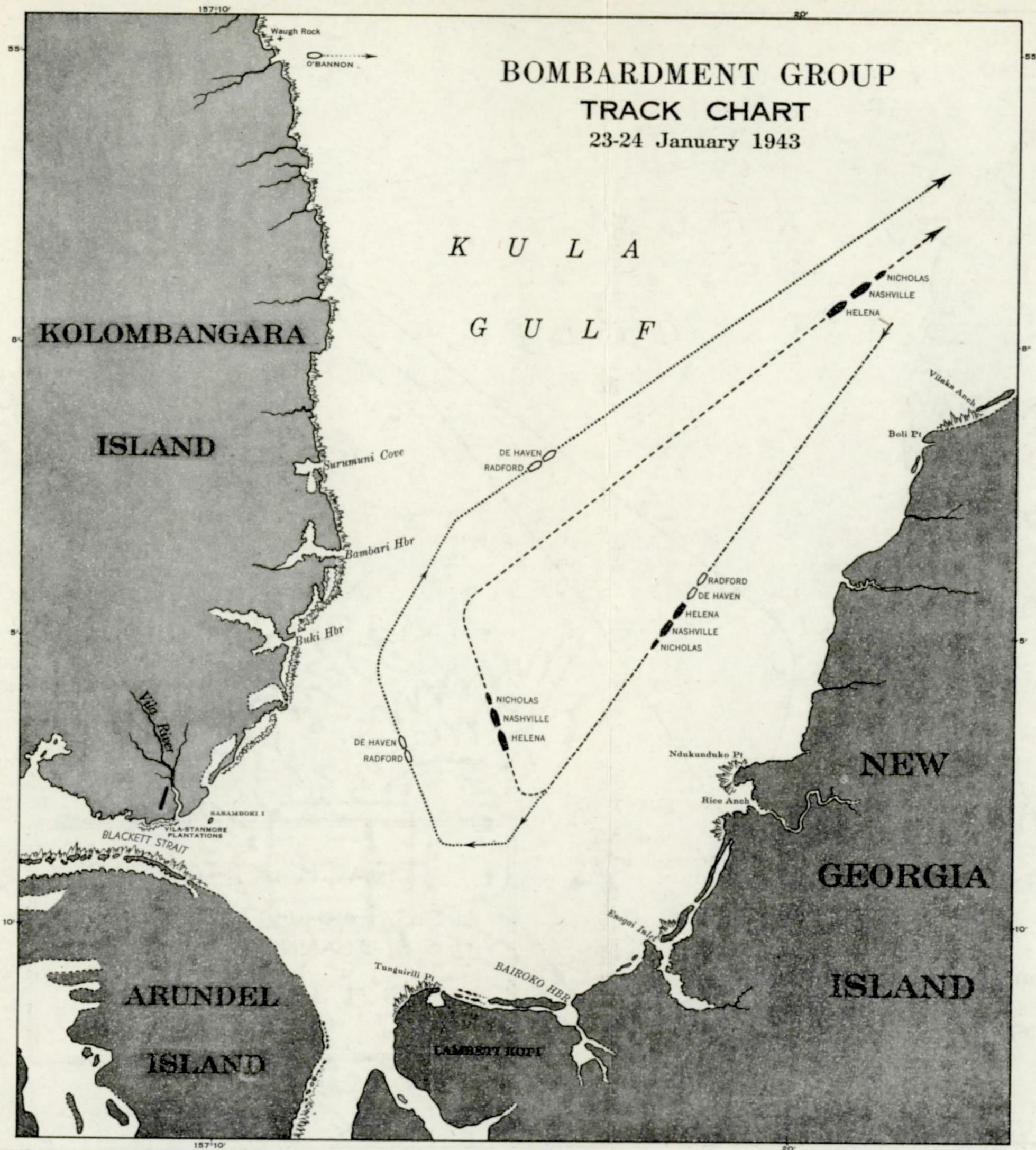


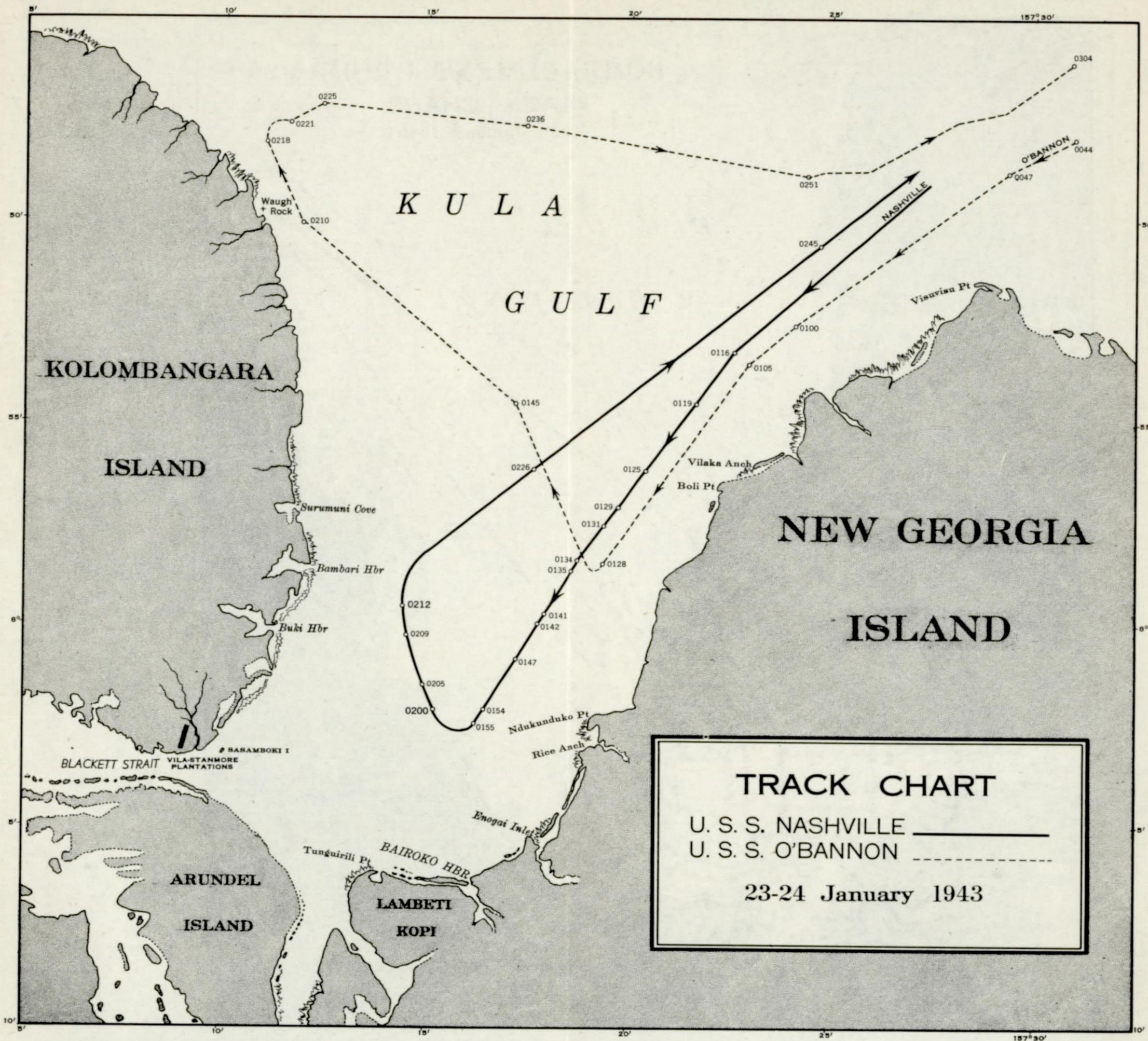
The Helena

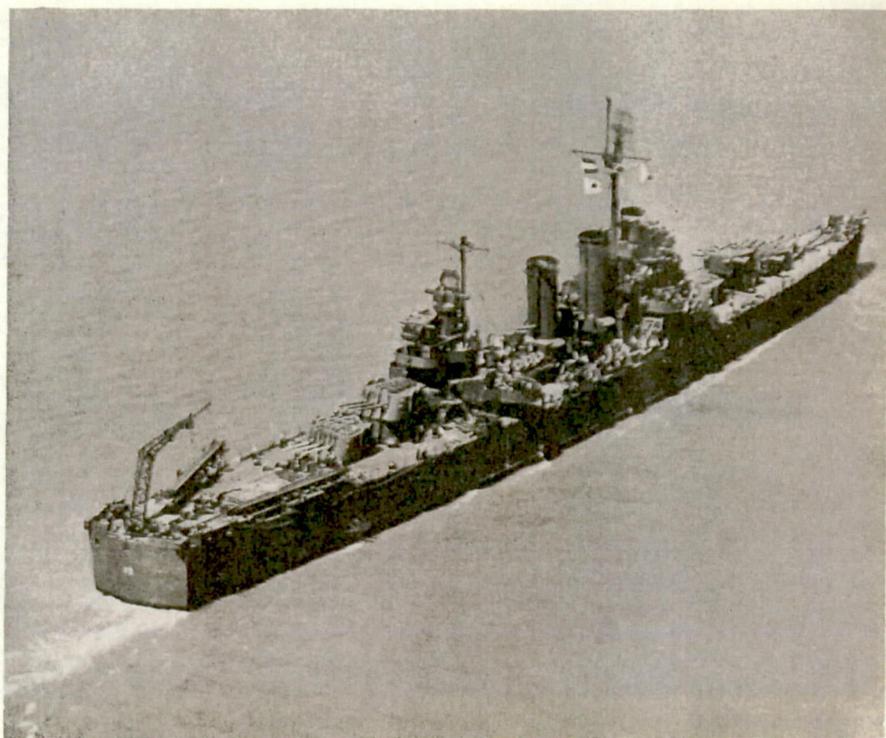


The Radford

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The Nashville



Stern view of the O'Bannon

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immediately the cruisers, which had already begun an aerial search with their SC radars, made contacts with enemy planes. The overcast, through which was glowing faintly the watery disk of the moon, prevented all but the most fleeting visual contacts with the enemy; but it undoubtedly served to screen the ships just as effectively. The bombardment group, steering a direct course, steamed steadily toward the mouth of the Gulf until, at 0310, a particularly large flashing white light was sighted on the water dead ahead. The *Nicholas*, on orders of the CTF, left the screen at full speed to investigate. She found a large lighted float, apparently dropped by enemy planes to stake out and mark the path of the formation. It appeared that when the floats were dropped, they would act first as a flare suspended from a parachute, dropping slowly to an altitude of about 500 feet. At this point they would plummet into the water, where they would exhibit for some time a series of bright flashes, similar to a navigation light.

By 0314 the *DeHaven* and the *Radford* had reached their stations on the port and starboard quarters of the *Helena*, and the formation was complete. Surface visibility remained about 8,000 yards, with the pale moonlight diffused by the dense cloud cover. The destroyers could be seen from the cruisers at 4,000 yards with the unaided eye. The Black Cat spotters reported that the wakes of the cruisers, extending at least five miles, could occasionally be seen from 6,000 yards altitude. At 0331, when radar indicated that the planes were definitely closing, the *Helena* was ordered to track the nearest "bandit" and open fire. During the next few minutes she opened up sporadically at several promising contacts, but made no definite hits.

At 0350, with flares still falling and an increasing number of enemy planes maneuvering in the clouds, the *Radford* reported a sound contact with an enemy submarine. The contact disappeared almost immediately, and before it could be tracked down a black squall appeared ahead and to starboard. Rear Admiral Ainsworth at once ordered course changed to 095° T., and the vessels, still in formation, slipped out of the comparative visibility into the cover of the rain. From that time until an hour later, when the ships were well out of the Gulf, the weather befriended them. As soon as they would emerge from one squall another would appear approximately on their course. By keeping under this series of temporary covers at least 75 percent of the time, the vessels complicated the task of the enemy planes. With the formation steaming at 30 knots, coming

into the open only occasionally, and with the Japanese unable to attack from ahead without flying directly through the squalls, the danger of torpedo or bomb attack was greatly lessened.

A few moments after 0400, an enemy float plane came momentarily into the clear, and was engaged by the antiaircraft batteries of the *Helena* and the *O'Bannon*, which may have succeeded in shooting it down. At that moment another surface radar contact was made—this time by the *Nashville*. The first report showed an undetermined number of small ships bearing 050° R. In a minute or two, this was revised to two small boats, bearing 060° R. The exact nature of the contact was never determined, for the American vessels slipped into another squall, and the radar pips soon died away.

The next heavy concentration of planes approached the formation at 0434, and all ships except the *DeHaven*, whose SC radar was not working, opened fire simultaneously. At 0438, the *Radford* picked up on her FD radar an invisible plane about 23,000 yards distant, apparently directly approaching the ship from starboard. Tracking was started at 18,000 yards. Soon thereafter the *Radford* began firing with all antiaircraft guns which could be brought to bear. At a range of about 4,000 yards, while the plane was still invisible and firing was in full radar control, the pip abruptly disappeared from the screen. At that moment, two points forward of the starboard beam, a plane burst through the overcast and crashed into the sea. Although direct confirmation was, of course, impossible, it seemed most probable that the *Radford* scored a hit by using radar aim alone—one of the first examples of a ship shooting down a plane and sighting it only when it crashed.

At 0441 the Japanese planes apparently gave up their attempt to attack and turned back to their bases. A few final shots were fired at an unidentified shadowing plane by the *O'Bannon* shortly before dawn, but no further action developed. At 0620 a fighter patrol of five P-38's from Guadalcanal arrived over the formation and escorted it to Tulagi, where it joined the remainder of the Task Force.

RESULTS

As in the case of the bombardment of Munda, the permanent results of the shelling, aside from an unknown number of troops killed and extensive matériel destroyed, were practically nil. The bombardment

group had barely reached Tulagi before the enemy undertook repair of damage and replacement of supplies. Reconnaissance reports indicated that three cargo ships arrived at Vila-Stanmore from the north the evening after the bombardment, and numerous other vessels followed on succeeding days. Construction of the air base continued at a rapid rate, seemingly little affected by the bombardment. The field was completed, and aircraft were operating from it, by early February.

Spotters and ships' officers agreed that the damage wrought, judging from the flames, was far greater at Vila-Stanmore than at Munda. Rear Admiral Ainsworth, in a report to CINCPAC, stated that this fact might possibly be due to luck, but added that "the supposition must hold that there was very little at Munda to hit, and that there were plenty of Japs and stores at Vila."

He added, however, "The fact is inescapable that the Japs have gone right ahead and built two airfields in spite of constant bombing by aircraft and two bombardments by surface vessels. We may destroy large quantities of gasoline and stores, and we may render these fields unusable at critical times, but the only real answer is to take the fields away from them."

III

THIRD BOMBARDMENT—MUNDA AND VILA-STANMORE

5-6 March 1943

The end of the bitter ground campaign on Guadalcanal came with surprising suddenness after the first week of February. We had known for some time that the Japanese were running a shuttle line of high-speed transports between Buin and the Guadalcanal area, but it was thought that these "Tokio Expresses" were bringing in reinforcements. Consequently, the Japanese Imperial Headquarters announcement on 9 February that their forces had been withdrawn from the island was unexpected. That afternoon our troops, driving west from Tassafaronga and east from Marovoso, made a junction, and on the following day Maj. Gen. Patch, commander of the ground forces in the Solomons, announced that there was no longer any vestige of organized enemy resistance on the island.

The fall of Guadalcanal, however, did not mean the imminent elimination of the enemy from the Solomon Islands area. Consolidation of Japanese air force and army bases continued in the islands to the north, despite heavy blows from our planes. By the middle of February the enemy had a greater concentration of force in the Buin-Shortland area than ever before, and in spite of American aerial bombardment his planes were still operating from Munda and Vila-Stanmore. At that time it was believed that the enemy would choose the area around Shortland Island as his main base for a defensive stand or future offensive operations. In support of these beliefs, observers advanced the arguments that Shortland was 100 miles farther away than Munda from our main air base at Henderson Field, and was a far safer area for Japanese ship operations. Furthermore, it was reasonably close to Rabaul, the main enemy base south of Truk.

During February we pressed home constant air attacks against these positions. Rabaul was bombed for 4 days in succession toward the end of the month. Bombs were seen to hit several warships and merchant-

men, while another warship was driven aground and port facilities were heavily damaged. Air attacks on Munda totaled more than 80 during the 3 months of December through February. Meanwhile we continued to improve our bases in the lower Solomons preparatory to planned moves to the northward. The principal development was in the Russell Islands west of Guadalcanal, which our troops occupied during the last week in February.³² Supplies, equipment, and personnel were brought in nightly, and strong defenses, including AA and 155-mm. batteries, were installed, harbors improved and an MTB base constructed. A fighter strip being built on the east end of Banika Island progressed rapidly, and by the end of March was ready for use.

Japanese offensive activity from their island bases slackened off somewhat toward the end of February, most probably because of attempts to reinforce garrisons in the Salamaua-Lae section of New Guinea. The Battle of the Bismarck Sea on 2 and 3 March effectively interdicted these plans.

