



**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

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DISASTER AT SAVO ISLAND, 1942

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

Disaster at Savo Island, 1942

by

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ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the naval battle of Savo Island from a historical perspective and extracts the lessons learned from a strategic, operational and tactical perspective. The Battle of Savo Island occurred early in the morning on 9 August in 1942 when the Japanese 8th Fleet surprised the Allied Task Force shortly after the landing at Guadalcanal. In approximately 37 minutes, the Japanese Navy destroyed four heavy cruisers and killed more than 1000 American and Australian sailors handing the U.S. Navy the worst defeat in its history. There were many reasons for this debacle, however the one common thread through the entire disaster was the poorly framed command and control relationships. This article examines the command and control breakdowns along with the various contributing causes such as personality conflicts between various commanders of the allied force, communication and equipment shortfalls, common prejudices, and the superior night fighting ability of the Japanese force that caused this decisive defeat.

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DISASTER AT SAVO ISLAND, 1942

THE BATTLE OF SAVO ISLAND

The Battle of Savo Island occurred early in the morning on 9 August in 1942 when the Japanese 8th Fleet surprised the Allied Task Force shortly after the landing at Guadalcanal. In approximately 37 minutes, the Japanese Navy destroyed four Allied heavy cruisers and killed more than 1000 American and Australian sailors, handing the U.S. Navy the worst defeat in its history. There were many strategic, operational and tactical reasons for this debacle, however the one common thread through the entire disaster was the poorly framed command and control relationships. This article examines the command and control breakdowns along with the various contributing causes such as personality conflicts between various commanders of the allied force, communication and equipment shortfalls, common prejudices, and the superior night fighting ability of the Japanese force.

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

Guadalcanal was the first American offensive of the War in the Pacific after the horrific naval defeat at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The Allies needed to gain a foothold in the Pacific to start their move toward Japan. Admiral Ernst J. King's vision in 1941, after assuming his position as Commander in Chief, United States Fleet (COMINCH), was

to protect the line of communications with Australia but, in so doing, set up "strong points" from which a step-by-step general advance can be made through the New Hebrides, Solomons, and the Bismarck Archipelago. It is to be expected that such a step-by-step general advance will draw the Japanese forces to oppose it, thus relieving pressure in other parts of the Pacific—and that the operation will of itself be good cover for the communications with Australia.¹

With the United States committed to a "Europe first" strategy, the Western Pacific was relegated to an economy of force theater. In early 1942, after the win at the Battle of Coral Sea and the decisive victory at Midway, General MacArthur made the overly optimistic claim that given two carriers and an amphibious force he could take Rabaul and hurl the Japanese back 700 miles. This announcement caught receptive ears in Washington. General Marshall agreed to the concept if the Navy would support it. With the Pacific divided into distinct theaters commanded by MacArthur and Nimitz, the Navy was not about to willingly give an Army general control over two of their carriers. The rhetoric that followed reached meteoric proportions between the Navy and Army when Admiral King threatened to conduct attacks in the Solomons with or without Army support while General MacArthur claimed the Navy was attempting to

place the Army in a "subsidiary role of providing occupation forces at the disposal of the Navy under the command of Navy or (worse yet) Marine Corps officers."²

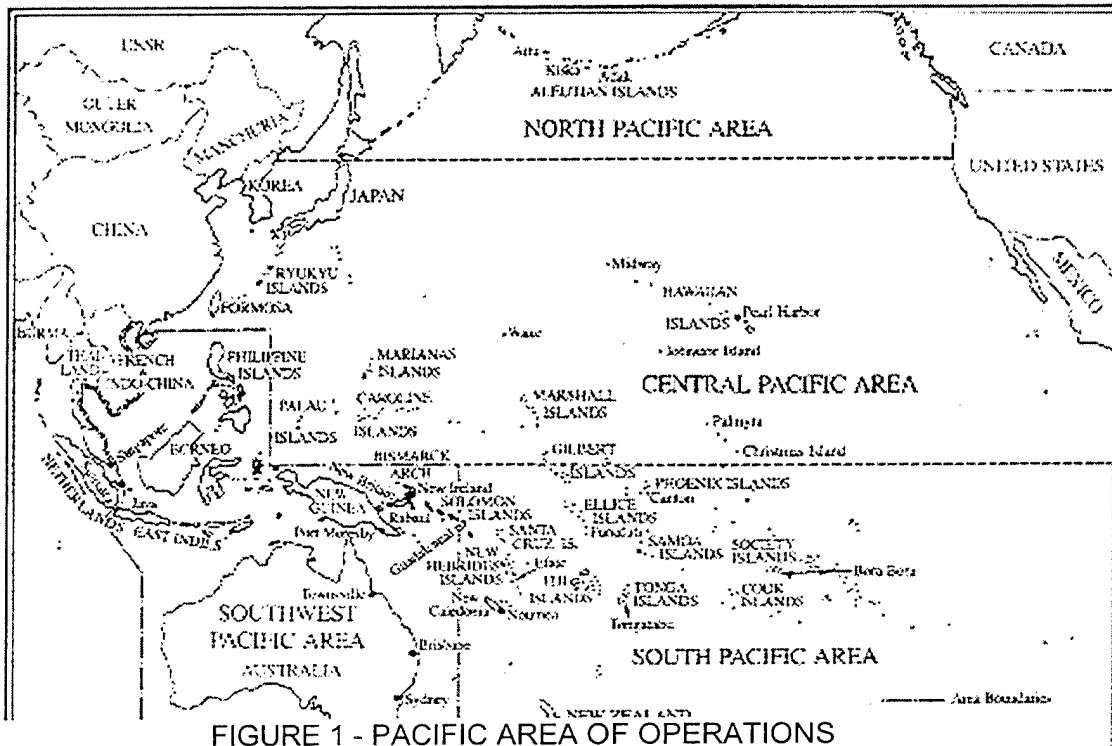


FIGURE 1 - PACIFIC AREA OF OPERATIONS

On 1 July 1942, only 38 days before boots landed on Guadalcanal, Marshall proposed a plan that both MacArthur and King supported. The overall campaign was divided into three parts. Task one was the capture of the Santa Cruz Islands and Tulagi under the command of Nimitz by 1 August. In order to conduct this operation, MacArthur ceded 1 degree of longitude along the eastern border of his area, placing the southern Solomons in Nimitz' South Pacific area. Task two required the capturing of Lae, Salamaua, and the northeast coast of New Guinea, while task three called for an attack on Rabaul. MacArthur would command for tasks two and three. This plan, code named Pestilence, was formally adopted on 2 July 1942.