PREPARATIONS

The most serious threat to our plans of expansion in the Solomons area still came from the enemy's advanced and staging bases at Munda and Vila-Stanmore. Even the heaviest bombings, complemented by ship bombardments, had been shown to have only a temporary effect on the activities of these airfields and supply centers. By the end of February, however, the Japanese were observed to have become even more confident of the invulnerability of these two outposts on the fringe of the island territory under our control. Cargo and troop ships from Rabaul and other areas were making the run to Munda and Vila-Stanmore more openly than ever, slipping down from the north sometimes in daylight but more often at night. Aviation facilities at the two fields were greatly reinforced, while occasional motor torpedo boats, capable of seriously impeding the development of our advance field on the Russell Islands, were reported based on the general area of Kolombangara and New Georgia Islands.

Faced with this growing menace, COMSOPAC decided to stage a daring double bombardment of the two enemy outposts, as much in the hope of interrupting enemy shipping as of wreaking any permanent

³³ The enemy apparently did not become aware of our presence in the Russells for almost 2 weeks following the initial landing, since the first attack against this base took place on 6 March.

damage. To achieve a simultaneous bombardment, and at the same time to combat successfully any enemy supply convoys and escorts which might be in the area, it was obviously essential that we employ a larger force, with considerably more fire power, than in the two earlier shellings.

Accordingly, on 27 February, COMSOPAC ordered Rear Admiral Aaron S. Merrill, then at sea in the *Montpelier*, to create the following Task Force for the proposed operation:

Task Force MIKE, Rear Admiral Merrill.

Vila Group

3 Cruisers:

Montpelier (F), Capt. Leighton Wood.
Cleveland, Capt. Edmund W. Burroughs.
Denver, Capt. Robert B. Carney.

3 Destroyers: Comdr. Harold F. Pullen.

Conway (F), Lt. Comdr. Nathaniel S. Prime.
Waller, Comdr. Laurence H. Frost.
Cony, Lt. Comdr. Harry D. Johnston.

Munda Group

4 Destroyers: Capt. Robert P. Briscoe.

Fletcher (F), Lt. Comdr. Frank L. Johnson.
O'Bannon, Lt. Comdr. Donald J. MacDonald.
Nicholas, Lt. Comdr. Andrew J. Hill.
Radford, Lt. Comdr. William K. Romoser.

The vessels were to rendezvous and fuel at sea in protected waters to the south on 3 March, then proceed to Espiritu Santo, arriving after dawn the following morning. The general directive ordered them to sortie from Espiritu Santo that afternoon, and head for the Russell Islands where they were to arrive that night after passing east and north of San Cristobal. The approach was to be made the night of the 5th, and the bombardment was to begin as close as possible to 0130 on the 6th.

As directed, all vessels scheduled to take part in the operation completed their fueling, and arrived at Espiritu Santo at 0600 on the 4th for detailed discussions and plans. COMAIRSOPAC, unfortunately, was at that time in Noumea, but a large delegation from his staff, as well as the commanding officers of all ships in the Task Force, came aboard the *Montpelier* immediately for the conference. The air delegation brought with them many excellent photographs of the bombardment area at Munda and Vila-Stanmore, as well as grid overlays and mosaics showing target locations compiled from the latest photographic interpretations and in-

telligence reports.⁸³ A representative of the Black Cats was also present, to consult with and arrange for the transportation of the ships' spotters by plane to the locations of the bombardments. Detailed arrangements for air coverage of the Task Force during the entire operation were completed, and later confirmed by letter from COMAIRSOPAC.

In view of the fact that both previous bombardments and retirements had been carried out with an almost machinelike precision and with a minimum of enemy interference, it seemed advisable to repeat the same general tactics on this occasion. All navigation was to be by SG radar, fire was to be continuous after the first ranging salvos, and column formation was to be used for the actual bombardment to avoid mutual illumination of our units. Practically simultaneous fire was to be employed by the cruisers, since the previous attack on Vila-Stanmore had conclusively shown that by this means the group could pour a more concentrated and destructive weight of shells on the target and improve its chances of making a clean getaway by reducing the period of its stay in dangerous waters. As before, the primary task of the destroyers in Kula Gulf was to protect against submarines and patrol vessels, and silence enemy shore batteries so that the cruisers could bombard unhindered.

Caution dictated minor deviations from previous patterns, however. Because of the reported presence of enemy shipping in the general target areas, it was deemed advisable that the cruisers be ready to illuminate Kula Gulf with starshells before reaching the firing line, thereby preventing the escape of, or attack by, possible enemy units in that vicinity. Furthermore, despite the fact that the waters off Munda were far less confining than those in Kula Gulf, it was believed that the combined pattern could best be preserved by simultaneous and concentrated firing on the part of the destroyers of the Munda detachment, even though this procedure might result in less effective spotting by the Black Cats.

On the morning of the 4th all ships completed filling their allowance of ammunition from the *Pyro*, and at noon Task Force MIKE departed for its destination, 839 miles to the northwest. The passage was without incident, except for the fact that, because of strong head winds, it became necessary to increase speed from 24 to 25 and finally to 26 knots to maintain the predetermined schedule. Contrary to weather reports and ex-

⁸³ While the conference was in session an officer messenger arrived by air from Noumea with additional data from COMSOPAC on important targets.

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pectations based on meteorological conditions during the preceding months, the afternoon and evening of the 5th broke clear and cool. As the Force steamed up through Lengo Channel and Savo Sound, there was not a cloud in the brilliant blue sky. The ships had been under fighter coverage since daylight. In the Guadalcanal area the air was completely controlled by friendly planes. This circumstance, combined with the unusual visibility, seemed to preclude the possibility of enemy snoopers giving the alarm. Until dusk only one unidentified plane had appeared on the radar screen, and this fleeting bogey was reported 28 miles to the westward. Although it was most unusual for an American task force to remain in waters north of 15° S. latitude for any length of time without detection, Rear Admiral Merrill felt there was an excellent chance that his command had not been observed.

Darkness fell at 1845 as the vessels were approaching the departure point 7 miles north of Daisen Island in the Russell Group. All ships went to General Quarters. At 2000 the Munda detachment left the formation without signal and proceeded on course 250° T. under the command of Capt. Briscoe to carry out its assignment.³⁴

APPROACH TO VILA-STANMORE

While the Munda destroyers sped away at 25 knots into the darkness, the three cruisers and their escort of destroyers continued on course, planning to run as close as safe navigation would permit to the north shore of New Georgia Island before making the turn to Kula Gulf and the firing line. With a mild sea causing a lively surf along the shore, it was believed that hugging the coast would decrease the risks of detection by making the ships' wakes less conspicuous from the air. The cruisers were disposed in column, the destroyers screening 6,000 yards ahead. The group had employed no form of communication since dark, and the use of TBS had been rigidly restricted prior to that time; yet all the previously determined changes of course and speed were made precisely on time and in perfect order.

Until 2115, the passage was uneventful. No planes, other than the

³⁴ Rear Admiral Merrill noted: "For obvious reasons, it was desirable that the bombardment of Munda and the bombardment of Vila-Stanmore be conducted simultaneously; however, it was realized that the distance involved and the probability of enemy interference with either or both detachments would render this difficult, if not impossible, of fulfillment." For purposes of clarity, this narrative will treat the bombardments consecutively, beginning with the shelling of Vila-Stanmore.

three Black Cats carrying the spotters up the southern shore of Santa Isabel Island, were picked up by radar, and not a sign of enemy activity was sighted. It began to seem as though the hoped-for had happened, and that the ships would reach their destination undiscovered, when a disturbing radio message from Guadalcanal was intercepted⁸⁵—COMAIRSOLS was relaying a coastwatcher's report that two Japanese light cruisers or large destroyers had left Faisi at 1910, and were heading south at high speed. Shortly afterwards, the first spotting Black Cat radioed Guadalcanal, which in turn informed the Task Force, that it had sighted two enemy cruisers heading east by south at 30 knots in latitude 07° 35' S., longitude 156° 50' E.

A study of the enemy's location, course, and speed led the CTF to believe it "highly probable" that the Japanese had located at least part of the American forces, and were racing to intercept them. In the first place, it was extremely unlikely that the enemy would dispatch surface forces as late as 1900 to attack the nearest American base in the Russell Islands, since the distance was too great to give them night coverage on the return trip. Secondly, their reported departure coincided closely with the only occasion when hostile scouts might have spotted our forces—the brief period shortly before dusk when the strange bogey had flashed across the screen.

The course and position transmitted by the Black Cat seemed to indicate that the destination of the two vessels, especially if they were destroyers, might be Blakett Strait, either via Vella Gulf or Kula Gulf. If this assumption was correct, their speed would put them in the Strait at about 2230. As the Vila-Stanmore group's schedule called for a course change to the left into Kula Gulf at 0017 on the 6th, and the distance from the mouth of the Gulf to the eastern entrance to the Strait was 20 miles, it seemed to CTF to be useless to change his plans and increase speed—especially at the risk of having the necessary communications give warning of the approach. On the other hand, the enemy's destination and intentions were not at all clear. There could be no sound reason for his sending two cruisers or destroyers to intercept a far larger force, even considering the possibility that the Japanese ships had not been properly identified and were, in reality, two heavy cruisers which had been reported the previous day to have arrived at Buin from the

⁸⁵ Flag records give the time of receipt of this message as 2230.

north escorting two cargo vessels. It was thought possible, however, that the two ships might be planning to proceed to the eastern end of Blackett Strait and there, obscured from radar detection by the cover of the steep shore line, await the opening of the bombardment before attacking.

After weighing the various hypotheses and noting the difficulty and danger of changing plans at the last minute, Admiral Merrill decided to carry through his original scheme with two small alterations. The first was to order a slight increase in revolutions, to effect arrival at the firing line about 5 minutes before the zero hour for the bombardment. This was to insure that the Munda detachment would not open fire first and alert the enemy vessels, should they be in the Strait. The second was to draft a message to be given out to the Vila-Stanmore group when it was well into the Gulf, warning of the possible presence of the enemy, and giving notice that when the *Montpelier* fired her starshells to illuminate Blackett Strait, the other vessels should take under fire any hostile units revealed. If none was sighted, the bombardment was to proceed as planned.

At 0010, 6 minutes ahead of the schedule set by the operational plan, the *Montpelier*, followed by the *Cleveland* and the *Denver*, changed course to 240° T. to swing into Kula Gulf, and reduced speed from 25 to 20 knots. In accordance with orders, the *Waller* maintained her position 6,000 yards ahead, detached from the formation, for an advance sweep of the Gulf over the intended track. The *Conway* took station 2,000 yards ahead of the flagship, and the *Cony* dropped back on the port quarter of the cruisers to protect against motor torpedo boat attacks from the many small coves which indent the eastern shore of the Gulf.

The night was exceptionally dark—so black that navigation had to be entirely by SG radar.³⁸ At 0336, the flagship picked up Tunguirili Point bearing 214°. Three minutes later the formation, still at 20 knots, turned to 213° to slip down the bay as close to the east coast as feasible. At this point the *Waller* and the *Conway* were 6,000 and 2,000 yards respectively ahead of the *Montpelier*; the *Cleveland* was 1,000 yards astern of the flagship, the *Denver* followed the *Cleveland* at 1,000 yards, and the *Cony* had taken station 2,000 yards off the *Denver's* port quarter. At

³⁸ Unfortunately there was only one instrument aboard each ship. During a large part of the ensuing action, the use of these for navigation deprived CTF and the commanding officers of their best means of locating enemy surface craft.

0053, as the flagship attempted to get a radar bearing on Sasamboki Island, the next point of navigational interest, a large pip appeared on the screen. The pip gave a bearing of 234° T. and a distance of 14,300 yards—exactly the predicted direction of the island but about 9,000 yards short. Radar plot was so informed, and in about a minute reported that the pip must be regarded as an enemy vessel. Seconds later the pip divided, and indicated two ships on approximately an opposite course from the bombardment group. By this time all the other ships had made contact. Aboard most of them, exactly as in the *Montpelier*, the pips had separated into two clearly defined elements. All began tracking the enemy and training their guns.

At approximately 0100, the flagship broke silence to make a contact report over TBS, and ordered the Task Group to stand by for "Commence Firing." A few seconds after 0101, the *Montpelier* opened with her main battery, followed almost immediately by the *Cleveland* and the *Denver*. All three cruisers, without prearrangement, concentrated their fire on the second ship in column, perhaps because it developed a better pip on their radar screens. The first few salvos appeared to straddle; but on the *Montpelier's* sixth salvo, at about 0106, a fire blazed up fiercely in the enemy's after gun mount. Immediately thereafter, an explosion aft of amidships sent a column of flame roaring into the air, beginning as a deep-red ball and ending as a gigantic mushroom of fire 150 feet above the target's decks. As the light silhouetted her for an instant, the *Cleveland's* main battery spotters identified her as a large destroyer by the narrow white band on the top of her raked stack.³⁷

Meanwhile the *Waller*, which had been carefully tracking the enemy from her position 6,000 yards ahead of the column, fired a spread of five torpedoes just as the cruisers opened with their main batteries. She had estimated the enemy's speed at 24 knots. Apparently the cruisers' gunfire had slowed the target down, however, for just as the fire was at its height the left wing torpedo struck the burning enemy amidships with a tremendous explosion.³⁸ The vessel immediately broke in two and sank, leaving a glowing mass of wreckage surrounded by burning oil on the water. She had fired only a few ineffective shots.

³⁷ On the other hand, a *Waller* signalman with a high-powered glass said she was a cruiser over 400 feet long with a tripod mast and two stacks. This was hardly credible, for to have had two stacks, the target would have had to be a heavy cruiser and at least 598 feet long.

³⁸ CTF reported that he received the impression of a "colossal explosion without noise," although it was heard by the Munda detachment 25 miles distant.

The American cruisers, as soon as they saw that their first target was out of action and practically dead in the water, had checked fire and swung their batteries toward the leading enemy ship which continued on her northerly course, firing spasmodically without salvos. She steamed ahead for about 4 miles, under the concentrated fire of all three cruisers, before the flagship's radar plot reported that she had come to a complete stop. Flaming dully from repeated hits (the first salvos of both the *Denver* and the *Montpelier* had struck home), her fire became weaker and more erratic. At about 0130 the *Waller* was ordered to close and finish her off, but before the destroyer could get in position, the enemy sank.³⁹

BOMBARDMENT OF VILA-STANMORE

The shore bombardment began, in an unforeseen manner, while the surface engagement was at its height. The *Denver*, third cruiser in line, had ceased firing on the first Japanese ship and was training on the second, when her fire control officer observed a shore battery firing on the formation from Surumuni Point. Noting that the starboard 5" battery was disengaged at the time, he ordered it to open up on the landward flashes. The first salvo fell short, so he walked the mean point of impact up the hill until, after expending only 84 rounds, he straddled and silenced the enemy battery.

All these distractions had only slightly altered the course and alignment of the American force. By the time "cease firing" was ordered, the original formation remained substantially unchanged, except that the *Denver* had dropped to 4,000 yards astern of the flagship. The *Conway* was 2,000 yards and the *Waller*, 3,000 yards off the *Montpelier's* starboard bow, and the evolutions of the battle had placed both destroyers already on the bombardment line. One other factor made a minor change in the established timetable. During the engagement with the Japanese ships, the *Montpelier* had increased her speed to 25 knots to facilitate dodging torpedoes, the other cruisers following suit.⁴⁰ This speed-up, plus the 5 minutes that the group was already ahead of schedule, brought the flagship to the firing course of 000° T. at 0123, 7 minutes ahead of plan.

³⁹ The *Cony*, during the engagement, had been fulfilling her task of sweeping the nearby harbors, with considerable seagull trouble. The birds appeared constantly on her radar screen, to be tracked assiduously and futilely by the gun director. *

⁴⁰ Strangely enough, even at this comparatively high speed the ships' wakes were completely invisible to Black Cat No. 1, directly overhead.

The element of surprise having already been lost, the CTF decided not to make any corrective attempts.

As the *Montpelier* turned to the firing line, her secondary battery fired more than 30 starshells over Blackett Strait.⁴¹ The very effective illumination proved to the satisfaction of the CTF that the Strait was now empty of enemy shipping, and at 0125 the flagship fired two ranging salvos with her main battery. Her spotter in the Black Cat reported the first hits directly on the target. Within a minute the *Montpelier* had shifted to continuous fire, walking her pattern over enemy positions in the Vila Plantation area. Almost immediately an enemy coastal battery opened up near the causeway over the Vila River in the center of the plantation area. It fired slowly and ineffectively at the bombarding vessels until finally silenced at 0140. Several enemy AA guns scattered about the plantations also began replying weakly.

At 0127, 2 minutes after the *Montpelier's* ranging salvo, the other cruisers began their bombardment. Meanwhile the *Montpelier* swung briefly to 010° T. to avoid passing through an area of burning debris left by one of the sunken enemy ships. The *Cleveland* effectively covered the southern sector of the target area, starting a sizable fire with one salvo and nearly blowing it out with the next.⁴² The *Denver* blasted, in succession, the south end of the runway, bivouac areas along the coast, shore installations west of the Vila River, aircraft dispersal areas, and Stanmore Plantation. The shell bursts of the barrage were easily distinguishable from the fire delivered by the enemy shore positions. Japanese firing gave off a garish flash of orange light, while shells bursting on shore positions appeared as quick, light, pin-point illumination. By the use of spotting glasses, the observers in the Black Cats could quickly distinguish these bursts and pick out reference positions in the target area.

As seen from the air, the bombardment appeared "highly devastating." Hits were scored on emplacements thought to be shelter tents, on barracks, grounded planes, and other objectives. Many small fires broke out, especially in the trees surrounding the targets. At one time, because of a particular angle of view, shells in the air were thought to be planes, and were reported as such, but the report was quickly corrected. One

⁴¹ The *Denver* also fired one starshell spread.

⁴² This second blast may not have been from the *Cleveland's* projectiles at all. Her Black Cat reported that the cruiser had hit an ammunition dump on the southeast tip of Vila Plantation. The *Cleveland's* captain complained that the damage his ship caused was "not spectacular."

large fire, probably from the ammunition dump hit by the *Cleveland*, adversely affected the aerial view for some time, almost completely blotting out the surrounding area, and making the mouth of the river indistinguishable. The Black Cats had no difficulty, however, in bracketing the targets located between Ringi Cove and Disappointment Lagoon, both of which were quite visible throughout the operation.⁴³ Fires across the length of the plantations burned brightly long after the ships had left the scene.⁴⁴

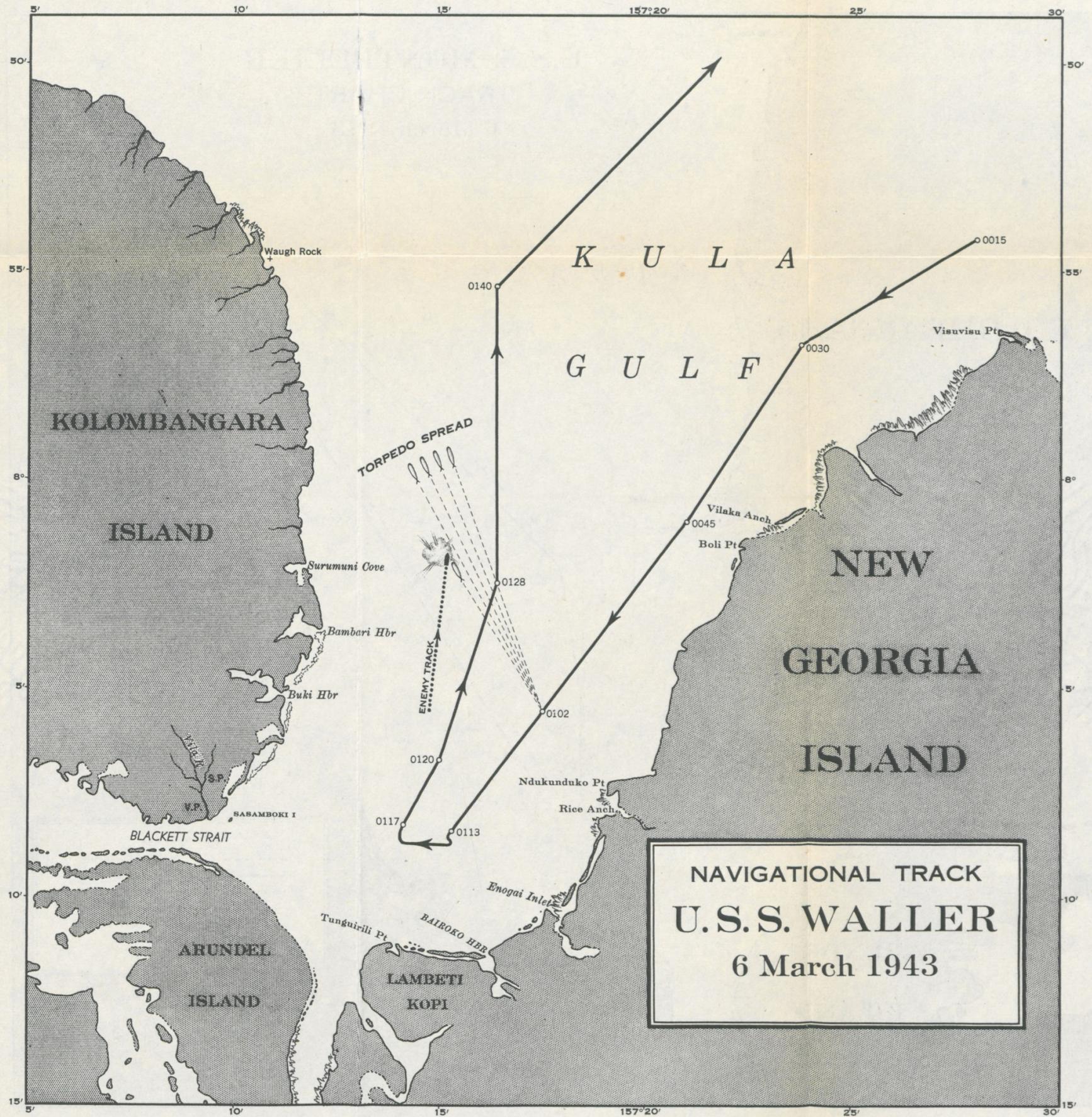
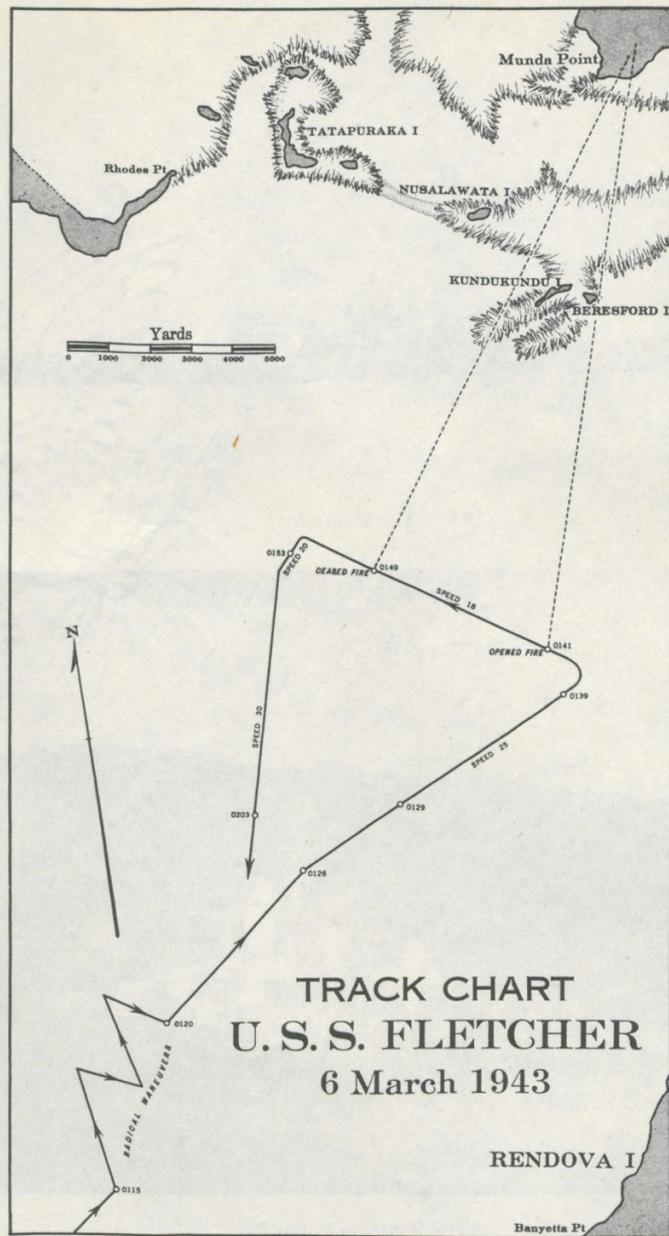
At 0134, while the *Cleveland* was still firing, the *Montpelier* swung to the retirement course of 045° T., and increased speed to 25 knots. Six minutes later, just before the *Denver* had completed her firing, the Munda detachment 23 miles to the south opened up with heavy fire on its targets, and flames leaped up over the low hills and black jungle of New Georgia Island. As soon as all three cruisers had completed their bombardment and had reached their stations in column on the retirement course, speed was increased to 30 knots. The destroyers, which had been lobbing shells into small coves on the western shore and silencing anti-aircraft and shore batteries, were instructed to rejoin.

By 0145 the *Conway* had reached her retirement station on the *Montpelier's* port bow. The *Waller* was screening 7,000 yards to the north, while the *Cony* was just coming up on the flagship's starboard quarter. At that moment, with Visuvisu Point broad on the *Montpelier's* starboard bow, a string of enemy flares fell to the right of the column. Although they were similar in appearance to the flares dropped from planes after the earlier bombardment of Vila-Stanmore, the *Montpelier's* commanding officer was of the opinion that they were fired from shore batteries, since no unidentified planes were noted on his radar screen.⁴⁵ Again at 0150, just as the formation left the Gulf and turned on a easterly course in the general direction of Guadalcanal, a line of float lights fell astern of the column at right angles to its course. The torpedo

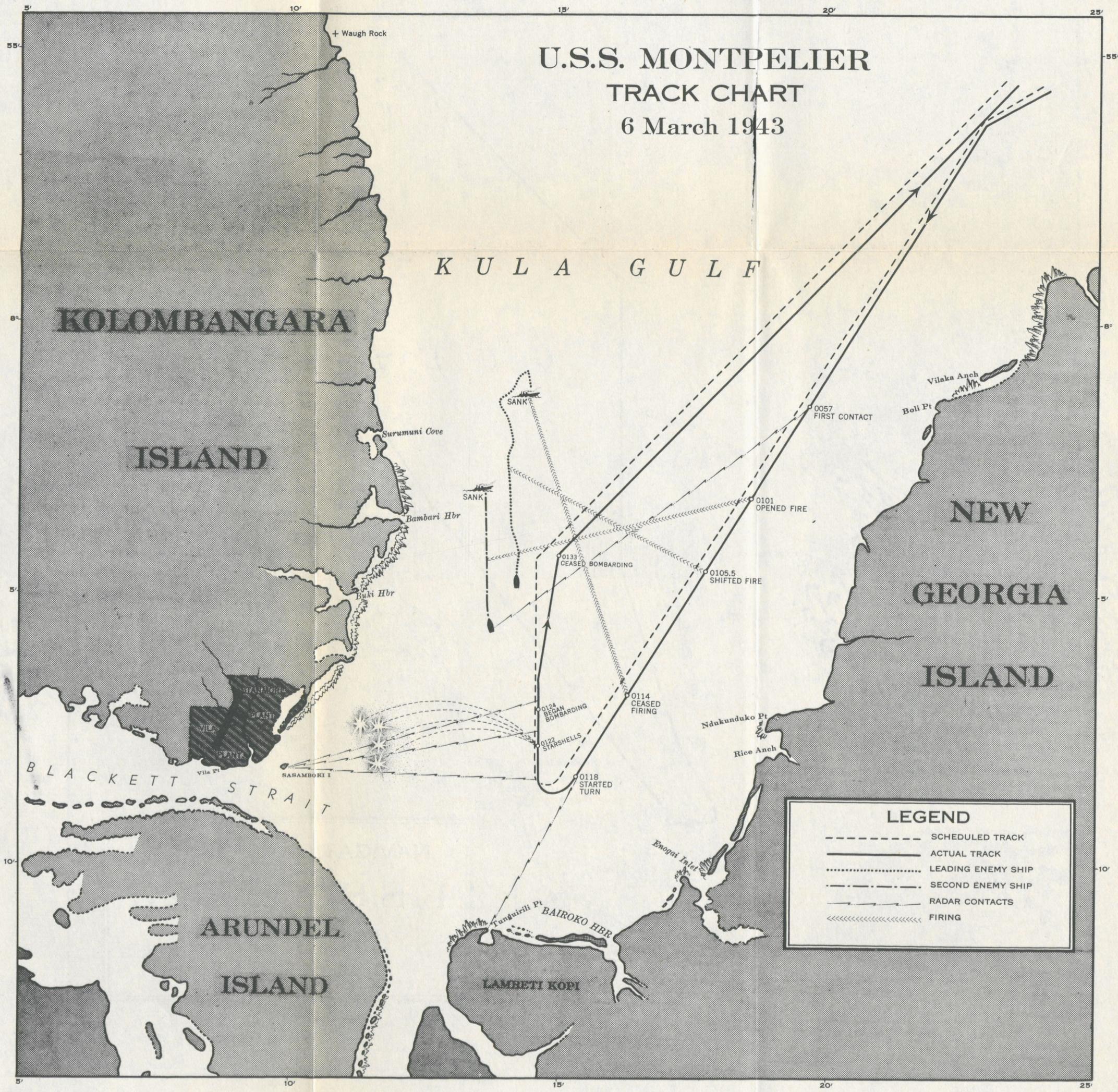
⁴³ It seems possible that the enemy jammed the Black Cats' radars. They were inoperative during a large part of the bombardment, but began working once more as soon as the bombardment ended. Probably the Japanese radio control station was eventually knocked out by one or more shells.

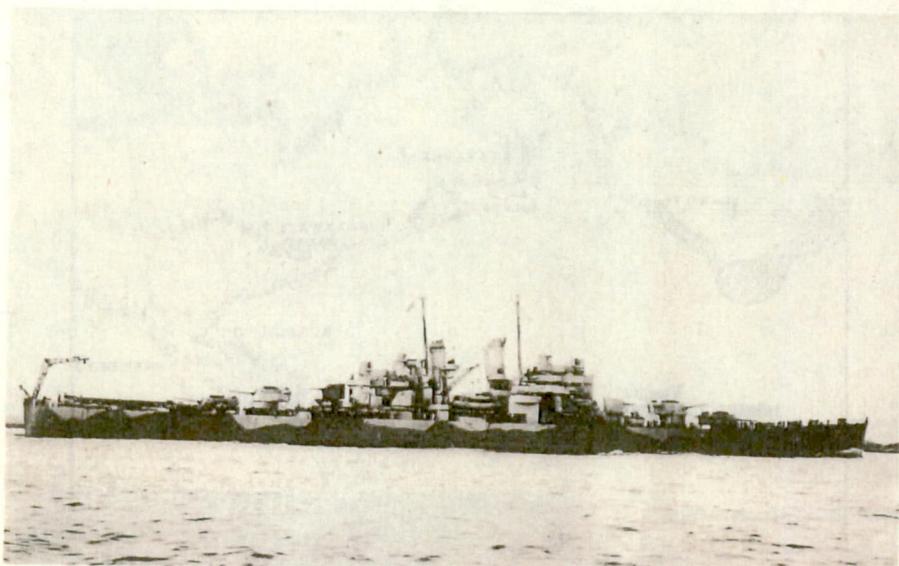
⁴⁴ The *Cony*, satisfied that no enemy opposition was forthcoming from the small harbors she was assigned to guard, independently bombarded the north shore of Blackett Strait, setting more fires.

⁴⁵ On the other hand, the *Denver's* C. O. reported picking up "1 or 2 unidentified aircraft . . . in locations and on courses which indicated the possibility of snoopers." He added, "It was apparent that the flares were beyond the shoreline, and it was presumed that they were in the vicinity of the Munda detachment."

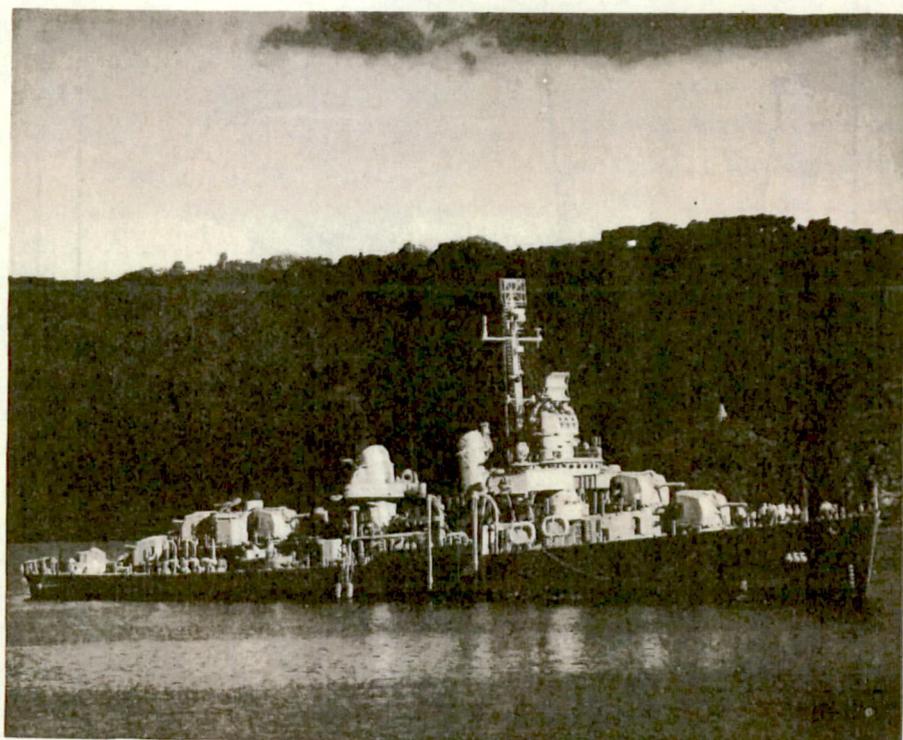


U.S.S. MONTPELIER TRACK CHART 6 March 1943





The Montpelier



The Waller in Purvis Bay

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

attack which this procedure usually presaged, however, never materialized. With all hands remaining at General Quarters throughout the night, the detachment steamed safely to its rendezvous with the Munda group.