While the plan was being finalized, intelligence picked up the landing of Japanese forces on Guadalcanal to build an airfield. The intent of the Allied plan all along was to find a place to put an airfield. With the Japanese accommodating on Guadalcanal, the plan changed on 5 July. King and Nimitz deleted the Santa Cruz Islands from task one and added Guadalcanal. The code name for the new target was "Cactus." The importance of this operation now doubled; the seizure of this airfield provided the needed Allied foothold and at the same time deprived the

Japanese of another offensive platform. Seizing the Guadalcanal airfield before it became fully operational necessitated an aggressive timeline.



FIGURE 2 - THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

On the Japanese side, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's (commander in chief of the Combined Fleet) initial objective was to eliminate the Pacific Fleet and capture Hawaii³, but the failure to destroy Pearl Harbor and defeats at the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway had all but killed that dream. The Japanese, however, maintained as their strategic objective "bold military action followed by skillful diplomacy."⁴ They felt that by securing the Solomon Islands and positioning themselves to cut off Australia, they would force the Allies to the bargaining table. With diplomacy working in the east, the Japanese could turn their attention toward development of the southern resource area and the ongoing war in China.

Japan did not contemplate the annexation of Australia or New Zealand, but the physical isolation of those nations from the rest of the Allied world would be useful in the shaping of an eventual peace settlement that would leave Japan in control of the mineral rich Solomons, New Guinea, and the New Hebrides.⁵

KEY FIGURES/COMPOSITION/DISPOSITION OF ALLIED/JAPANESE FORCES

An understanding of the composition and disposition of the Allied and Japanese forces leading up to the battle on 9 August 1942 is necessary to appreciate the great cunning and courage demonstrated by the Japanese striking force. It also sets the stage and depicts the poor tactical and operational disposition of Allied forces prior to the attack.

JAPANESE COMPOSITION/DISPOSITION OF FORCES

The Japanese Striking force was commanded by Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, a greatly respected leader in the Japanese Navy. He was characterized as tactically competent, an inspirational leader, courageous, and aggressive. Although aggressive, he was not careless. At the start of the war, he was second in command to Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, leader of the Pearl Harbor Strike Force. Mikawa continued as a subordinate of Nagumo through Midway.

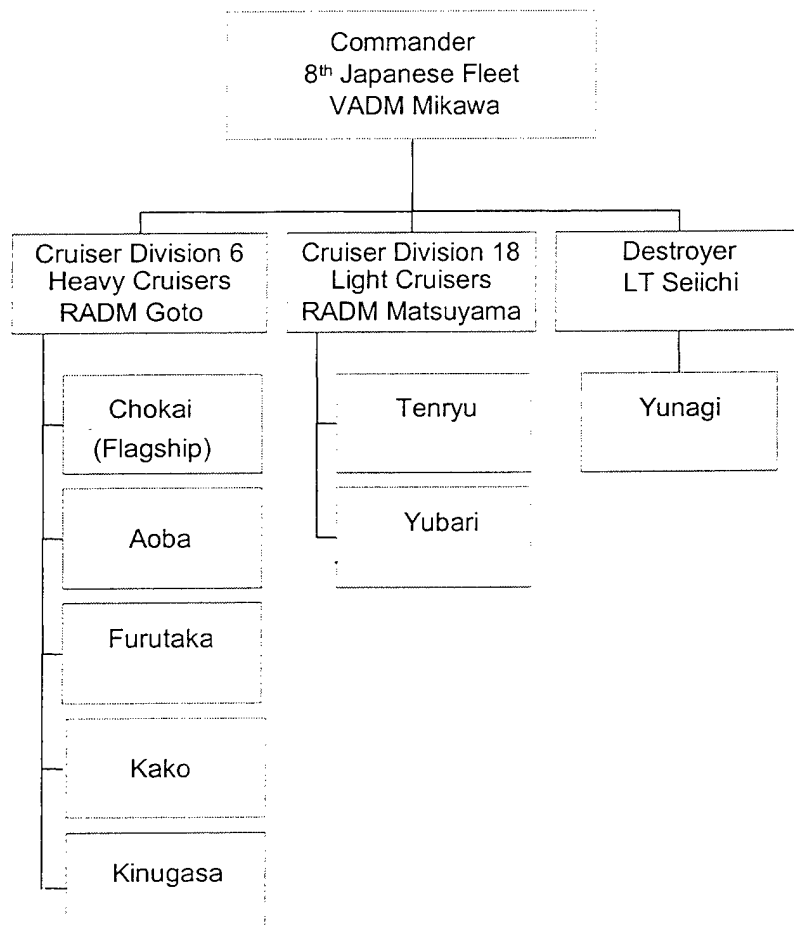


TABLE 1 - 8TH JAPANESE FLEET

After the devastating loss at Midway, Mikawa was given command of the new Japanese 8th Fleet on 12 July 1942, to be headquartered in Rabaul, New Britain. He was assigned the heavy cruiser *Chokai* as his flagship. Under his command were two Cruiser Divisions; Cruiser Division 6 commanded by Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto and Cruiser Division 18, commanded by Rear Admiral Mitsuhashi Matsuyama. Cruiser Division 6 consisted of four heavy cruisers; *Aoba*, *Furutaka*, *Kako*, and *Kinugasa*. Cruiser Division 18 consisted of the light cruisers *Tenryu* and *Yubari*. The Fleet was also accompanied by the destroyer, *Yunagi*, commanded by LT. (sg) Okada Seiichi. Table one provides an overview of the command structure.

During the night of 8 August, the Japanese Striking Force moved in a column formation with *Chokai* in the lead, followed by *Aoba*, *Kinugasa*, *Furutaka*, and *Kako* of Cruiser Division 6. They were followed by the two light cruisers, *Tenryu* and *Yubari*, from Cruiser Division 18. Providing rear security for the force was the destroyer, *Yunagi* (See Figures 3 and 4). Being a newly formed unit, they went into this battle with little task force training. Mikawa purposely kept the formation simple to reduce the confusion when the battle started.