APPROACH TO MUNDA

Upon departure from the Vila-Stanmore group at 2000 on the 5th Task Group BAKER, consisting of the *Fletcher*, *Nicholas*, *O'Bannon*, and *Radford* in that order, set out for Munda by the closest direct route, their immediate navigational objective being a point 5.3 miles from Banyetta Point on a bearing of 202° T. The track followed by the destroyers, at a speed in advance of 25 knots, lay 10 miles offshore from all known enemy-occupied areas.

The weather was clear,⁴⁶ with brilliant stars and no clouds overhead. Navigation during the entire approach was by SG radar. Only friendly planes appeared on the screen. The group felt sure that the enemy had no advance intelligence of the proposed bombardment. At 2128, the flagship intercepted the report by Black Cat No. 1 concerning the two enemy vessels standing down from Faisi. Already at General Quarters, our ships continued on their course while awaiting additional information; but the initial report was the last they received until ComTaskFor MIKE reported engaging the enemy in Kula Gulf.⁴⁷

The *Fletcher* made her landfall off Banyetta Point on schedule at 0104, and the formation changed course to 048° T. without signal to head for the turning point to the firing line. As the turn was executed, the Munda destroyers heard and saw the firing marking the surface battle in Kula Gulf. Gun flashes and tracers, moving from right to left toward Vila Plantation, were clearly visible over the rolling land masses. Shortly thereafter, observers spotted a large red glow in the vicinity of the entrance to Blackett Strait, followed by a heavy explosion which lit up the vessels of the Munda group.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Capt. Briscoe described it as "disgustingly clear."

⁴⁷ "This lack of information," Capt. Briscoe reported, "was of no assistance in improving the state of tension which naturally accompanies an operation of this nature. Cat FOUR made no reports of his investigation of the area to the northwest of Rendova, and I was forced to assume that he had seen nothing and that the cruisers were not lying off Munda awaiting my arrival."

⁴⁸ The night was so clear that the commander of one destroyer later complained that even the tracers from the cruisers had him illuminated. "This statement is not to be considered facetious," said Capt. Briscoe, "in view of the volume of fire of this unit."

Two minutes later, at 0106,⁴⁹ radar picked up an unidentified aircraft coming in over Rendova Island heading for the formation. The plane's range closed very quickly from 8,000 to 5,500 yards, and when it became apparent that its course would take it directly over the formation, the *Fletcher* broke TBS silence to announce, "Bogey coming up from starboard." The whole formation then began maneuvering radically, but on orders of CTG held their fire until the plane's identity could be established. This order was based, Capt. Briscoe explained, on the premise that the bogey's plotted speed of 110 knots partially identified it as a Black Cat, and that to open fire at that time would unnecessarily disclose the presence of the formation in dangerous waters. The plane, never identified by sight contact, passed overhead and disappeared in the general direction of Munda Point. The evasive maneuvers it caused the group to make, however, completely disrupted an orderly approach to the firing line, and necessitated a course change to 060° T. in order to arrive at the starting point originally selected.

BOMBARDMENT OF MUNDA

At 0139 the destroyers swung to the bombardment course of 350° T. and slowed to 18 knots. The previous maneuvers had closed up the formation considerably, so that when the *Fletcher* opened fire 2 minutes later, the *Nicholas* and the *O'Bannon* were able to follow suit at one-minute intervals. The *Fletcher's* first ranging salvos struck the center of the landing strip 14,900 yards distant. After covering this target, she moved her fire down to Munda Point proper, and blasted the installations beyond the point along the shore.

Only the *Fletcher* had been assigned a specific bombardment area, the other ships being directed to cover thoroughly the revetments and runway, beginning at the eastern limits of the base and working toward Munda Point. Following the flagship, the *Nicholas* and the *O'Bannon* moved onto the line, and began their bombardment almost simultaneously. Their shells started several small blazes in the general target area, although their fire was difficult to spot because of its concentration.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Flag's estimate. Other destroyers fix the time of this contact 9 to 12 minutes later.

⁵⁰ CTG reported: "A spotting officer . . . was furnished by COMAIRSOPAC, there being none available on the ships present without taking a key officer from one of the ship's company. The spotting of this officer . . . was continuous throughout the bombardment, interspersed with a Clem McCarthy blow-by-blow description of the results being obtained. He was the best one-man cheering

The *Radford* did not follow the other destroyers so closely onto the firing line. Her main mission was to protect the group against surprise air or surface attack during the first 8 minutes of the bombardment, and then to bombard for a period of approximately 5 minutes, provided no surface or air contacts had been made. At 0146, when satisfied that no such targets were within range of either the SG or SC radars, the *Radford* commenced firing on Ilangana Point, where a shore battery was observed to be in action.⁶¹ After a minute's shelling, she apparently silenced the enemy fire, and at 0152, after a careful radar and visual search had revealed no surface or air targets, began bombarding the airfield, using Kundukundu Island as orientation point for train, and 12,500 yards as opening range. Before ceasing fire for the retirement, she was credited with scoring at least one bull's-eye.

At 0150, according to plan, the *Fletcher* ceased bombarding and took up an all-around radar and sound search.⁶² Two minutes later, almost exactly 10 minutes after zero time, the flagship changed to the retirement course of 225° T., the succeeding ships ceasing fire upon reaching the turning point and following generally in her wake. As soon as the *Radford* had made her turn, the course was changed to 195° T., and speed was increased to 30 knots. Retirement to the rendezvous off Purvis Bay, Florida Island, was laid generally along the course of the approach to Banyetta Point, thence passed 5 miles south of the Russell Islands and between Savo Island and Cape Esperance, Guadalcanal. Speed of retirement, after the group had reformed, was set at 32 knots. As the ships headed out into the darkness, they could see the fires lighting the shoreline and the flares dropped over the airfield by their Black Cat.

At 0248 the flagship's radar picked up aircraft indications approaching the formation from over Rendova Island. The vessels, still at General Quarters, tracked the bogey for several minutes, and observed that it was

section I have ever heard, but his spots after the first ones were naturally of no value. The firing plan of all ships was predicated on the first ranging salvos . . . shifting fire according to plan in order that all revetments, storage areas, gun emplacements, and bivouac areas could be covered. The efforts of this officer, however, were greatly appreciated, and his running comments on the show were well worth the price of admission."

⁶¹ Capt. Briscoe observed that the precaution of having the *Radford* withhold fire until after the *Fletcher* had ceased was well worth while, "since it is not believed that the firing of the shore battery . . . would have been noted had the *Radford* been firing at the time."

⁶² The usual "phantom torpedo boats" were seen from the bombarding destroyers. This time they were projected against the drifting smoke from the guns. Profiting from their earlier experience, the vessels ignored them.

making what appeared to be a bombing approach from the port quarter. Its speed at the time was judged to be about 125 knots, but because of the land interference on the screen this figure could easily have been in error. When the plane came within 5,000 yards of the formation, showing no indications of turning away and exhibiting no "identification friend or foe" or other signals, Capt. Briscoe ordered the group to commence firing.

The *Radford* opened fire at a range of 4,600 yards, expending 26 rounds of 5" AA ammunition. The plane, apparently undamaged, closed to 1,500 yards before making a radical turn to port and signaling a weak IFF. When last picked up, it was 18 miles away, still headed northward over the land, with no IFF discernible.⁵³

The remainder of the retirement to the rendezvous was uneventful. At 0715, the Munda group, approaching Savo Island from the southwest, sighted the Vila-Stanmore detachment to the north of the island. The two groups joined forces, and under protection of fighter coverage from Guadalcanal, proceeded to Purvis Bay.

RESULTS

The two bombardments, considered as tactical operations, were well and accurately executed, but as usual they had little or no long-range effect. Air searches over Munda the following morning showed definitely that the runway, at least, was "considerably banged up." Yet enemy planes were soon operating from the strip, despite repeated American aerial attacks beginning at dawn on the 6th. Spotters' reports indicated that the three most important objectives at Vila-Stanmore—the bivouac areas west of Vila Plantation, the dwelling areas at Vila, and the wharves at Stanmore Plantation—received "effective and punishing bombardment." The use of the base by enemy shipping, however, seemed to diminish only slightly, if at all, during the succeeding weeks.

The most important and encouraging result of the operation was the efficient and speedy sinking of the two enemy destroyers. Their hasty departure from Buin at the same time as the departure of our own force from U. S. controlled waters, combined with their presence in Kula Gulf

⁵³ The *Fletcher's* captain later reported: "The last desire of this Commanding Officer is to shoot down one of our own capable, hard-working PBY's, but, if they continue to make unnecessary harassing approaches on this ship within gun range, they will be taken under fire when the slightest doubt exists of their true identity."

at the exact time of the bombardment group's entry, would serve to indicate that they had knowledge of, or at least strong suspicions as to the plans of Task Force MIKE. Their complete lack of readiness, however, would indicate that they were not equipped with radar, or that our position against the land mass of the New Georgia shore of the Gulf prevented its effective use. A study of the records of the combined operation, Admiral Merrill said, convinced him that "the admitted effectiveness of aircraft in daytime action against surface craft has forced surface craft to increased night operations in localities where land-based aircraft are prevalent in larger numbers.

"As this condition will maintain throughout the war in the island-studded Southwest and West Pacific, we should concentrate our efforts on improving our effectiveness in night battle."

IV

FOURTH BOMBARDMENT—VILA-STANMORE

15-16 March 1943

During the 10 days following the 6 March bombardment of Munda and Vila-Stanmore, the situation in the Solomon Islands remained relatively static. American and allied air forces continued to strike at Japanese concentrations throughout the South Pacific in order to upset the enemy's time schedule and keep his forces disorganized. In the course of these operations, the usual raids were made against ground installations in the northern Solomons. By mid-March the attacks our fliers had conducted over Munda numbered in the nineties, while Vila-Stanmore was being raided almost daily. Frequent aerial attacks were also pressed home on the enemy bases at Kahili and Ballale farther to the north. To the west, an enemy convoy composed of one transport, four cargo vessels, one tanker and three destroyers was located 40 miles off Wewak on the north New Guinea coast on 13 March. Before the group scattered, our planes attacked and left the transport burning, possibly sank the tanker, and scored a direct hit on the forward deck of one of the destroyers. On the same day, late in the afternoon, our medium bombers and long-range fighters attacked three enemy transports approaching Dobo in the Aroe Islands, south of New Guinea. Bombing and strafing were carried out from masthead height. Direct hits were scored on two of the vessels, causing heavy damage and fires.

The points of greatest Japanese concentration during this period appeared to shift to the west, with their forces growing in strength in the Ambon-Dobo area. The enemy did not, however, neglect his Solomons bases, but continued to pour troops and supplies into Vila-Stanmore and Munda.⁵⁴ Intelligence indicated that these areas were receiving continuous reinforcements at night, probably from Buin and Shortland Island, and that motor torpedo boats had been added to the defenses of Kula Gulf. These small craft were believed, at the time, to be based

⁵⁴ COMSOPAC intelligence reports estimated the number of Japanese at Vila-Stanmore alone as eight or nine thousand.

on Buki and Bambari Harbors, in the coves to the east and south of the Gulf, and in Blackett Strait, and were thus in an excellent position to defend either the Vila staging base or, more remotely, the advanced base at Munda. We continued to strengthen our own bases in the Russell Islands, despite repeated enemy air attacks which caused minor damage. Work on the landing strip progressed favorably, and our troops on Baisen and Banika Islands received reinforcements as rapidly as accommodations and installations could be prepared.

PREPARATIONS

The earlier, successfully executed hit-and-run attacks on Munda and Vila-Stanmore, while not inflicting catastrophic damage on ground installations, had proved their worth as diversionary operations. With this in mind, COMSOPAC decided to schedule another bombardment for the night of 15-16 March. A new destroyer squadron commander, Comdr. Francis X. McInerney, had arrived in the Solomons area. COMSOPAC believed that he and the personnel of two new destroyers, the *Strong* (Lt. Comdr. Joseph H. Wellings,) and the *Taylor* (Lt. Comdr. Benjamin Katz), should be given the opportunity to take part in a shelling of Vila-Stanmore. In addition, there existed the possibility that an attack by a destroyer force could smoke out some of the PT boats which the enemy had reportedly introduced into this area. To provide the nucleus of experience, two veterans of previous bombardments—the *Nicholas* (Lt. Comdr. Hill) and the *Radford* (Lt. Comdr. Romoser)—were added to the task group.⁵⁵

The bombardment vessels, component units of Task Force AFIRM under Rear Admiral Ainsworth,⁵⁶ parted company with the rest of the Force at 1100 14 March, in latitude 12°36' S., longitude 163°05' E. With Comdr. McInerney in his flagship, the *Nicholas*, the group proceeded north and east of San Cristobal and at 1040 on 15 March arrived at Tulagi, where all were to fuel. The *Strong*, however, was unable to take aboard any oil, partly because of lack of time, partly because of a casualty to the destroyer *Craven's* fuel oil booster pump, but largely because the tanker *Erskine Phelps* had only 40,000 to 50,000 gallons available. Fortunately

⁵⁵ The *O'Bannon* was also scheduled to take part in this operation, but mechanical failure of her main feed pump forced her to withdraw.

⁵⁶ This designation was retained until 0100 16 March, when the four destroyers became Task Group MIKE.

the *Strong* already had aboard about 105,000 gallons of fuel and Diesel oil—an amount which was considered sufficient for the operation, provided none of her tanks was damaged by enemy action.

While the vessels lay to at Tulagi, Comdr. McNerney issued his bombardment plan. This called for the *Nicholas* to turn to the firing course, one mile off Vila Point, at 0200 on the 16th, followed by the *Radford*, the *Strong*, and the *Taylor* in that order, at one minute intervals. All ships were to fire two spotting salvos to hit on the beach near the mouth of the Vila River. The Black Cat detailed for the operation was to spot only these bursts. Following the ranging salvos, the *Nicholas* was to shift fire to the north end of Stanmore Plantation, the *Radford* to the westernmost part of Vila Plantation, the *Strong* to the center of Stanmore Plantation, and the *Taylor* to the runway and other installations at Vila. The commanding officers were instructed that they were free to shift their bombardment to silence shore batteries outside their assigned target areas if the fire from such batteries were unusually heavy. They were also warned to keep an alert watch on the disengaged side, and to refrain from using TBS unless it became obvious that their position was known and an attack was imminent.⁵⁶

THE BOMBARDMENT

The Task Group sortied from Tulagi at 1545. After leaving Savo Island to the south, course was set for latitude 08°54' S., longitude 159°16' E., and speed was fixed at 17 knots. Formation was in column, open order, in the same sequence called for by the bombardment plan. The vessels went to General Quarters from sunset at 1836 until 1951, then set Condition of Readiness TWO and Material Condition BAKER.

At 1945, the formation having reached its predetermined navigational point, course was changed to 304° T. with a speed of 25 knots. Visuvisu Point was picked up at 0017 on the 16th, bearing 250° T., 15½ miles distant, and without signal the destroyers changed course to 270° T. and speed to 15 knots.

An hour later, with Visuvisu bearing 161° T. at a distance of 5½ miles, the group increased its speed to 25 knots and swung to 214° T. to enter Kula Gulf.

⁵⁶ A steady approach by an unidentified plane to within 4,000 yards of the formation was to be construed as a probable attack.

The weather was clear and the visibility excellent as the group steamed down the Gulf. A bright moon setting over the mountains on Kolombangara Island silhouetted the ships on the New Georgia shoreline and lit their white wakes as they stood toward the firing line, until at 0138 it was obscured by a dark cloud and shortly thereafter disappeared behind the peaks.⁵⁷ Apparently the approach was unobserved, however, for the plantation area presented only the blackness and silence of a sleeping camp when the flagship turned to the firing course at 0158, two minutes before the zero hour.