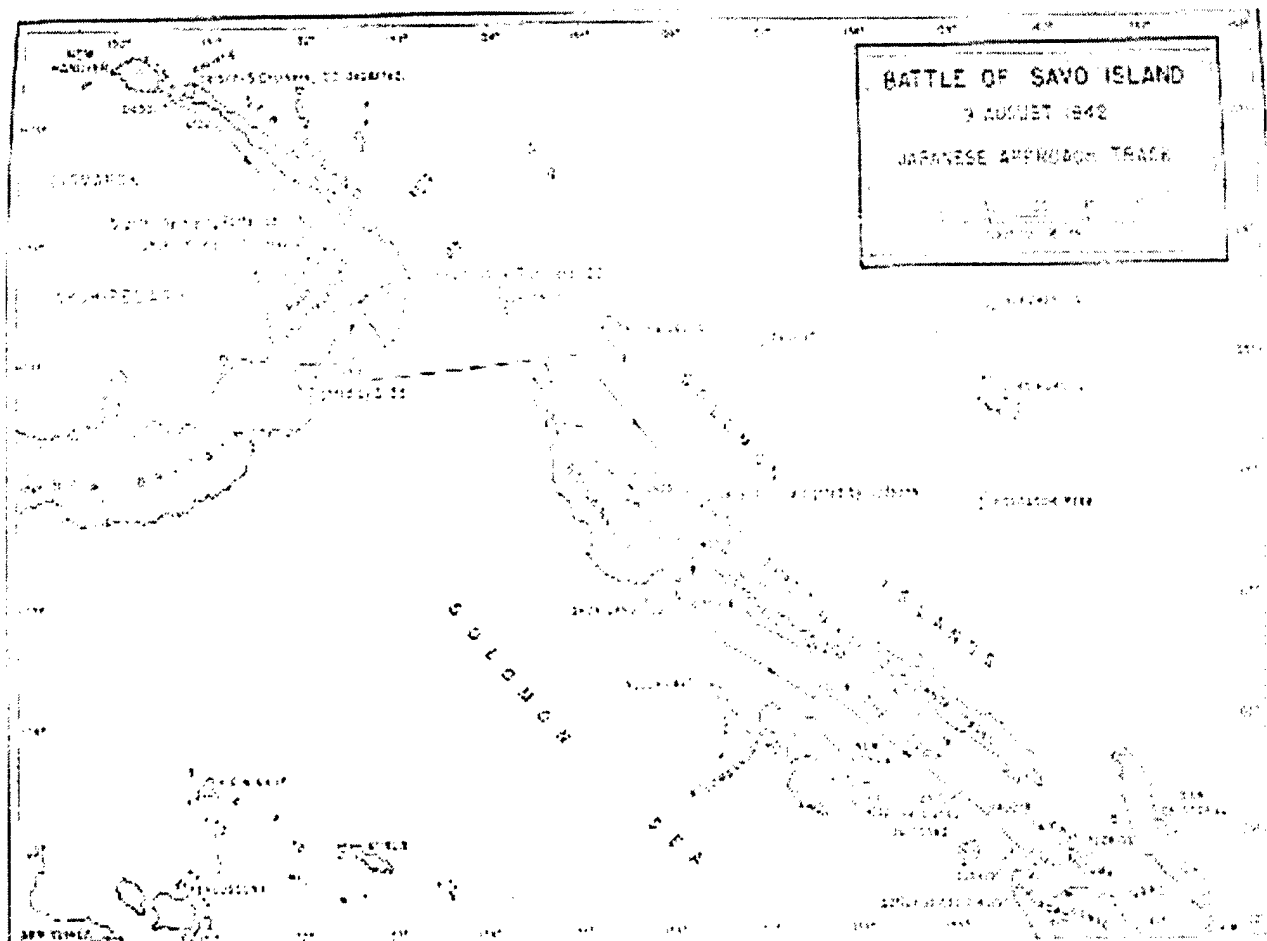


FIGURE 3 - ADMIRAL MIKAWA'S PATH TOWARDS SAVO ISLAND

ALLIED COMPOSITION/DISPOSTION OF FORCES

On 9 March 1942, the newly formed Joint Chiefs of Staff, consisting of General George C. Marshall (Army Chief of Staff), Admiral Ernst J. King (Chief of Naval Operations), and General Henry H. Arnold (Chief of the Army Air Forces), divided the Pacific theater into two distinct commands. General Douglas MacArthur commanded the Southwest Pacific Area, which consisted of the Philippines, the South China Sea, the Gulf of Siam, most of the Netherlands East Indies, Australia, and the Solomons. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz commanded the rest of the Pacific Ocean, which he divided up into three distinct regions; the North Pacific Area, Central Pacific Area, and the South Pacific Area. Admiral Nimitz had direct command over the North and Central Pacific Areas. However, in the South Pacific Area, Nimitz was instructed by Admiral King to appoint a subordinate commander to run operations in that region. Nimitz nominated Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley who was subsequently approved by Admiral King.

The general organization and structure of Operation Watchtower was finalized with Nimitz's order to Ghormley on 9 July 1942 and Ghormley's subsequent Operation Plan 1-42, disseminated on 17 July. Both plans placed Admiral Ghormley in operational control over all the forces in the operation. Ghormley's order placed the entire Expeditionary Force (Task Force 61) under the command of Vice Admiral Frank J. Fletcher. Although Admiral Fletcher was the senior Carrier Group Commander, the plan called for Rear Admiral Noyes to command the Carriers as Air Support Force (Task Force 61.1) leaving Fletcher free to focus on the overall operation as the Officer in Tactical Command (OTC). Task Force 62, the subordinate Amphibious Force, was commanded by Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner. As CATF, Turner was responsible for putting the Marines ashore and off-loading their combat support and supplies. The Commander of the Landing Force was Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift, USMC. Royal Navy Rear Admiral V. A. C. Crutchley was second in command to Admiral Turner and responsible for providing the defensive screen around Guadalcanal.

Ghormley retained command of McCain's TF 63, all land-based aircraft in the South Pacific Force. Table 2 outlines the chain of command for Operation Watchtower.

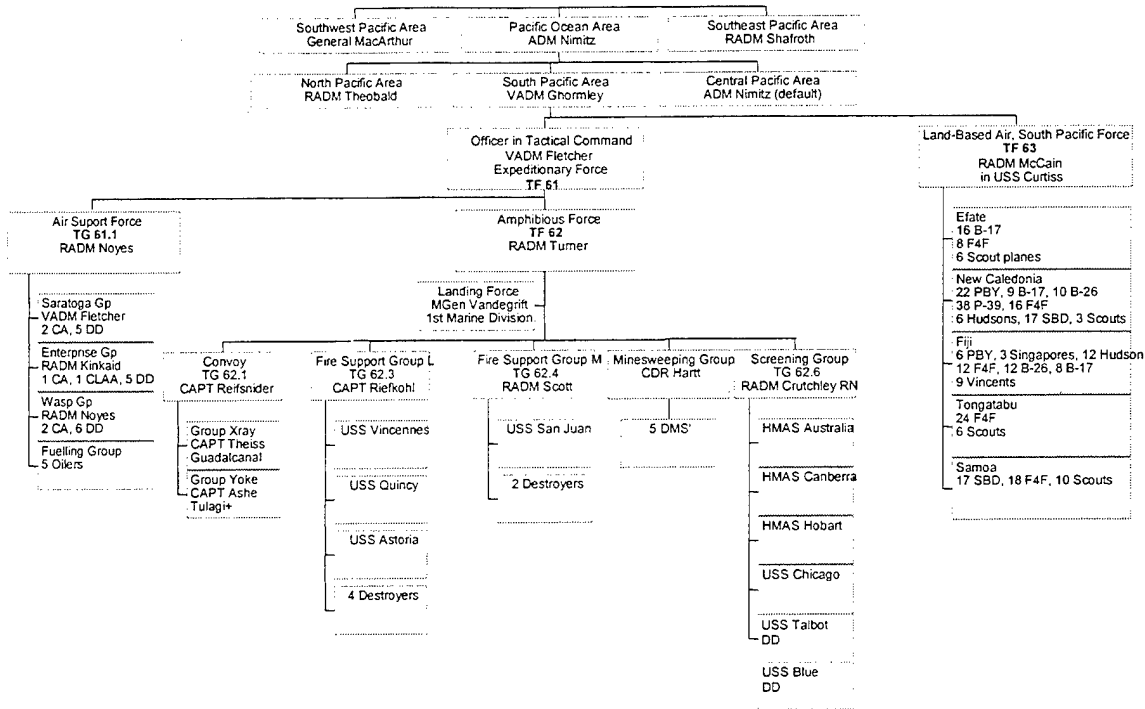


TABLE 2 – OPERATION WATCHTOWER

Admiral Crutchley's plan for protecting the amphibious forces, approved by Turner, called for dividing the force into four elements. The first element was two radar pickets, destroyers *USS Blue* and *USS Ralph Talbot*. The pickets were responsible for outer screening of the northern entrance into the area as they had the best radars in the task force. The second and third elements covered the inner entrances into the landing area which was divided by Savo Island. To cover both sides of the Island, Crutchley divided the ships of the combined U.S.-Australia screening and fire support force into two groups. The Southern Group commanded by himself, consisted of the destroyers *USS Bagley* and *USS Patterson*, and the heavy cruisers, *HMAS Australia* (Crutchley's flagship), *HMAS Canberra*, and *USS Chicago*. To the north of Savo Island was the Northern Group commanded by Captain Frederick L. Riefkohl. In addition to his own *USS Vincennes*, Riefkohl had the heavy cruisers *USS Quincy* and *USS Astoria*. In company with the cruisers of the Northern Group were the destroyers *USS Helmand* *USS Wilson*. The fourth element was Task Force 62.4, located farther to the east, commanded by Rear Admiral Norman Scott. His responsibility was to guard the transport ships at Tulagi. He had the light cruisers *USS San Juan* and *HMAS Hobart*, and the destroyers *USS Monssen* and *USS Buchanan*. Table 3 outlines the task organization for security on the night of 8-9 August 1942. Figure 4 depicts the disposition of the task force as Mikawa began his attack into the sound at Guadalcanal.