At 0200, after steadying on the bombardment course, the *Nicholas* opened up with her first five-gun ranging salvo, and after a spot indicated that she was on the target, raised her mean point of impact and moved down the line firing shells into the installations along the northern fringe of both plantations.⁵⁸ Following 750 yards in her wake, the *Radford* opened up at 0203 with two salvos. The first was spotted "Up 200," and the second "Right on." Immediately the *Radford* shifted her fire to the north end of the landing strip and commenced five-second full salvo fire at a range of 13,000 yards, moving her fall of shot through the same area covered by the *Nicholas*.

Until the *Strong* began her bombardment, there were no visible results to testify to the accuracy of the shelling. Just after one of the *Strong's* first salvos, however, at about 0205, a sudden flare-up lit the trees on the island, then rose column-like into the air. In addition to being much larger than the 5" shell bursts, the fire was whiter and far more intense. In a few moments it began to subside and gradually disappeared, indicating that in all probability a hit had been scored on an ammunition dump or a gun emplacement containing ammunition.

Coincident with this blast, the *Taylor*, final ship in the column, turned onto the line and opened fire. The first spot she received, as in the case of the *Radford*, was "Up 200," and the second spot "Right on! Right on!" Both the *Strong* and the *Taylor* thoroughly covered their assigned target area, which included the runway and the river edge of Stanmore Plantation, starting several small fires.⁵⁹ No enemy opposition was en-

⁵⁷ Lt. Comdr. Wellings in the *Strong* commented: "Personally, I have never seen a moon set so slowly . . ."

⁵⁸ All ships maintained salvo fire throughout the bombardment.

⁵⁹ The *Taylor's* starboard smoke screen generator, apparently tripped by the firing, was lost overboard.

countered. The Japanese forces on the plantations either were taken entirely by surprise, or were not equipped to return the fire—a rather improbable contingency in view of the large amounts of equipment reportedly introduced into the area during the preceding weeks.

At 0216 the *Taylor* ceased firing and followed the other vessels to the retirement course of 050° T. Speed of the formation was immediately increased to 32 knots. After 6 minutes course was changed to 045° T. for a clear departure from the Gulf. Although it was expected that enemy aircraft would trail the formation during the hours of darkness, and might attack after dawn, none was sighted. At 0234, however, a bright white flare fell off the flagship's port quarter, followed at 0300 by a similar flare some distance astern to port. Between 0440 and 0443, two more flares appeared off the port beam, but failed to illuminate the formation, which by this time was well out of the Gulf heading on course 120° T. at 34 knots.⁶⁰ The first and only suspicious radar pip developed at 0550, when an unidentified aircraft circled ahead of the bombardment group then ran down its port side. All ships were still at General Quarters, but antiaircraft fire was not employed since the bogey—possibly an enemy snoop—never came nearer than 9,000 yards. The remainder of the retirement was uneventful until at dawn fighter coverage from Guadalcanal met the ships and escorted them to Tulagi.

RESULTS

Except for the one large flare-up seen from the bombarding destroyers, the results of the attack were unspectacular. A few small fires started in the target area quickly subsided and, as usual, the enemy continued to make use of the base at Vila-Stanmore for aerial and maritime operations. The action was considered to have served its main purpose, however, by instructing two new ships in the technique of successful night bombardment.

⁶⁰The *Strong's* C. O. reported, "It is not understood how these planes missed our wake, which seemed to make a white road at least a mile wide for miles astern." The *Radford's* commander remarked that the flares in every case ignited at an altitude of approximately 8° and appeared to remain fixed for the duration of illumination, which varied from 3 to 5 minutes. Because of their constant altitude and bearing, and because radar was unable to detect a plane in their vicinity, he guessed that the lights might have been suspended from anchored balloons, and have been operated from the ground.

V

FIFTH BOMBARDMENT—MUNDA AND VILA-STANMORE

12-13 May 1943

As autumn wore on, the focus of belligerent action in the Southwest Pacific shifted more and more to the west. For two months following the fourth bombardment, practically all the land fighting in this area was centered in New Guinea. Lae, Salamaua, Wewak, Bulldog, Madang, and other bases and harbors received increased attention, while operations in the Solomons declined.

The apparent diminution in importance of the Solomon Islands theater, however, was relative rather than absolute. The intensity of aerial activity over the Russell Islands, the New Georgia group, and the northern enemy bases continued to grow; and, despite the more concentrated (and more publicized) fighting in New Guinea, it remained evident that the Japanese had no intention of abandoning their positions north of Guadalcanal. Reconnaissance in mid-April showed major increases in enemy air strength throughout the entire South Pacific. On 7 April, more than 250 Japanese aircraft were reported in the Solomons. Two days later 90 planes were sighted at Kavieng. Other sightings revealed that New Britain Island had also been reinforced.

INTERIM ACTIVITIES

With this augmented power, the enemy resumed the offensive. For some time past, Task Force AFIRM had based at Tulagi in order to strike at enemy shipping running under cover of darkness from Buin to Vila-Stanmore. Nightly the Force swept up New Georgia Sound, familiarly known as "The Slot," to within 30 miles of Kula Gulf, reversing course at midnight in order to reach Tulagi by dawn. Its strength varied from three cruisers and six destroyers to two cruisers and four destroyers, with Black Cats scouting in advance. The sorties developed no contacts with Japanese surface vessels but undoubtedly annoyed the enemy, for

early in April he staged an aerial attack in force on our shipping in the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area.

Task Force AFIRM, after completing its sweep on the night of 6 April, had entered Tulagi to fuel and to complete preparations for bombarding Munda and Vila-Stanmore on the night of the 7-8th. The Force got underway, and shortly after noon on 7 April was standing out of Tulagi on this mission when warning came of an impending air raid. The group continued on to the northwest of Savo Island until, at 1345, it received a dispatch from COMSOPAC cancelling the bombardment. The vessels rounded the Nggela group north of Florida Island and stood down Indispensable Strait.

The Japanese had chosen a propitious time for the attack. Including Task Force AFIRM, we had about 40 ships of corvette size or larger in the Guadalcanal area, and a somewhat greater number of small vessels such as PT boats, tugs, and district patrol vessels. Upon receipt of the warning of the threatened attack (coast watchers estimated the enemy force at 160 planes), our ships began getting underway from their various berths to clear restricted waters and get sea room for maneuvering. When the attack finally materialized at 1500, our ships were divided into six main groups. Task Force AFIRM was in Indispensable Strait; one small group lay east of Koli Point; three groups were proceeding east of Sealark Channel toward Espiritu Santo; and one large group, composed of most of the small vessels and some larger ones, was still in Tulagi Harbor.

The first attacks were directed at these latter ships, the enemy having apparently failed to sight Task Force AFIRM. Bomb concussions damaged the oil hulk *Erskine Phelps*, and two direct hits sank the New Zealand minesweeper *Moa* with a loss of five men. Two bombs struck the oiler *Kanawha*, demolishing the engine room and starting a fire forward. She was taken in tow, but sank near Tulagi, losing one officer and 18 men. Several planes began bombing runs on the *Taylor*, but were driven off by 5" gunfire which shot down at least three of them. At 1512 the destroyer *Aaron Ward*, off Berenge Point heading for Lengo Channel, was attacked by another wave of bombers. She suffered one direct hit in the engine room and four near-hits but managed to shoot down one plane. A few minutes later, 600 yards from the shoal at Teneti Point in 40 fathoms of water, she went down with 27 of her crew.

Of more than 160 Japanese planes sighted over or en route to Guadalcanal and Tulagi, our fighters reported destroying 39 at the cost of one

pilot and 7 planes. In addition, surface craft reported shooting down about 25 of the enemy. The exact damage to the attackers could not be fixed, however, because of the probability of duplication in the accounts.

Meanwhile our fliers continued their usual raids against Munda, Vila-Stanmore and other enemy-held bases. A most successful attack was carried out over Rabaul on the night of 23 March. Aerial photographs taken earlier in the day revealed that the enemy had based over 250 planes on the airfields of Lakunai, Vunakanau and Rapopo. That night our heavy bombers raided these concentrations. Fifty-four tons of bombs ranging from 2,000 pounders to incendiaries fell on the runways, dispersal areas, and other installations. Our planes were over the area for an hour and a half. Fires broke out in all parts of the fields, indicating that many of the grounded planes were damaged or destroyed. Heavy antiaircraft and searchlight barrages were encountered, and some of our planes were damaged, but all returned to their bases.

By early May, attacks on Munda totaled more than 120. Our pilots reported that they knew this area so intimately that they could direct their machine-gun fire and bombs at the hut occupied by the Japanese commanding officer. The number and intensity of attacks on Vila-Stanmore also grew, as the "softening up" process was carried out methodically and relentlessly. Enemy shipping capable of supplying the two bases also came in for its share of attention. On 17 April, torpedo bombers made three hits on a 10,000-ton cargo vessel southeast of Faisi Island, while other bombers scored two hits on a cargo ship and several near-hits on another near Tonolei Harbor.

Nevertheless, the Japanese continued to maintain large numbers of planes in the Solomons area and to use them both offensively and defensively. Furthermore, the number of aircraft kept in reserve in the northern islands seemed to be on the increase. Photographs taken of the Buin area on 29 April revealed a total of 12 bombers and 73 fighters at Kahili and Ballale airfields, while 20 float planes were sighted near Shortland Island. A few days earlier, an enemy flight of 10 bombers and 20 fighters was intercepted 95 miles northwest of Lunga point on Guadalcanal. Navy Corsairs had been on a mission over Vila-Stanmore and were returning to the base at Henderson Field when they met the Japanese planes, shooting down five Zeros and turning the rest back toward Kahili. We lost two fighters.

The enemy carried out one daring but ineffectual operation on Guadal-

canal late in April. On the night of the 27th, a patrol of eight men and one officer landed near Beaufort Bay on the southwest coast of the island, apparently in an attempt to reconnoiter and report on our strength in that sector. All were killed the following morning as they attempted to leave the island by small boat.

As enemy shipping continued to pour into the Munda-Vila-Stanmore area, it became apparent that we possessed neither the ships nor the opportunities for the multitudinous skirmishes which would be necessary to halt the traffic. Early in May, CINCPAC decided that mining the approaches to the staging base at Vila might help to disorganize the Japanese supply and reinforcement schedule. Accordingly, on the night of 6-7 May, a task group composed of the destroyer *Radford* (Lt. Comdr. Romoser) and the light minelayers *Preble* (Lt. Comdr. Frederic S. Steinke), *Gamble* (Lieut. Warren W. Armstrong) and *Breese* (Lt. Comdr. Alexander B. Coxe, jr.) steamed up through Ferguson Passage and laid a standard three-row minefield extending from 900 yards due west of Makuti Island northward to within 1,000 yards of the shore of Kolombangara Island. Conditions were ideal for the operation. It was a night without moon and with intermittent violent rain squalls. Visibility occasionally dropped to absolute zero. Excellent navigational results were obtained by radar, so that despite the wild weather the field was laid on a perfect time schedule without a single premature exposition or "floater." A task force under the command of Rear Admiral Ainsworth, comprising the cruisers *Honolulu* (F), *Nashville* and *St. Louis*, with a destroyer screen composed of the destroyers *O'Bannon*, *Chevalier*, *Strong* and *Taylor*, assisted by rounding Kolombangara from the north and sweeping Vella Gulf in advance of the minelaying. Both groups then joined forces and returned through Vella Gulf to Guadalcanal. Apparently the operation was unexpected and unobserved by the enemy. Its success was evidenced by reports of coast watchers, revealing that three Japanese destroyers and several noncombatant ships exploded and sank within 48 hours.

Operations such as this, however satisfying their temporary success might be, remained comparative pinpricks rather than body blows to the Japanese. By May, all policy-making officers were in agreement with Admiral Ainsworth's earlier expressed thesis that "the only real answer" was to take the fields and bases away from the enemy. Plans were afoot for the amphibious campaign which was eventually to wrest these islands

from his control after weeks of bloody fighting. Meanwhile there remained the problems of hampering to the greatest extent possible the nightly traffic between the New Georgia Group and the islands to the north, of reducing by attrition the effectiveness of the forces already stationed at the advanced and staging bases, and of limiting the enemy's airpower and air facilities until our own offensive preparations were completed.

PREPARATIONS

With all these factors in mind, CINCPAC gave his approval to a plan for a three-pronged attack, scheduled for the night of 12-13 May, in which the heaviest volume of fire yet employed was to be poured into Munda, Vila-Stanmore, and nearby installations, while another and more extensive minefield was to be laid in Kula Gulf. Consultation with task force and destroyer squadron commanders revealed that 15 ships would be available for the combined operation—four cruisers, eight destroyers, and three minelayers. After a study of intelligence reports on the concentration and potential strength at the two bases, it was decided that the majority of the ships—three cruisers and five destroyers—should bombard Vila-Stanmore, where the enemy had recently concentrated his reinforcement attempts. One cruiser and two destroyers would simultaneously take the Munda garrison under fire, while the destroyer and the minelayers which had sown the previous pattern would once again attempt to block by mines the northwestern approaches to Kula Gulf. Primary objectives of the bombardments were to be Japanese troop dispositions and shore installations of a more permanent nature.

Because some of the bombardment vessels would be forced of necessity to work in close conjunction with the mining group, the general navigation plan used for all previous bombardments of Vila-Stanmore was reversed, while the arrangements for shelling Munda remained essentially similar to earlier plots. The approach through Kula Gulf and the actual bombardment of Vila-Stanmore were to be conducted on a southerly course along the Kolombangara shore. The mine detachment, following this bombardment group in, was to close Kolombangara, lay its minefield, and join the cruisers in the vicinity of Visuvisu Point. This plan possessed several advantages. In the first place, it would keep the Vila-Stanmore bombardment group as far away as possible from the mined area during the retirement. Secondly, it offered an excellent bombard-

ment course, since recent intelligence advices indicated that large enemy troop concentrations were billeted in the bivouac areas between Lulu Lake and the north end of the landing strip. In the third place, the proposed course provided the only feasible method of assuring the element of surprise by keeping the vessels well clear of the enemy's observation post and searchlight on Visuvisu Point until they were well into the retirement. Fourthly, it permitted a simple bombardment plan, striking first at the primary objectives at effective ranges. And fifthly, it allowed the *Radford*, leading the mine detachment, to be used as a picket covering the close-in approaches to Kula Gulf.

The proposed approach and firing plan presented one basic disadvantage, in that the heavy ships would have to open fire while heading into restricted waters. If the Japanese should offer any real opposition, particularly in the form of underwater attack, it was felt that the cruiser captains might face some difficulty in getting their ships safely out of the Gulf.

The many advantages the plan possessed, however, overcame this one objection, and the task force organization for the operation was speedily drawn up. Once again, command of the group was given to Rear Admiral Ainsworth, and the following division of duties was established:

Task Force AFIRM, Rear Admiral Ainsworth.

Vila-Stanmore Group, Rear Admiral Ainsworth.

3 Cruisers:

Honolulu (F), Capt. Hayler.

Helena, Capt. Cecil.

Nashville, Capt. Spanagel.

5 Destroyers:

ComDesRon MIKE, Comdr. McInerney.

ComDesDiv CHARLIE, Comdr. Alvin D. Chandler.

Nicholas (F, MIKE), Lt. Comdr. Hill.

O'Bannon (F, CHARLIE), Lt. Comdr. MacDonald.

Taylor, Lt. Comdr. Katz.

Strong, Lt. Comdr. Wellings.

Chevalier, Comdr. Ephraim R. McLean, Jr.

Munda Group, Capt. Campbell.

1 Cruiser:

St. Louis (F), Capt. Campbell.

2 Destroyers, Comdr. Harry F. Miller.

Jenkins (F), Comdr. Harry F. Miller.

Fletcher, Lt. Comdr. Robert D. McGinnis.

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Mining Group, Lt. Comdr. Romoser.

1 Destroyer:

Radford (F), Lt. Comdr. Romoser.

3 Minelayers:

Preble, Lt. Comdr. Steinke.

Gamble, Lieut. Armstrong.

Breese, Lt. Comdr. Cox.

The photographic interpretation unit on the staff of COMAIRSOPAC again furnished a complete pictorial layout of the areas to be bombarded. Firing grid charts which this unit prepared covered practically the entire Vila-Stanmore bivouac area, reaching as far westward as Ringi Cove, where the enemy was reported to have constructed additional landing facilities and warehouses.⁶¹ Various intelligence reports and charts prepared by reconnaissance units enabled the ship commanders to place the positions of bivouacs and observation posts accurately, while enlarged aerial photographs provided an almost perfect scale layout of Japanese battery emplacements. The chief of staff and operations officer to COMAIRSOLS flew down to Espiritu Santo to confer with Admiral Ainsworth on air support operations. At this conference, all details regarding Black Cats, fighter coverage and air strikes on the Kahili-Ballale area were discussed and agreed upon. Just prior to the departure of the mine detachment on 10 May, a conference of all commanding officers was held aboard the flagship of the Task Force Commander, at which emergency procedures and the general firing plan were discussed.