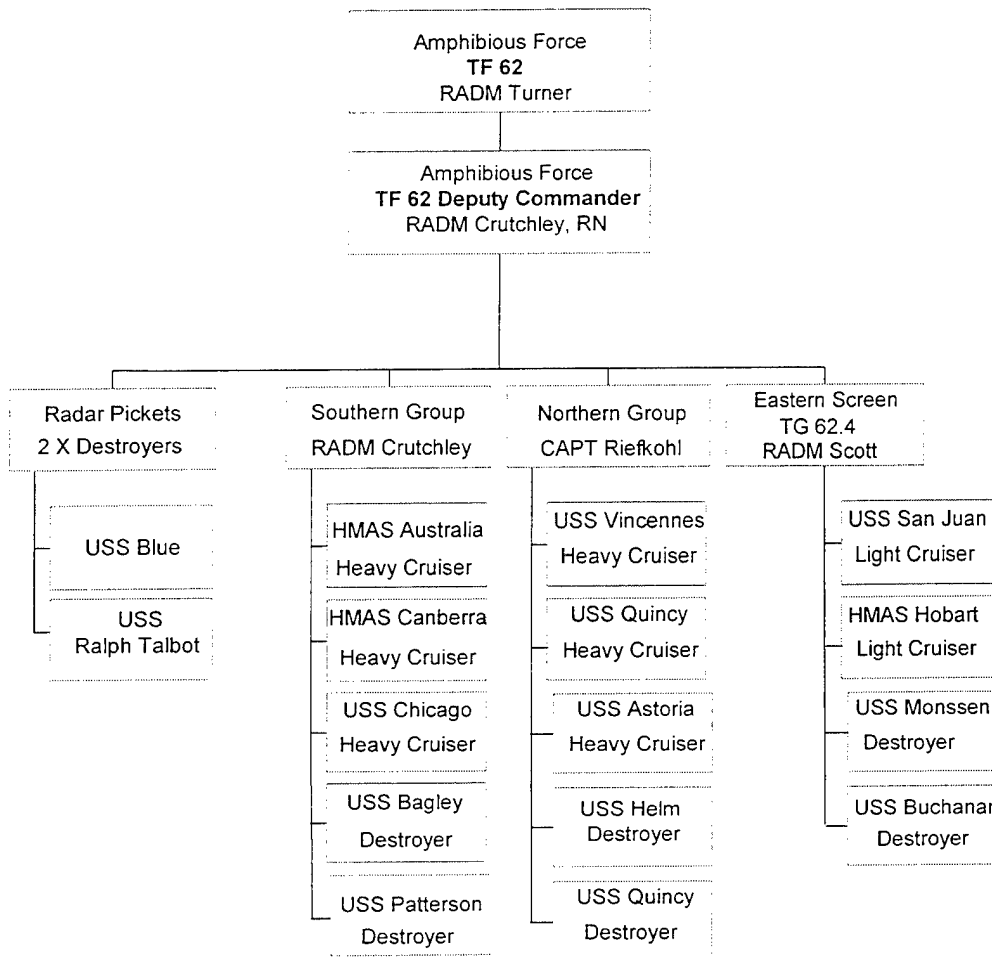


TABLE 3 – SECURITY FOR GUADALCANAL, 8-9 AUGUST 1942

THE BATTLE

Mikawa's approach into the "slot" of Savo Island was a feat of skillful seamanship augmented by luck. He had been sighted by submarines and different aerial reconnaissance missions on 8 August, all of which combined to give Admiral Turner an untimely and incomplete picture of Mikawa's intentions. Mikawa was aided by weather, as overcast skies with occasional rain squalls hid his task force, and he timed his attack to close on the Allied Forces in the dark. Through the day of 8 August, he sent numerous organic reconnaissance aircraft (float planes) to compile a picture of the Guadalcanal and Tulagi area. By the time of the attack, he had nearly perfect intelligence on the disposition of the Allied Force. Most importantly, he knew that the security forces were split into separate task forces divided by Savo Island. Though Mikawa was inferior in numbers, his plan created an opportunity to engage and destroy the unalerted Allied Force piecemeal.

Mikawa's battle plan was drawn up and signaled to his strike force at 1642, 8 August. The plan called for his task force to sweep to the south side of Savo Island and torpedo the Allied ships off Guadalcanal. They were then to turn east and north to destroy the Tulagi landing force with torpedoes and gunfire. After the attack, the Japanese Force was to proceed around the north side of Savo Island and depart the area as soon as possible. Mikawa planned to order the attack at 0130 on 9 August 1942. The plan allowed enough time to conduct the attack and to get 120 miles away under the cover of darkness before daylight would permit counter-attack by aircraft from the U.S. carrier groups. Mikawa did not know the exact location of the carriers, but assumed they were about 100 miles to the south of Guadalcanal. His battle plan was executed nearly to perfection.

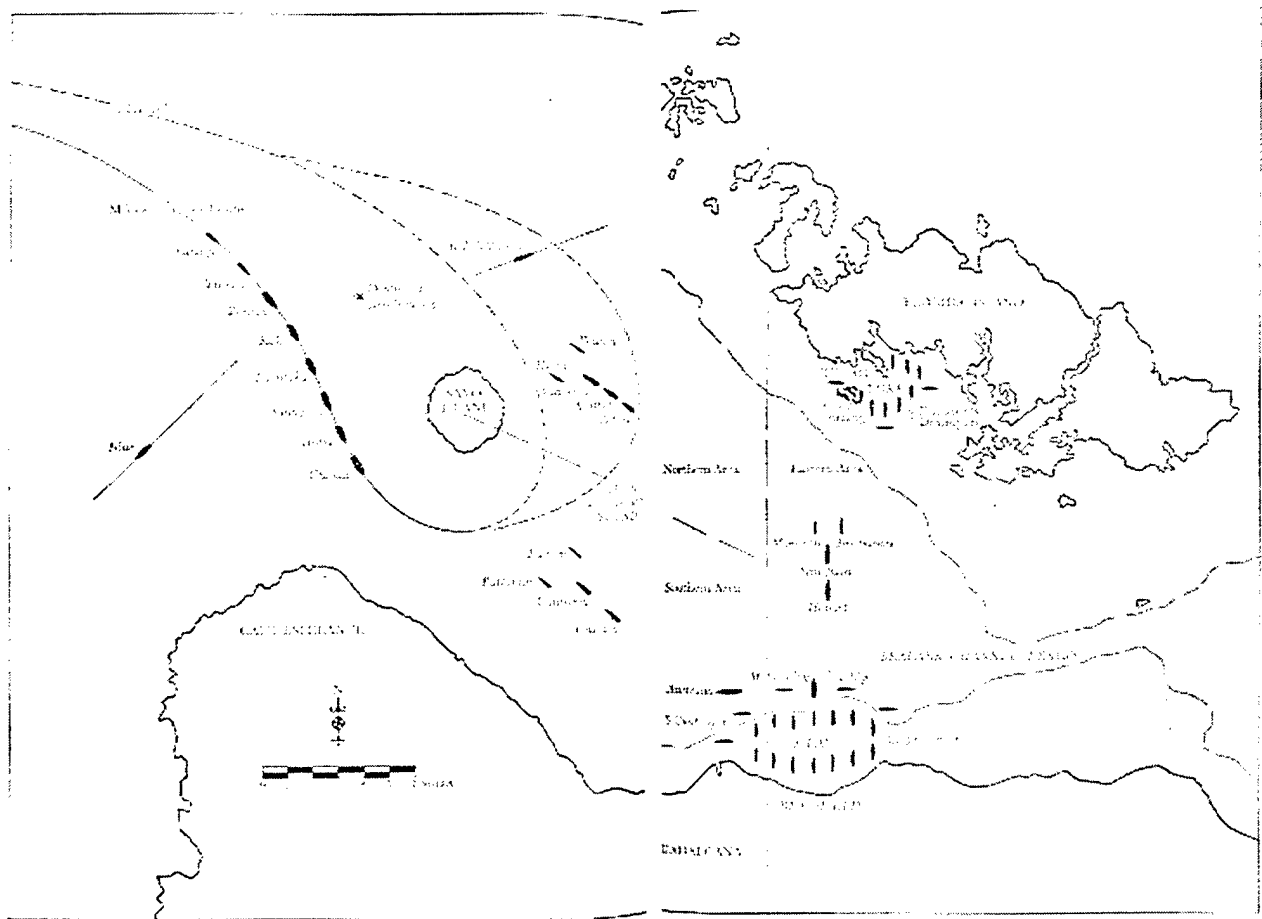


FIGURE 4 - THE BATTLE OF SAVO ISLAND

The weather was perfect for the attacking force. Cloud cover and intermittent thunderstorms created a screen between the Northern and Southern forces and thus precluded mutual support.