As in the case of the previous combined bombardment, a single zero hour—in this case 0100 on 13 May—was set for both firing groups, and the same time was fixed for beginning the laying of mines. Since some slight deviations from a rigid time pattern were unavoidable, and because of the advisability of completing the shelling and starting the retirement in as brief a period as was consistent with thorough coverage of the target areas, the bombardment plan was kept as simple as possible. The directive for the Munda operation followed generally the lines previously established. After obtaining bearings on Banyetta Point the Munda

⁶¹The Munda bombardment was not scheduled in time for such lavish preliminary detail. However, the inclusion of the Munda action presented no difficulties, since complete plans had previously been worked out for just such a contingency. Dispatches sent to Espiritu Santo by plane informed all hands in advance that Munda was also to be bombarded, and a revised operation order was distributed to all ships. Its chief effect on the Vila-Stanmore group was to reassign the *Taylor*, originally placed in destroyers rear, to van destroyers, and to order the *Chevalier* to cover the objectives originally assigned to the *Taylor* as well as her own.

vessels, with the *Jenkins* in the lead and the *St. Louis* and the *Fletcher* following in column, were to slow to 18 knots and turn to the bombardment course of 309° T. in time to open fire at the zero hour. The *Jenkins* was to act as a screen against motor torpedo boats, submarines and other craft, and to silence shore batteries. Only when it became certain that no such opposition would be encountered was she to open fire. The *St. Louis* and the *Fletcher* were assigned troop areas as their primary targets, but they could shift fire to menacing shore batteries and air or surface targets at discretion. All ships could use automatic weapons as necessary, but were not to open fire at air targets prior to the bombardment except to repel attacks.

The plan for the bombardment of Vila-Stanmore was of necessity somewhat more complicated. Entry to Kula Gulf was to be made with the *Nicholas* and the *Taylor* screening ahead, followed by the *Honolulu*, *Helena*, and *Nashville* in column in that order. The *O'Bannon*, *Strong* and *Chevalier* were to screen astern, and the mining group was to follow behind the rear destroyers. The *Honolulu* was to open fire on bivouac areas in the plantation region from a point on the entry course west of the halfway mark between Bambari and Buki Harbors, at approximately the zero hour. After ten minutes, when approximately due west of the mouth of the Vila River, she was to lift her main battery fire over the plantations to cover Ringi Cove on the north coast of Blackett Strait for another minute, whereupon she was to turn to 090° T. and bombard with 5" shellfire Enogai Inlet on the New Georgia shore. While firing on the inlet, she was to swing to the retirement course of 030° T. and open briefly on Rice Anchorage while leaving the Gulf. Firing plans for the *Helena* and the *Nashville* were roughly similar, although Bairoko Harbor was also included in the list of secondary targets for these cruisers. The time allowance between prescribed limiting bearings was sufficient to permit the comparatively deliberate firing rate of six shots per gun per minute.

The destroyers, both van and rear, were to open fire at the same hour, guided by the *O'Bannon* following in the *Nashville's* wake. Their target areas were assigned in the following order for the first 4 minutes. The *O'Bannon* was to take a thousand-yard square just south of Bambari Harbor, concentrating on an enemy observation post and houses. The *Strong's* point of concentration, north of the *O'Bannon's*, included a road

and houses in the marshlands bordering the harbor. The *Chevalier* and the *Taylor* were to concentrate on the houses just north of Surumuni Cove. For the next 14 minutes, all destroyers were to lay their fire on the area to the east and south of Lalu Lake, covering enemy barges on the lake itself. Thereafter, the plan called for them to switch to targets on New Georgia Island and fire into Bairoko Harbor and Rice Anchorage during the retirement. All destroyers were to intersperse their salvos with lulls at regular intervals for radar searches of the Gulf.

The mining group, assigned to a position astern of the rear destroyers during the entrance to the Gulf, was to break away 45 minutes before zero hour and proceed independently down the Kolombangara shoreline. Just as the flagship opened fire, the group was scheduled to begin laying a standard three-row minefield extending from a point 1,000 yards due east of the mouth of the Okopo River on a line of bearing of 110° T., for a distance of 8,400 yards. It was expected that the mining would be completed in about a quarter of an hour, thus giving the layers time to regain their stations in the formation before leaving Kula Gulf. Operational plans had to be changed somewhat from the basic plot to assure the mine group sufficient fuel to accomplish its mission. Since the *Gamble* carried only 83,000 gallons of oil—a bare minimum supply for the trip from her base at Espiritu Santo to Kula Gulf and Tulagi—it was decided to have these ships fuel from the *Erskine Phelps* at Tulagi, and return to that base for additional fuel before heading home to Espiritu Santo.⁶²

The mining group, containing older and slower ships than either bombardment group, sortied from its base first, leaving Espiritu Santo at 1700 on 10 May. Passage to Tulagi was made at an average speed of 17 knots via Sealark Channel. Two rehearsal runs simulating actual courses and formations for the scheduled operation were held en route, one during daylight and the other at night. At 0600 on 12 May, in the vicinity of Nura Island, the mine vessels picked up their air coverage. Under its protection they steamed into Tulagi Harbor at 1000.

The remainder of the Task Force stood out of Second Channel, Espiritu Santo, at 0545 on 11 May, with the destroyers forming an antisubmarine screen about the four cruisers in the following order: *Nicholas*, No. 1; *Jenkins*, 2; *Chevalier*, 3; *Fletcher*, 4; *O'Bannon*, 5; *Taylor*, 6; and *Strong*,

⁶² Admiral Ainsworth reported: "We did not relish the idea of sending these fully loaded mine-layers into Tulagi for fuel, but the margin for the *Gamble* was too thin to do otherwise."

7. The heavy weather, squalls, and high winds occasioned by a front hanging over Espiritu Santo were left to the eastward by dawn of the 12th, and clear weather prevailed throughout the remainder of the operation. Late that afternoon, as the formation passed through Sealark Channel, the Munda group separated from the Vila-Stanmore group, and proceeded independently south of Savo Island toward its objective, under its own fighter and antisubmarine patrol. At 1830, near Savo Island in point $08^{\circ}50' S.$, $159^{\circ}25' E.$, the mining group made rendezvous with the Vila-Stanmore group, and both proceeded in the direction of Kula Gulf.⁶³

APPROACH TO VILA-STANMORE

At nightfall the Vila-Stanmore group went to standard antiaircraft night cruising disposition, the cruisers in column and the destroyers in a screening circle with 1,000-yard intervals. The mine detachment followed in column, led by the *Radford*. The sky remained clear, with the moon in the last quarter, as the ships stood up "The Slot" at 25 knots on course $300^{\circ} T.$ ⁶⁴ The approach was uneventful, except for numerous radar contacts on friendly planes believed to be the spotting Black Cats, until 0000 on 13 May, when the formation, now at General Quarters, slowed to 20 knots, turned to course $225^{\circ} T.$, and entered Kula Gulf.

As they executed the turn, the combined groups without signal changed formation to a single column, with the *Nicholas* and the *Taylor* in the van, followed by the *Honolulu*, *Helena*, *Nashville*, *O'Bannon*, *Strong*, and *Chevalier*. The mine detachment, with the *Preble*, *Gamble*, and *Breese* following the *Radford* in that order, brought up the rear. Distance between the cruisers was maintained at 700 yards and between the destroyers at 500 yards. The *Taylor*, rear ship of the van, stayed 1,000 yards ahead of the *Honolulu*.

Accurate navigation of the Gulf area turned out to be extremely difficult in the darkness. Approximate ranges were obtained by sighting on questionable tangents and mountain peaks, and correlating these observations with SG radar ranges and bearings of the nearest land. At points

⁶³ As in the case of the third bombardment, the operations will be treated separately, beginning with the shelling of Vila-Stanmore, followed by the mining of Kula Gulf and the bombardment of Munda.

⁶⁴ Lt. Comdr. Romoser complained that the moon silhouetted the force "too effectively for comfort."

10 to 15 miles from land, positions were correct only within a two-mile error margin, but as the shore was closed to 6 or 8 miles the error was decreased to half a mile. The accuracy of the radar ranges, and particularly of the sight bearings, seemed to depend on the contour of the land at the water's edge. Rounding Visuvisu Point at a distance of about 14 miles, radar gave ranges on what was believed to be the nearest land. In reality this turned out to be a two or three hundred-foot embankment setting back a mile or two from the shoreline.

It had been planned to give Visuvisu a wide berth, but by the time the flagship raised Kolombangara on the short scale of the radar screen, it was apparent that the formation was ahead and to the northwest of position and had closed the coast too far. However, all ships had been cautioned to be alert for just such a contingency. They followed the movements of the flagship, making course and speed changes without signal.

At 0018 the mining detachment, by prearrangement, dropped away from the bombardment group and set out on an irregular course for the starting point of its mining run, 1,000 yards off the mouth of the Okopo River. The moon set behind the Kolombangara hills shortly after 0030, leaving a black shadow along the coast for the final run down the Gulf. A fresh breeze from the north drove low clouds across the horizon, but the sky above was starlit and the sea inside the bay was calm. The bombardment vessels continued their approach to the firing line. They had reached a point about halfway down the Gulf when lookouts and director crews on the flagship spotted an intermittently blinking light on the mountain slopes between the Sesepi and Okopo Rivers. The blinking was unintelligible to the men in the ships. After about a minute it ceased. The column steamed on into the darkness.

BOMBARDMENT OF VILA-STANMORE AND MINING OF KULA GULF

Thirty seconds before the zero hour the flagship's Black Cat arrived on station 8,000 feet over the target area from the direction of Blackett Strait.⁶⁵ Just as the spotter sighted the Vila River off his port bow, two batteries of searchlights, composed of three lights and two lights respec-

⁶⁵ The *Honolulu's* gunnery officer commented: "This is believed to be much too high for good night aerial observation."

tively, began probing the sky directly overhead from the edge of the airfield. They failed to illuminate the plane, although they succeeded in completely obliterating its vision during the first crucial spotting moments. Meanwhile the *Honolulu's* main battery was laid and ready. She passed through the initial point on the firing course at the prescribed speed, and at 0100, exactly as scheduled, she opened fire. Within the brief space of a minute and a half, the other two cruisers and the five destroyers opened up on their assigned objectives, catching the whole northern end of the Japanese bivouac area in enfilade.

Because of the lights, the Black Cat was unable to transmit spots for the first salvos, although the spotters were able to follow the shell trajectories clearly. When the first projectiles landed, however, the searchlights abruptly went out, and in a few seconds the plane was able to spot "No change." A moment later the *Honolulu's* radar plot reported contact with a ship in Blackett Strait. The *Honolulu* raised her mean point of impact and, in accordance with plan, walked her pattern down the strait to Ringi Cove. At 0107, radar plot reported the contact false, and two minutes later the flagship went to rapid fire on information from the pilothouse that the turnaway would begin about a minute earlier than planned.

The *Nashville*, third cruiser in column, reached her open fire point coincident with the *Honolulu's* opening salvo, but because of the sharp angle on her bow and the possible damage that might have resulted to the adjacent 40-mm. twin mount and the 1.1" mount, fire was withheld for about 30 seconds. Ranges and bearings to the assigned target area were furnished by the navigator during the approach, and plot set up a problem based on the data with zero target course and speed. Plot and the navigator checked data from time to time, and agreement was reached five minutes before opening fire. Her first salvo landed squarely on the target. Subsequent well-placed salvos fully covered the plantations.

At about the fifteenth salvo, approximately two minutes after opening the bombardment, a serious casualty occurred in Turret III. Two 6"/47 powder charges became ignited (or were fired prematurely for unknown reasons), causing an explosion in the gun chamber which resulted in the immediate death of 7 men, fatal injuries to 11, serious injuries to 15, and minor burns and lacerations to several more. This accident immediately gave rise to many reports of fires in turrets and handling rooms, hits

and other catastrophes, but despite these rumors fire was continued without interruption with the remainder of the battery.⁶⁶

The *Helena*, second cruiser in column, was the last to open fire. Her first ranging salvo, a minute and a half after the *Honolulu's*, was unobserved, but subsequent bursts landed directly in her target area, the battery emplacements halfway between the grid areas of the *Honolulu* and the *Nashville*. Opening range and bearing of the target from the *Helena* were derived from information based on navigational data previously furnished to Plot. Small adjustments of course and speed near the end of the approach were not conducive to reliable checks of generated bearing against navigational bearing and range. The probable error between the two, however, was small, and spots indicated that the *Helena's* shells continued to fall on the assigned objectives.

The *Nicholas* and the *Taylor*, searching ahead of the cruisers, opened fire almost coincidentally with the *Honolulu*, the *Nicholas* on Sasamboki Island and the *Taylor* on Vila Airfield. For 10 minutes they concentrated on gun emplacements, signal stations, and the causeway near the mouth of Disappointment Cove, some of their shells falling short in the water but the majority landing on the targets. At about 0110, just prior to the change of course for the retirement, the *Taylor's* executive officer observed a radar pip which appeared to be a small object standing out of Blackett Strait at high speed. Combat Information Center reported it as a plane as it disappeared from the screen close aboard to starboard. Later analysis, however, indicated that it was probably produced by a combination of fall of shot from our own forces and shells from shore batteries firing at the formation. Enemy fire was negligible.

Following in the wake of the cruisers came the rear destroyers, the *O'Bannon* in the lead. During the final stage of the approach she conducted a continuous search on both the long and short scale of the SG and SC radars, paying particularly close attention to the area to port of the

⁶⁶ The ship's chronological report shows the speed with which the fire was brought under control:

- "0104 Looks like we are hit back of Turret III. Fire on topside Turret III. Repair I to Fwd Flood Station, check No. 3 handling room.
- "0106 Fwd Flood cannot get #3 handling room on phone.
- "0106½ Lower Handling Room on fire. Turret III on fire.
- "0107½ Shift to continuous fire.
- "0108 Handling room #3 on fire—Get Hot!
- "0109 Hose is rigged in handling room. Not burning on Main Deck.
- "0110 Fire under control in handling room.
- "0112½ Fire in Turret III reported under control."

cruisers and to the entrance to Bambari Harbor on her starboard bow. Only when it was definitely established that there would be no enemy surface craft opposition to the opening of the action was the main battery ordered to prepare for bombardment. At 0100 the SG radar was placed on the first target bearing. When SG matched the main battery director in train, the *O'Bannon* opened fire on the southernmost part of the entrance to Bambari. As she steamed down the line, she swung her fire in succession to Kape Harbor and the bivouac area southwest of Lalu Lake. At 0114, as she was about to go into the turn for the retirement, she checked fire for a radar search.

Five hundred yards behind the *O'Bannon* came the *Strong*, conforming to the same course and bombarding the same areas. The *Chevalier* brought up the rear of the formation.⁶⁷ Barely a moment after the flagship's first salvo she opened on Surumuni Cove at a range of 4,640 yards. Four minutes later, after firing 160 rounds, she shifted her aim to Bambari Harbor, concentrating for 2 minutes on four houses and an observation post along the shore. At 0107, the *Chevalier* checked fire and began a thorough radar search, while her crew extinguished two small fires, caused by burning cork, on the starboard whaleboat and the fantail. At 0110 she resumed fire, aiming generally at the bivouac area but concentrating particularly on the houses between Lalu Lake and Vila Gulf, and on the shoreline of the Lake itself.

The first phase of the bombardment while the vessels were on the southerly leg of their course caused no large fires and explosions such as the great blaze seen during the first bombardment of this area. Spectacular results were not really expected, however, since it was known that the enemy had spread his troops and installations over a large area. All spots indicated that the plantations and the subsidiary harbors had been covered thoroughly and effectively.⁶⁸ Some commanding officers expressed the belief that the droning of the Black Cats had warned the bombardment-wise Japanese of the approach of our units, thus giving them time to get to their gun positions and foxholes. Whether or not this fear was

⁶⁷ The *Chevalier's* action report hints at the possibility that the enemy might have been prepared for the attack. As the *Honolulu* opened fire, personnel in the *Chevalier* distinctly heard a "warning siren" from the general direction of the plantations.

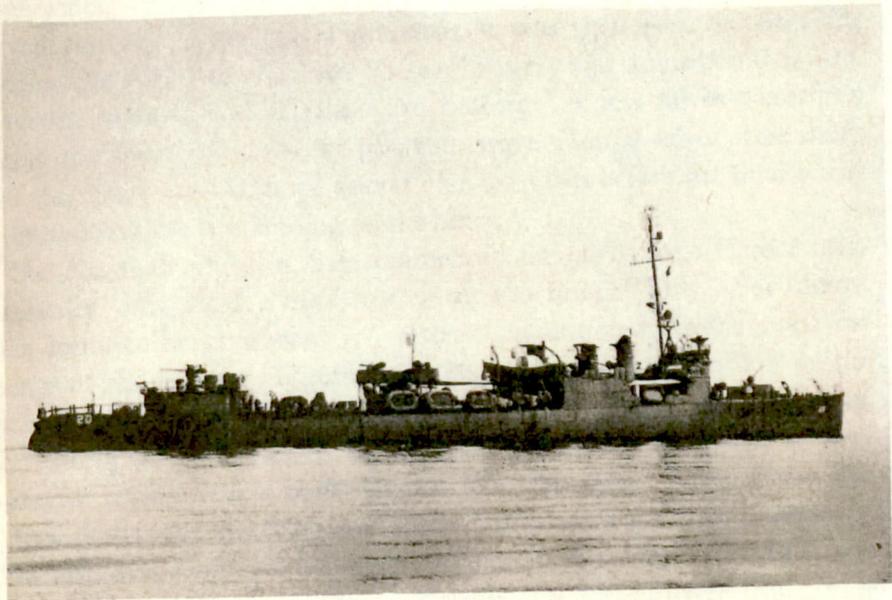
⁶⁸ Admiral Ainsworth, in his report to CINCPAC, wrote: "It took three months after the first Munda bombardment for the news to filter through that the enemy had suffered heavy personnel losses there; and we are hoping that the final assessment of damage for these bombardments will show even heavier casualties."

justified, return fire was extremely light, and possibly consisted of only one 4" battery believed silenced by the destroyers.