At 1800 Mikawa received confirmation from his reconnaissance planes that all was well. At 1840 he signaled "Let us attack with certain victory in the traditional night attack of the Imperial Navy. May each one calmly do his utmost!"⁶

Vice Admiral Fletcher, already suffering the strain of Midway and Coral Sea, had a tough fight on 8 August. While the initial amphibious landings at Guadalcanal and Tulagi went well, his carriers lost twenty-one aircraft defending the Expeditionary Force against three Japanese air raids – air raids which could have distracted him from the sketchy and uncorrelated intelligence reports of Mikawa's approaching 8th Fleet. These air raids disrupted the off-loading of General Vandegrift's supplies and support equipment, and left Fletcher focused on attack by Japanese bombers and torpedo planes. At 1807, while Mikawa was approaching, Fletcher signaled Ghormley requesting permission to withdrawal his carriers due to aircraft losses and low fuel state. While awaiting Ghormley's reply, Fletcher repositioned the carriers, opening Savo Island.

Although Fletcher's message was not meant for Admiral Turner, he received a copy of it and was immediately furious. The departure of the carrier group would deprive him of air cover and force the withdrawal of his amphibious force ships. Although land based aircraft were available from Admiral McCain's task force, their distant bases and the obsolete, inadequate types of aircraft virtually mooted their role in defending against Japanese air raids. Turner's forced departure placed the Marines in a precarious position; they lost both their transport ships and the warships that were providing them fire support. At 2042, Turner called a meeting with Admiral Crutchley and Major General Vandegrift. The meeting took place at 2315. The items of discussion at that meeting were of far less importance than the meetings very effect on the defending force. The meeting pulled Crutchley away from command of the defense force and, more importantly, took *HMAS Australia* from the Southern Force. This reduced the Southern Group's combat power by a third. On departure from his force, Crutchley put Captain Bode in charge of the entire Southern Group but somehow neglected to inform the force. Bode assumed that Crutchley would return shortly and did not reposition *USS Chicago* to reoptimize the screening disposition, did not assert his new authority, and went to bed without issuing night orders. Crutchley, having finished the late meeting with Turner, decided to keep *HMAS Australia* close to shore with the transport ships because of the danger of rejoining the

screening force at night, under poor weather conditions and without radio communications, which would risk a friendly fire situation or possible collision.

Meanwhile, Mikawa was heading towards Savo Island at 26 knots. At 2313, he launched two of his scout planes for a final look at the disposition of the Allied force. These scout planes were also responsible for dropping parachute flares at the proper time to illuminate the transports at Guadalcanal and Tulagi. These planes were spotted on radar and visually by a number of the allied ships, but were assumed to be friendly because they were flying with running lights. Not a single ship took action against the planes beyond a single message from *Ralph Talbot* to Admiral Turner's ship warning of the aircraft. The report, in any case, never got to Turner.

Mikawa headed toward his objective with his force in column formation. His flagship, *Chokai*, was in the lead. Because few of the ships had ever worked together before, they were spread approximately 1300 yards apart. At 2230, the "Battle Warning" was sounded and the Allied Southern Force was sighted moving along the southern side of Savo Island. The command "Prepare to Fire Torpedoes" was given at 0025 followed by "Battle Stations Alerted" at 0045. At 0054, the lookouts on Mikawa's ship spotted the picket ship *USS Blue* heading directly at them approximately 5 miles away. Just as Mikawa prepared to engage her, *Blue* made a 180 degree turn and headed away from the Japanese task force. With *Ralph Talbot* the other screening ship, approximately 10 miles to his north, Mikawa had slipped between the pickets undetected. Neither of the picket ships detected Mikawa's task force.

At 0133, as his force moved around the southern side of Savo Island, Mikawa gave the order "All Ships Attack!" Three minutes later his scouts picked up the destroyers *Bagley* and *Patterson* leading the Southern Force followed shortly by the cruisers, *Canberra* and *Chicago*. At 0136, Mikawa ordered "Independent Firing." The Southern Force was then brought under torpedo attack. *USS Patterson* was the first to sight the attacking force and announced "WARNING—WARNING: STRANGE SHIPS ENTERING HARBOR!" Shortly after *Patterson's* warning, Mikawa's scout planes dropped their flares, illuminating not only the transports at Guadalcanal, but *Chicago* and *Canberra* as well. *Canberra* was the first ship hit and ultimately received two torpedo hits and a total of 24 gun hits. Captain Getting of the *Canberra* was killed. *Canberra* sank at 0800, 9 August. Both *Bagley* and *Patterson* escaped with minor damage while Mikawa's force focused on *Chicago*. *Chicago* took a torpedo and a gun hit with little damage, and was saved further hits when she saw the trail ship of Mikawa's force and went after it, sailing in the opposite direction of the attacking force. *Chicago* then lost sight of the enemy ship and was left without an enemy to pursue. Significantly, Captain Bode never warned

the Northern Group that an attack was in progress. In 6 minutes, Mikawa had severely damaged the Allied Southern Group and was turning around Savo Island headed toward the unalerted Northern Group.

Mikawa's luck only got better. At 0144, he made a rapid course change with his leading three cruisers, *Aoba*, *Kako*, and *Kinugasa*. The maneuver was missed by the last three, *Yubari*, *Tenryu*, and *Furutaka*, but this inadvertent split created two separate attacking divisions. Although this created a command and control problem for Mikawa, it put the Northern Force between two attacking forces. For the Japanese, it was like shooting ducks in a pond. The Northern Force was caught completely by surprise and pounded by Mikawa's force. The devastating fire brought to bear on the task force sank *Astoria*, *Vincennes*, and *Quincy*.

Extremely successful at his first pass around Savo Island, Mikawa contemplated another. Fortunately for the Allied Forces, Mikawa had a number of concerns. His force was divided, it would take him almost three hours to bring it back together, and daylight was not far away. Daylight meant that he was very susceptible to air attack and he still had no idea where the carrier group was located. Finally, his ships were out of torpedoes and a second attack using only guns would be much riskier. At 0220, Mikawa gave the order to retire up the slot.