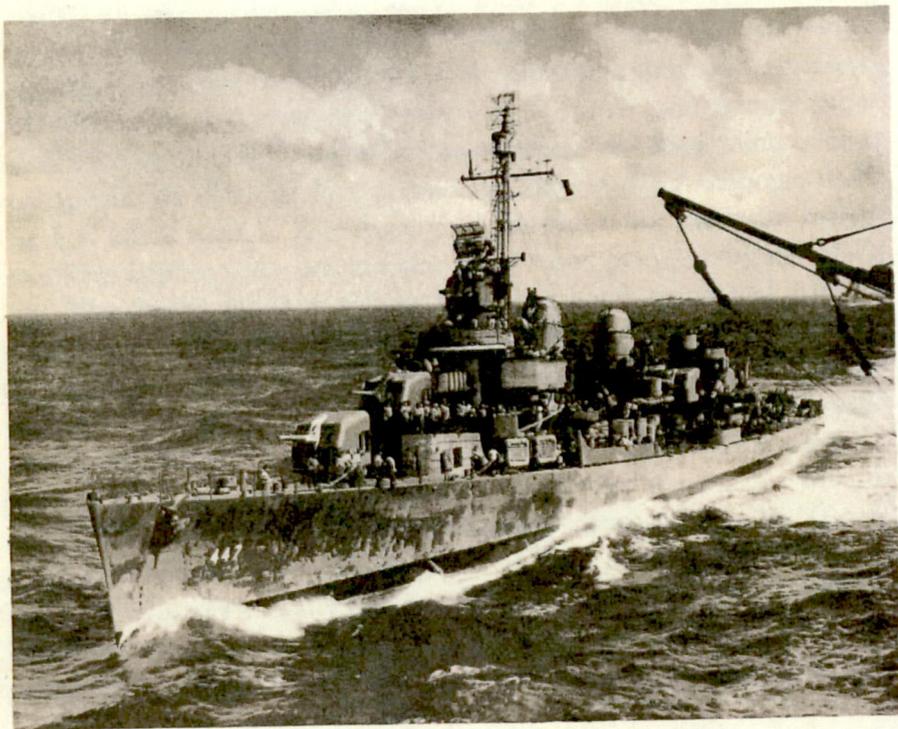
At 0111 $\frac{1}{2}$, after more than 10 minutes of blasting the bases on Kolombangara, the *Honolulu* began her change of course to 090°, to head directly for the New Georgia shore. As she did so she checked her main battery fire. The executive officer, acting on reports that motor torpedo boats might be based on Rice Anchorage and Enogai Inlet, had kept watch on these harbors throughout the first stage of the bombardment. At 0114, when the ship had steadied on her new course, Sky Forward opened up with the starboard 5" battery on Enogai. Immediately the familiar phenomenon of phantom warships materialized to plague the cruisers. The first flashes from the flagship revealed a dark shadow appearing out of the smoke on the port side abreast of the *Nashville*. Gradually it grew into a complete ship, about 2,500 yards away on a parallel course. The *Honolulu* recognized it as a phantom, but the *Nashville* opened fire briefly. In a few moments the ghost melted away into the thickening smoke.

A minute later the *Honolulu* reopened with her main battery, sending 68 rounds into the inlet before changing course to 030° for the completion of the night's work and the retirement. At 0118 $\frac{1}{2}$ Sky Forward resumed with the starboard 5" battery on Rice Anchorage, and a minute later ceased fire for good. No usable spots were received during this phase of the operation, since the firing was quite well advanced by the time the flagship's Black Cat arrived over New Georgia. By the time the plane came into position, nearly one-third of the salvos were seen to be falling in the water, although some of them ricocheted onto the land. One shore gun near Enogai opened up at about this time and fired three rounds at the last ships in the formation; but of the two splashes observed, one landed about 400 yards over the column and the other 800 yards short.

The *Helena*, following in formation, opened fire with her 5" battery on Enogai Inlet soon after the *Honolulu*, concentrating on the south shore. After 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ minutes of fire, Combat Information Center reported a surface target standing out of the inlet. A moment later the Black Cat confirmed the report. The *Helena* checked fire to make a search with the forward FC and FD radars and to train her main battery on the reported bearing. No contact could be made by the fire-control radar. Shortly thereafter C. I. C. reported that it had lost the target. The 5"

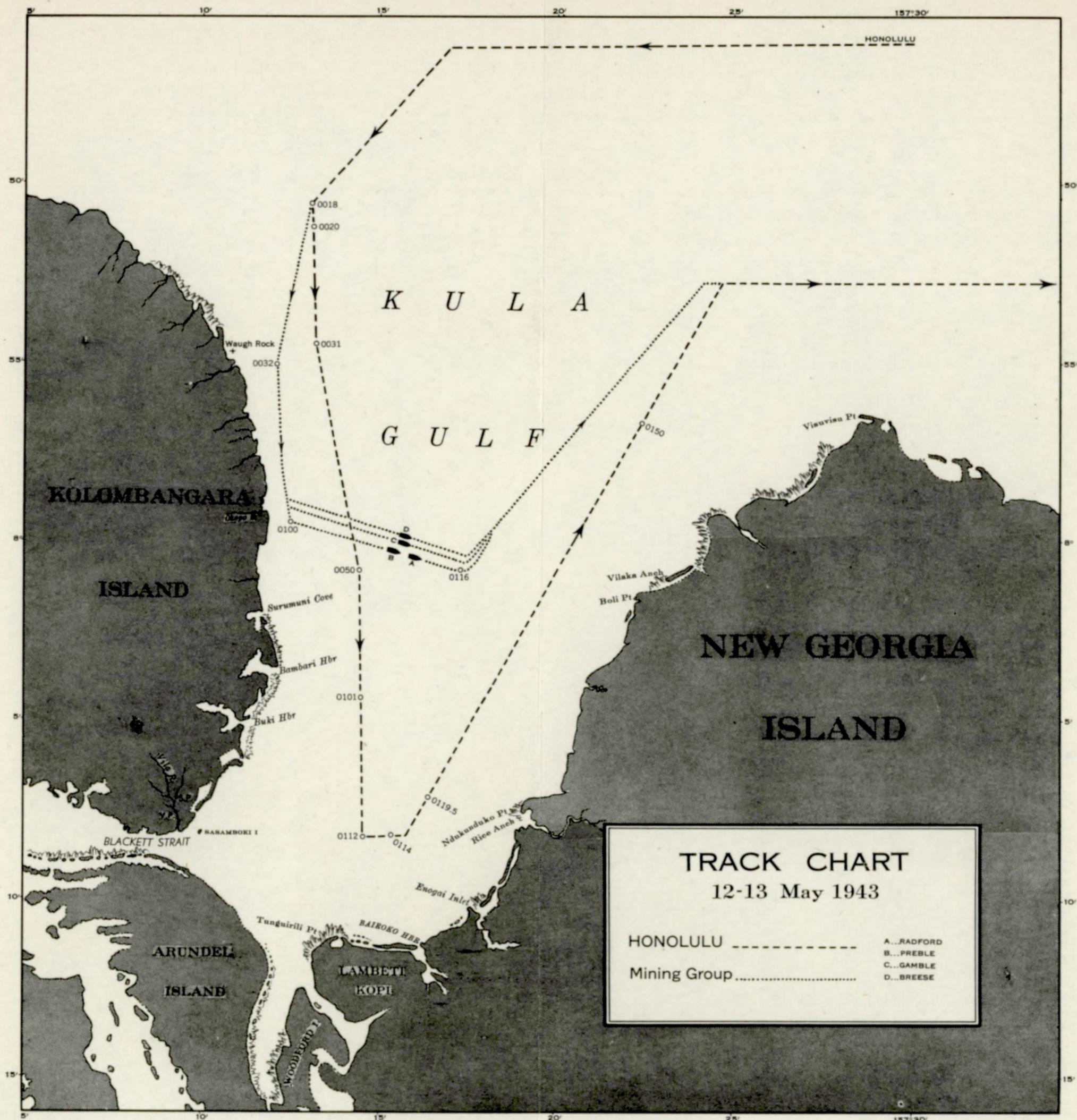


The minelayer *Preble*



The *Jenkins*

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~



TRACK CHART

12-13 May 1943

HONOLULU -----

Mining Group

A...RADFORD
B...PREBLE
C...GAMBLE
D...BREESE

battery nevertheless unloaded guns on the range first given, with unobserved results. According to schedule, it was then past the time for shifting fire to Rice Anchorage. The 5" battery was trained on that area, however, using C. I. C.'s range and bearing. A few salvos were fired before the *Helena* was too far past the target. Initial salvos were short, and the range was increased a total of 1,300 yards before the final bursts indicated that fire was landing on the beach.

The *Nashville*, third in line, commenced fire on Bairoko Harbor coincidentally with the *Helena's* first salvo into Enogai Inlet. For almost four minutes her starboard 5" battery concentrated on the northeast corner of the harbor. The first salvo caused a vivid white flash on the shore, followed almost immediately by a second flash of lesser intensity. Succeeding tracers appeared to be entering a very smoky area, as they were not readily visible at the end of their trajectory. Point of aim was then shifted to the low-lying land south of the entrance to Rice Anchorage. This area was bombarded for almost 3 minutes before "cease fire" was ordered, and the *Nashville* followed the *Honolulu* and the *Helena* into the retirement.

The *Nicholas* and the *Taylor*, ahead of the cruisers, were just completing their 8-minute bombardment of Enogai Inlet and Rice Anchorage when the rear destroyer column began its turn in the wake of the cruisers. The *O'Bannon*, following the *Nashville*, fired for one minute on a spit of land on the Gulf side of Bairoko Harbor, and for 6 minutes on a small peninsula north of Rice Anchorage and on the Anchorage itself. The first salvos fired at Rice Anchorage fell short, but successful corrections were applied after her fire was spotted out 400 yards by the *Black Cat*. The *Strong* failed to follow up with a bombardment of Bairoko because of a steering casualty as she was about to make her initial turn. Steering control from the bridge was lost when a loose connection in the synchrotic tie control panel caused the contactors to open. Although control was shifted to the trick wheel in the steering engine room in about 30 seconds,⁶⁹ the *Strong* veered radically off station. At 0125, 6 minutes after the casualty, the *Strong* regained station astern of the *O'Bannon*, and bombarded Rice Anchorage for three minutes before ceasing fire. The *Strong's* casualty also spoiled the execution of the *Chevalier's* bombardment plan. As the latter began her course change, she found it necessary to make violent turns to avoid ramming the *Strong*, and ran

⁶⁹ Lt. Comdr. Wellings reported: "It seemed like about an hour . . ."

more than a mile further south than originally intended, her fire blocked meanwhile. Four minutes later she began firing on Bairoko Harbor, but after 30 rounds control reported that the guns could no longer bear on the target. Fire was then shifted to Rice Anchorage, where 46 rounds landed before that target, too, was passed and the *Chevalier* ceased fire.

Meanwhile the mine detachment, which had separated from the bombardment group at 0018, had laid its minefield and was standing northeast by north out of the Gulf to regain its station at the rear of the task group. The mine-layers had slipped down the Kolombangara shore on various courses and speeds, conforming to the coast line and timing their run to arrive at their initial operational point 1,000 yards off the mouth of the Okopo River at the zero hour. The task was carried out exactly on schedule. As the Japanese searchlights in the plantation area began searching for the Black Cat overhead, the group arrived on station and turned to the mining course. The *Preble* followed in the *Radford's* wake on 110° T., while the *Gamble* and the *Breeze* made simultaneous turns which put them on separate parallel courses slightly to the north. One minute after the *Honolulu* opened fire they began laying their mines at a speed of 15 knots, and in 16 minutes had sown a standard three-row field almost 8,500 yards in length, apparently undetected by the enemy. Course was immediately changed to 041° T. and speed increased to 25 knots plus to join the remainder of the task group for the retirement.

RETIREMENT FROM KULA GULF

Departure from the Gulf was uneventful. At 0130 the *Nicholas* and the *Taylor* increased speed to 28 knots and stood out to the north on an extension of the third bombardment course. The other vessels followed at brief intervals as they concluded their bombardments. By 0200 the leading cruisers had cleared the headlands of New Georgia, and swung right in formation to 090° T. Thirty minutes later the mining detachment joined the bombardment vessels from astern on course 120° T. The united group formed a scouting line for the return trip.

The retirement proceeded normally, without suspicious contacts, until 0515, when the formation was about 30 miles northeast of the Russell Islands. At that time the *Strong*, stationed on the port quarter of the *Nashville*, picked up with her SC radar a lone aircraft coming up from directly astern. The plane was tracked for 20 miles, and at a distance

of 11,000 yards was picked up by the *Nashville's* radar. It closed the formation to 5,900 yards at a speed of 80 knots and an altitude of 2,500 feet, showing red and green running lights but making no IFF signals. The *Strong* broke TBS silence to announce that if the plane continued to close she proposed to open fire unless otherwise directed. Admiral Ainsworth ordered her to wait, but at 0530, through a misunderstanding, the *Nashville* fired six rounds of 40-mm. ammunition. The *Strong* followed suit with five rounds of 5" 38 caliber. The plane, apparently unharmed, immediately made a speed turn and disappeared. At this point the SC radar operator in the *Honolulu* obtained a momentary IFF showing. The plane was identified as one of our own Liberators on its way home after harassing Kahili.⁷⁰

BOMBARDMENT OF MUNDA

The Munda group, with the *Jenkins* and the *Fletcher* screening on either bow of the *St. Louis*, detached itself from the Kula Gulf group at 1547 while standing up Sealark Channel and set out independently to the south of Savo Island. Shortly after sunset, while steaming northwest of Guadalcanal, it was challenged by the Russell Island signal station, but made no reply, partly because of the gathering darkness and partly because Capt. Campbell was unwilling to run the risk of disclosing the identity of his formation to possible enemy snoopers.

At 2000 the group passed through point 09° 15' S., 158° 35' E., on course 285° T., at a speed of 24 knots. In accordance with operation orders, the ships assumed a column formation, the *Jenkins* 1,000 yards ahead of the *St. Louis* and the *Fletcher* the same distance astern, with the cruiser acting as guide. The sea was smooth for the approach, with a slight ground swell from the southeast. The sky remained cloudless and starry. Except for a slight haze over the Rendova and New Georgia land masses, visibility was unlimited. All vessels went to General Quarters at 2300. Navigating by SG radar, the formation passed 9,000 yards west of Banyetta Point at 0030 on the 13th and according to plan reduced speed to 18 knots. Thirteen minutes later, just before moonset, the flagship picked up Beresford Island (Black Rock) bearing 028° T. at a distance of 19,200 yards.

⁷⁰ Admiral Ainsworth noted in his action report: "If the plane were one of ours, he had no business coming in over the formation as dawn was just breaking and he could hardly fail to see us. He could certainly see both the land masses of New Georgia and Santa Isabel Island, the course he was supposed to take."

The formation, about 2 minutes behind schedule, stood up toward the firing line.

At 0059 the *Jenkins* turned to the bombardment course of 309° T. Two minutes later, as the searchlights at Vila-Stanmore began hunting for the other bombardment group's Black Cats, the *St. Louis* turned in her wake. No hostile forces were to be seen by either visual or radar search, so at 0102, just as the *Honolulu's* main battery extinguished the lights, the *Jenkins* opened fire, her first salvos landing directly in the center of the runway. Two minutes later, at 0104, the *St. Louis* commenced firing at a range of 13,900 yards with two spotting salvos designed to fall in the middle of the strip. The Black Cat transmitted a spot of "up 1,000—half lighted in water" as the *Fletcher* turned to the firing course and a minute later joined the bombardment. For the next quarter hour, the three ships carefully worked over the bivouac area and the runways, starting at least one large fire.⁷¹ The only enemy resistance encountered consisted of inaccurate and ineffective anti-aircraft fire directed at the Black Cat.