Mikawa left 1,023 sailors killed and over 700 wounded in his wake. In addition, he sank four Allied heavy cruisers and severely damaged a number of destroyers. This defeat expedited the departure of Turner's Amphibious Task Force, leaving the under supplied Marines to fend for themselves on Guadalcanal.

ESSENCE OF THE DEBACLE

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Admiral Ghormely received the order to conduct the Guadalcanal invasion on 25 June 1942. He had a very limited and inexperienced staff – actually little more than a signal detachment. They had absolutely no expertise in amphibious operations. Messages from Washington took hours or days to reach them. His only intelligence consisted of coast watchers, high flying airplanes, and aerial photos. He had no major naval units under his command, had virtually no air power and controlled no carriers. By 7 August, he had 282 aircraft, but most were antiques or inadequate -- P-39's, P-400's, and F4F Wildcat fighters. All of these aircraft lacked the range to operate over the southern Solomons. This lack of aircraft would prevent him from gaining and maintaining air superiority. So from any perspective, it was nearly a miracle that an invasion of Guadalcanal's magnitude was executed at all.

The command and control situation was further complicated by the location of Admiral Ghormley's flagship, which was moored in Noumea. His distance from the fight prevented Ghormley from exercising any intelligent oversight of the operation. This required the delegation of the tactical fight to Admiral Fletcher, in his flagship *USS Saratoga*, about 150 miles south of Guadalcanal in support of the landings. Admiral Fletcher's number one concern was the security of the carriers, relegating the success of the landings to a secondary position. This organizational structure also created an extra layer for Admiral Turner to coordinate air support. He had to request air assets first through Admiral Fletcher, who would task Ghormley, who then sent a request to Admiral McCain. Admiral Turner reflected on this organization in the 1960's and came to the following conclusions:

At the top level, ... the major element of air reconnaissance in the SOPAC area was not under the operational control of the Commander Expeditionary force. Had TF 63 [the air reconnaissance force] been included in the Expeditionary Force, perhaps Jack [Fletcher] would have felt more like an Expeditionary Force commander and assumed a greater responsibility for sticking with the whole Force through to success. Unity of command increases the chances of victory. The shore-based aircraft under General MacArthur's command was a large percentage of the total reconnaissance aircraft searching the operational area. In WATCHTOWER, unity of operational command might have produced a greater feeling of responsibility on the part of the individual reconnaissance pilot to get his intelligence of enemy forces through to his top operational commanders promptly, as well as more direct communication channels.

The command and control problems first reared their head on 26 July. A very important meeting was held between Admirals Fletcher, Turner, McCain, Crutchley, and Major General Vandegrift off Koro Island in the Fijis. Admiral Ghormley was supposed to attend, but because of the distance, sent his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan. When the critical issue of how long the carrier group would provide support to the landing force came up, Fletcher stated that he would only support for two days. This was immediately challenged by Turner and Vandegrift, who believed that they needed five days. The discussion became intense, with Fletcher finally agreeing to stay for three days. The opportunity to resolve this critical issue was lost through Ghormley's absence. When this issue was relayed to him by his chief of staff, rather than injecting himself forcefully into the fray, Ghormley decided that McCain's planes from Espiritu Santo would provide air cover when the carrier group departed. Ghormley's failure to underscore Fletcher's task to fully support the amphibious assault force played a major role in Fletcher's failure to stand by in support of the landings, in distracting Turner and Crutchley from defending their force from surface attack, and in focusing Fletcher on the survival of his carriers at the expense of commanding the Expeditionary Force. In Ghormley's defense, he was given

strict orders from Nimitz which tied his hands on command of the expeditionary force and curtailed his authority:

The Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet would order Task Force Commanders to report to the Commander South Pacific Force for duty. The Commander South Pacific Force would direct the Task Force Commander to carry out his mission. The Commander South Pacific Force would not interfere in the Task Force Commander's mission unless circumstances, presumably not known to the Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet, indicated that specific measures were required to be performed by the Task Force Commander. The Commander South Pacific Force would then direct the Task Force Commanders to take such measures.⁸

This guidance, in essence, took operational command from Ghormley and placed it squarely with Fletcher. Ghormley might have gone back to Nimitz to request clarification of his guidance or, later, requested that the carriers remain longer. He chose to do neither. Nimitz's directive, in effect, made Admiral Ghormley the equivalent of a modern Sub-unified Commander and left Fletcher as the modern Commander Joint Task Force (CJTF). The organizational structure was detailed in Nimitz's order and subsequently spelled out in Ghormley's Operation Plan 1-42. This organization and command structure might have worked, had Fletcher abided by it or had Ghormley aggressively enforced it. Instead, Fletcher focused on the carriers of Task Group 61.1 and each subunit protected its own resources, leaving the Marines to fend for themselves on Guadalcanal. In retrospect, a formal CJTF could have linked staffs from all subordinate units, created a coherent chain of command, and clearly defined tasks and responsibilities.

Although the task organization assigned Admiral Fletcher as the overall tactical commander, his presence with the carriers must have played a key role in his narrow view of his responsibilities. Had Fletcher used a dedicated command and control ship, the outcome might have been different. Instead, Fletcher was singularly concerned with protecting the carriers, which he clearly recognized as vital theater or even national assets.

When Fletcher departed on the evening of 8 August he forfeited his command responsibilities for the operation, leaving Turner (as senior officer present) in tactical command. The command and control situation only got worse when Turner called a meeting late in the evening of the 8th. This caused an unfortunate chain of events that left the task force without a viable chain of command. The meeting left Captain Riefkohl in overall command of the defense force but Riefkohl did not realize it. Captain Bode, of *Chicago* went to bed thinking that Admiral Crutchley would return shortly and reassume command of the Southern Group. After the evening meeting, Admiral Turner had no idea of Crutchley's whereabouts. Instead of rejoining

the Southern Group, Crutchley decided to remain in the transport area until daylight and to make a bad situation worse, Crutchley told no one of his plan.