At 0119, her bombardment completed, the *Jenkins* turned away to course 215° T., and began the retirement. The *St. Louis* ceased fire a minute later and turned in the destroyer's wake, followed by the *Fletcher* at 0129. In less than ten minutes the destroyers had reached their stations ahead and astern of the cruiser, and the formation began working its speed up to 30 knots. There was no enemy interference. The retirement proceeded as planned until 0202, when the *St. Louis'* port anchor broke loose from the hawse. This anchor, when sighted upon departure from Espiritu Santo, had a full turn of chain around one fluke. Capt. Campbell did not believe it could be cleared without a long delay, so he had ordered it secured close up against the hawse with the turn still around the fluke. The stock was forward, lifted as high out of the water as possible, and secured with two parts of two-inch wire running from the eyes of the ship. A four-by-four fender had been placed between the anchor and the ship's side abaft the hawse, and the hull shored up internally in the wake of the anchor.

⁷¹ The accuracy of the bombardment can be seen from the TBS log of spots kept by the *St. Louis*: "Perfect . . . right up the beach . . . you're rocking them away, that's fine . . . we could have no better fire control . . . no shots going in water . . . they look good . . . I don't believe anyone could do as well as we are . . . I wonder what the Japs think now . . . I don't think the Admiral could ask for a better one is all I can say . . . small fire on beach—oh, it's getting bigger . . . they still look good . . ."

When the speed of the ship during the retirement had reached about 30 knots, the stock of the anchor dipped under the water, carried away the two-inch wire, and cleared the anchor by flipping it over. It then swung with a short radius of chain in a violent arc, striking the side of the bow and piercing it in four places. The *St. Louis* slowed to 20 knots and then to 15 knots, but the seas continued to pour into the anchor windlass room and compartments A-303-A and A-305-A, while A-304-A made a slight amount of water from seepage. At 0218, with the ship slowed to 10 knots, the anchor was secured. The anchor windlass room and compartments A-304-A and A-305-A were pumped clear, while A-303-A was isolated. At 0220 speed was increased to 25 knots, at 0225 to 27 knots, and at 0243 to 30 knots, but flooding persisted. The ship was again slowed to 15 knots at 0303 while the holes in the skin were plugged. Thirty-seven minutes later speed was built up to 21 knots, and within an hour the retirement was resumed at the scheduled 30 knots.

The casualty had materially delayed the Munda group, however, so that it made contact with the Vila-Stanmore detachment some 45 minutes later than planned. The united formation from Kula Gulf reached the rendezvous point, 08° 05' S., 159° 25' E., at 0700, at which time the minelayers, with the exception of the *Radford*, proceeded independently to Tulagi for fuel and minor repairs.⁷² At 0747 the Munda ships joined up, and the Task Force executed column left on signal to 090° T. and steamed toward Espiritu Santo via Indispensable Strait.

RESULTS

The results of the bombardment, as usual, were disappointing. Munda and Vila-Stanmore continued to be used by the enemy; in fact, less than twelve hours afterwards, at 1100, a flight of 26 Zeros was reported by a coast watcher to be en route to Guadalcanal. The fact that the enemy flight consisted solely of fighters raised some doubt as to its mission, but apparently it was on reconnaissance, looking for Task Force AFIRM, which by this time was well on its way to Espiritu Santo. At about noon the Henderson Field radar made contact with the Japanese group on a bearing of 107° T., and 102 planes, the largest American fighter group to be scrambled to that date in the South Pacific, took off in defense. At 1300, 14 of our fighters met the enemy 23 miles southwest

⁷² The *Preble* and the *Breese* had developed machinery trouble which reduced their speed somewhat.

of Cape Esperance. The fight that followed was characterized by excellent fighter direction, and by an enemy attempt to give a "trap" radio fix to lure our planes.⁷³ About 75 percent of our fighters eventually met the enemy, and succeeded in shooting down 17 of them, eight at the point of original contact. We lost five planes and three pilots.

This last and heaviest of the bombardments may have had considerable adverse effect on the morale of the defending Japanese troops, but its main material results were not immediately noticeable. CINCPAC later said: "A large-scale bombardment for only harassing purposes with expenditure of nearly 10,000 rounds of ammunition is not believed justified by the results obtained." He added that "all ships were subjected to the hazard of enemy MTB and SS attacks with no prospect of equal opportunity to damage the enemy."

The mine-laying, however, was believed to have been eminently successful, although exactly how many enemy ships were sunk in the minefield during later supplying missions and the battles of Kula Gulf will never be known. In this connection, CINCPAC suggested that "a bombardment on a minor scale to cover the mine-laying would have been worthwhile."

The five missions had nevertheless helped to pave the way for the final attacks on the enemy's mid-Solomons bases. Many planes had been destroyed on the ground, and heavy losses had been inflicted on Japanese personnel and on supplies, notably ammunition and fuel. The extent to which these factors facilitated later landings cannot be calculated exactly, but it must have been considerable.

⁷³ Our fighters ignored the trap because no authenticator was used.

APPENDIX I

SYMBOLS OF U. S. NAVY SHIPS

AB	Crane ship.	CAZ	Auxiliary unallocated as to type (conversion).
AD	Destroyer tender.	CB	Large cruiser.
AE	Ammunition ship.	CL	Light cruiser.
AF	Provision store ship.	CM	Mine layer.
AG	Miscellaneous auxiliary.	CMc	Coastal mine layer.
AGC	Combined operations communications headquarters ship.	CV	Aircraft carrier.
AGP	Motor torpedo boat tender.	CVB	Large aircraft carrier.
AGS	Surveying ship.	CVE	Aircraft carrier escort.
AH	Hospital ship.	CVL	Small aircraft carrier.
AK	Cargo vessel.	DD	Destroyer.
AKA	Cargo vessel, attack.	DE	Destroyer escort.
AKN	Net cargo ship.	DM	Light minelayer (high speed).
AKS	General stores issue ship.	DMS	Minesweeper (high speed).
AKV	Aircraft supply ship.	IX	Unclassified.
AM	Large minesweeper.	LCC	Landing craft, control.
AMb	Base minesweeper	LCI(L)	Landing craft, infantry (large).
AMc	Coastal minesweeper	LCM(2)	45' landing craft, mechanized, Mk. II.
AN	Net layer.	LCM(3)	50' landing craft, mechanized, Mk. III.
AO	Oiler.	LCM(6)	56' landing craft, mechanized, Mk. VI.
AOG	Gasoline tanker.	LCP(L)	36' landing craft, personnel (large).
AP	Transport.	LCP(R)	36' landing craft, personnel (with ramp).
APA	Transport, attack.	LCP(N)	Landing craft, personnel (nested).
APc	Coastal transport.	LCR(L)	Landing craft, rubber (large).
APD	Troop transport (high speed).	LCR(S)	Landing craft, rubber (small).
APH	Transport for wounded.	LCS(S)	Landing craft, support (small).
APL	Hotel barge (barracks ship).	LCT(5)	Landing craft, tank, Mk. V.
APM	Mechanized artillery transport.	LCT(6)	Landing craft, tank, Mk. VI.
APS	Auxiliary cargo submarine.	LCV	Landing craft, vehicle.
APV	Aircraft transport.	LCVP	Landing craft, vehicle and personnel.
AR	Repair ship.	LSD	Landing ship, dock.
ARB	Repair ship, battle damage.	LSM	Landing ship, medium.
ARD	Floating drydock.	LST	Landing ship, tank.
ARG	Internal combustion engine tender.	LVT(1)	Landing vehicle, tracked (unarmored).
ARH	Heavy hull repair ship.	LVT(2)	Landing vehicle, tracked (unarmored).
ARL	Repair ship, landing craft.	LVT(3)	Landing vehicle, tracked (unarmored).
ARS	Salvage vessel.	LVT(4)	Landing vehicle, tracked (unarmored).
ARV	Aircraft engine overhaul and structural repair ship.	LVT(A1)	Landing vehicle, tracked (armored).
AS	Submarine tender.	LVT(A2)	Landing vehicle, tracked (armored).
ASR	Submarine rescue vessel.	LVT(A3)	Landing vehicle, tracked (armored).
AT	Oceangoing tug.	PC	173' submarine chaser.
ATR	Rescue tug.		
AV	Seaplane tender (large).		
AVC	Catapult lighter.		
AVD	Seaplane tender (converted DD).		
AVP	Seaplane tender (small).		
AW	Water distilling and storage ship.		
AY	Auxiliary tender, small.		
BB	Battleship.		
CA	Heavy cruiser.		

SYMBOLS OF U. S. NAVY SHIPS—Continued

PCE	180' patrol craft escort vessel.	YFD	Floating drydock.
PCE(R)	180' patrol craft escort vessel, rescue.	YFT	Torpedo transportation lighter.
PCS	136' submarine chaser.	YG	Garbage lighter.
PE	Eagle boat.	YHB	Ambulance boat.
PF	Frigate.	YHB	Houseboat.
PG	Gunboat.	YHT	Heating scow.
PGM	Motor gunboat.	YMS	Motor minesweeper.
PR	River gunboat.	YMT	Motor tug.
PT	Motor torpedo boat.	YN	Net tender.
PY	Yacht.	YNg	Gate vessel.
PYc	Coastal yacht.	YNT	Net tender (tug class).
		YO	Fuel oil barge.
SC	110' submarine chaser.	YOG	Gasoline barge.
SS	Submarine.	YOS	Oil storage barge.
		YP	District patrol vessel.
YA	Ash lighter.	YPK	Pontoon stowage barge.
YAG	District auxiliary, miscellaneous.	YR	Floating workshop.
YC	Open lighter.	YRD(H)	Floating workshop, drydock (hull).
YCF	Car float.	YRD(M)	Floating workshop, drydock (ma- chinery).
YCK	Open cargo lighter.	YS	Stevadore barge.
YCV	Aircraft transportation lighter	YSD	Seaplane wrecking derrick.
YDG	Degaussing vessel.	YSP	Salvage pontoon.
YDT	Diving tender.	YSR	Sludge removal barge.
YF	Covered lighter; range tender; pro- vision store lighter.	YT	Harbor tug.
YFB	Ferryboat and launch.	YTT	Torpedo testing barge.
		YW	Water barge.

DESIGNATIONS OF U. S. NAVAL AIRCRAFT

Class of airplane	Model designation		Manufacturer	U. S. name
	Navy	Army		
Fighter, 2-eng.	F7F		Grumman	
Fighter, 1-eng.	XF5U		Chance-Vought	
	F2A		Brewster	Buffalo
	F3A		Brewster	Corsair
	F4U		Chance-Vought	Corsair
	FM		Eastern, Linden	Wildcat
	FG		Goodyear	Corsair
	F2G-1		Goodyear	Corsair
	F4F		Grumman	Wildcat
	F6F		Grumman	Hellcat
	FR		Ryan	
	XF8B		Boeing, Seattle	
	XF14C		Curtiss, Buffalo	
	XFD		McDonnell	
Scout Bomber, 1-eng. . .	SB2A	A-34	Brewster	Bermuda
	SBW	A-25	Canadian Car & Foundry	Helldiver
	SBC	77-A	Curtiss, Col.	Helldiver
	SB2C	A-25	Curtiss, Col.	Helldiver
	BTC		Curtiss, Col.	
	SBD	A-24	Douglas, E. S.	Dauntless
	BDT		Douglas, E. S.	
	SBF	A-25	Fairchild, Mont.	Helldiver
	BTM		Martin, Balto	
	SBN		N. A. F.	
	SB2U		Vought-Sikorsky	Vindicator
Torpedo Bomber, 1-eng.	TBY		Consolidated-Allentown	
	TBD		Douglas, E. S.	Devastator
	TB2D		Douglas, E. S.	
	TBM		Eastern, Trenton	Avenger
	TBF		Grumman	Avenger
Patrol Bomber, boat, 4-eng.	PB2Y		Consol., S. D.	Coronado
Patrol Bomber, boat, 2-eng.	PB2P	OA-10	Boeing, Vanc.	Catalina
	PBY-5, 5A	OA-10	Consol., S. D., N. O.	Catalina
	P4Y		Consol., N. O.	
	PBM		Martin, Balto	Mariner
	PBN	OA-10	N. A. F.	Catalina
	XPBB		Boeing, Seattle	Sea Ranger
	CANSO "A"	OA-10B	Vickers	
Bomber, land, 4-eng. . .	PB4Y	B-24	Consol., S. D.	Liberator
Bomber, land, 2-eng. . .	PBO	AT-18 (A-29)	Lockheed	Hudson
	PBJ	B-25	N. American, K. C.	Mitchell
	PV	B-34	Vega	Ventura
	XP2V		Vega	
Observation Scout, 1-eng.	OY-1	L-5 (O-62)	Consol., Wayne	Sentinel
	SOC		Curtiss, Col.	Scagull
	SO3C		Curtiss, Col.	Scamew
	SC		Curtiss, Col.	
	S2E-1		Edo, L. I. C.	
	OS2N		N. A. F.	Kingfisher
	OS2U		Vought-Sikorsky	Kingfisher
Utility, 2-eng.	JRB	C-45	Beech	Expeditor
	JRC	C-78 (AT-17)	Cessna	Bobcat
	BD	A-20 (P-70)	Douglas, S. M.	Havoc

DESIGNATIONS OF U. S. NAVAL AIRCRAFT—Continued

Class of airplane	Model designation		Manufacturer	U. S. name	
	Navy	Army			
Utility, 2-eng	JRF	OA-9	Grumman	Goose	
	J4F	OA-14	Grumman	Widgeon	
	JM-1	B-26	Martin, Omaha	Marauder	
Utility, 1-eng	J2F	OA-12	Columbia, V. S.	Duck	
	GB	C-43	Beech	Traveler	
Transport, 1-eng	GK	UC-61	Fairchild, Hager	Forwarder	
	GH		Howard	Nightingale	
	AE(HE)	L-4	Piper	Grasshopper	
Transport, 4-eng. land	RY	C-87	Consolidated	Liberator	
	R5D	C-54	Douglas, Chicago	Skymaster	
Transport, 2-eng. land	RB	C-93	Budd		
	R5C	C-46	Curtiss, Buffalo	Commando	
	R3D		Douglas, L. B.		
Transport, 4-eng. Sea	R4D-1, 5	C-47, 47A	Douglas, L. B.	Skytrain	
	R4D-2, 4	C-49, 49A	Douglas, S. M.	Skytrooper	
	R4D-3	C-53	Douglas, S. M.	Skytrooper	
	R50	C-56, 60	Lockheed	Lodestar	
	PB2Y-3R		Consol., S. D.		
	JRM (XPB2M-1R)		Martin, Balto	Mars	
	JR2S-2		Vought-Sikorsky	Excalibur	
	PBM-3R		Martin, Balto		
	N3N		N. A. F.		
	Training, 1-eng. primary	NE	L-4 (O-59)	Piper	Grasshopper
NR		PT-21	Ryan	Recruit	
NP		PT-21	Spartan		
N2S		PT-13, 17, 18, 27	Stearman, Wichita (Boeing)	Caydet	
N2T			Timm	Tutor	
XN5N			N. A. F.		
XNL			Langley, Aviation Corporation		
Training, 2-eng. advanced		SNB-1	AT-11	Beech	Kansan
		SNB-2	AT-7	Beech	Navigator
Training, 1-eng. advanced		SNV	BT-13	Consol., Downey	Valiant
	SNC		Curtiss, Col.	Falcon	
Special Purpose, 2-eng	NH		Howard		
	SNJ	AT-6	N. American, Dal	Texan	
	TDR		Am. Aviation		
	TD3R		Am. Aviation		
	TD2R		Brunswick-Balke-Collender		
	TD3R				
	TD2R		Interstate Aviation		
	TD3R				
	TDN		N. A. F.		
	Special Purpose, 1-eng	TDN		Brunswick-Balke-Collender	
Helicopter, 1-eng	TDC	PQ-8	Culver		
	TD2C	PQ-14	Culver		
	TDR		Interstate Aviation		
	TDD	OQ-2A	Radio Plane Co.		
	HNS-1	R-4B	Sikorsky		
	HO2S-1	R-5	Sikorsky		
	HOS-1	R-6	Nash-Kelvinator		
	XHOS-1	XR-6	Sikorsky		

NAVY AIRCRAFT

APPENDIX II

List of published Combat Narratives

- THE JAVA SEA CAMPAIGN, January-February 1942 (out of print).
EARLY RAIDS IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN, 1 February-10 March 1942.
THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA, 4-8 May 1942.
THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY, 3-6 June 1942.
THE LANDING IN THE SOLOMONS, 7-8 August 1942.
THE BATTLE OF SAVO ISLAND, 9 August 1942.
THE BATTLE OF THE EASTERN SOLOMONS, 23-25 August 1942.
BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE, 11 October 1942.
BATTLE OF SANTA CRUZ ISLANDS, 26 October 1942.
THE LANDINGS IN NORTH AFRICA, November 1942.
BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL, 11-15 November 1942.
MISCELLANEOUS ACTIONS IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC, 8 August 1942-22 January 1943 (out of print).
BATTLE OF TASSAFARONGA, 30 November 1942.
JAPANESE EVACUATION OF GUADALCANAL, 29 January-8 February 1943 (including loss of the *Chicago*).