COMMAND CLIMATE

As the Officer in Tactical Command (OTC) of the operation, Admiral Fletcher was far from the vibrant, inspirational commander who soldiers and sailors rally around. His pessimistic attitude poisoned the command atmosphere for the entire operation. At the other end of the spectrum were two commanders who exemplified technical competence and support to the mission at hand. Admiral Turner, Commander of the Amphibious Force, was a tough, competent sailor whose central goal was to accomplish his mission. Major General Vandegriff, Commander of the Landing Force, was an optimistic Marine whose confidence and continual bravery under the most difficult of conditions would subsequently earn him the Medal of Honor. Vandegriff's initial assessment of the Expeditionary Force Commander was less than encouraging:

...found Fletcher lacking in knowledge of or interest in the forthcoming operation. Fletcher who looked "nervous and tired," openly discussed doubt about the successful outcome of Watchtower. He was even more disheartened when he learned that it would take five days to disembark Vandegriff's troops on Guadalcanal.⁹

Senior commanders are often asked to lead difficult missions with fuzzy and convoluted taskings, the great ones rise above these problems and inspire their subordinates to succeed. Given Vandegriff's perception of his commander, OPERATION WATCHTOWER was headed for significant problems.

CONTRIBUTING CAUSES

DOCTRINE

In some ways, the United States Navy was at a decided disadvantage before the war in Pacific even started. The Allies had an overall advantage of 2:1 over the Japanese in big guns before Pearl Harbor. U.S. Navy strategists envisioned a decisive Naval battle with the Japanese somewhere around the Philippines, where the U.S. superiority in firepower would prevail. The fatal flaws in this strategy were threefold. First, the U.S. assumption was that the fight would occur at long range under limitless sunlit visibility. Second, they were opposed by, in the words of Clausewitz, "a living, breathing adversary." And third, a good portion of the American numerical superiority in big guns lay at the bottom of Pearl Harbor and the Japanese outnumbered the U.S. Navy in carriers.

The Japanese realized that they could not overcome the quantity of U.S. battleships. Instead, they developed an attrition strategy in which they would use surprise and night fighting to reduce the number of U.S. battleships before crushing the American fleet in a decisive battle. The Japanese trained religiously, at night, and under very realistic conditions. Deaths in training were commonplace and were treated as the cost of doing business. While the Japanese trained realistically, the U.S. went from unrealistic night training before the war, to almost none from 1940 to 1941:

The U.S. Navy enjoyed no tradition of night battle and, unlike the British, did not extract the conclusion from World War One that a major navy must be prepared equally to fight by night and by day. Although the training schedules of U.S. warships included frequent night battle practice, artificialities and limited scale sapped their realism. Further, events in 1940 and 1941 seriously diluted even this expertise. Established crews became pools regularly raided for drafts to man new ships commissioned under the expansion program. Moreover, President Roosevelt's Atlantic "Neutrality Patrol" precluded much training.¹⁰

These shortcomings provided the U.S. Navy with many painful lessons.

U.S. Navy doctrine viewed the big guns as superior to the torpedo. Under that philosophy, we placed much greater emphasis on the gun and stressed a strategy of engaging an enemy force within effective gunfire range, which was believed to exceed torpedo ranges. The American emphasis on gunnery, rooted in inadequate, ineffective, and short-ranged torpedoes, was not mirrored in Imperial Japanese Navy equipment or tactics. While all Japanese cruisers (heavy and light) and destroyers were fitted with superb long-ranged torpedoes, no American heavy cruisers and only a few light cruisers were so equipped. The operational surprise achieved by the Japanese attack was enhanced by the surprising "failure" of their tactics to mirror our own.

OPERATION SHOESTRING

The Solomons campaign was so rushed to execution that the official Marine Corps history would state, "(s)eldom has an operation begun under more disadvantageous circumstances."¹¹ Although the official name of the operation was "Watchtower," Marines and sailors referred to it as "Operation Shoestring." Sending sailors and Marines so quickly into a major theater war has long been a sticking point. To some historians, King's decision to rush the operation was the greatest error of the Solomons campaign:

King catapulted "Watchtower" off at a velocity that mocked all conventions and under conditions that affronted a fair portion of the principles of war. The theater commander and his principal subordinates were confused about the objective of the enterprise; in Ghormley's case this prevented him from achieving economy of force in his dispositions, particularly in respect to aircraft...the selected

instruments for conducting the landings consisted of approximately 19,000 marines—such was the rush that a certifiable count was never made—of a hybrid, half-trained division and a hastily fabricated Amphibious Force led by an admiral who arrived at the eleventh hour ...¹²

To the U.S. advantage, the Japanese did not believe that the Allies would conduct a counteroffensive until 1943. Thus, when Japan received initial reports from the Solomons about an Allied attack, the reports were noted with mere curiosity. The Japanese initially thought the U.S. move on the Solomons was a small expeditionary force that would easily be expelled.

Timing put the Allies in a "Catch 22" position. Had the Allies not taken action quickly, the Japanese would establish such local air superiority in the Solomons as to make later operations much more costly, possibly cutting off the Allies from Australia. If the U.S. went too fast, a naval or amphibious force disaster might lead to an even more protracted war in the Pacific. The Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to err on the side of "too fast."

Operation Watchtower was hastily planned and inadequately prepared, but this was by necessity, not design: the airfield at Guadalcanal had to be taken before it became operational, and the Japanese, on the move had to be stopped. All too rarely in war does time permit the concentration of force that a commander would like.¹³

PROTECTION OF THE CARRIER BATTLE GROUP

Carrier battle groups revolutionized naval battles. The battles at Coral Sea and Midway were fought without the naval fleets sighting each other. Air power was rising to new prominence, making the survival of the carriers a paramount concern. With only four U.S. carrier groups in the Pacific, it was critical that they not be spent lightly. Admiral Fletcher, commanding three of the four Pacific Fleet carriers, felt the immense responsibility of balancing seven Japanese carriers.

Fletcher had already lost 2 carriers; *Lexington* at Coral Sea and *Yorktown* at Midway. He was extremely concerned about losing another carrier to submarines or aircraft -- the loss of another carrier would put the war effort against the Japanese in jeopardy. This worry combined with constant warnings of Japanese submarines in the area to increase his burden. Fletcher was also concerned about the match up of airplanes. The Japanese Zero was clearly superior to the American Wildcat. Fifty percent of the Wildcats lost by 7 August were shot down by Japanese Zeros.

All of these concerns shaped Fletcher's decision to leave the Guadalcanal area, but it was the guidance he received from Nimitz that carried the day. Nimitz's warning to Fletcher before Midway was based on the concept of "calculated risk." His force should only engage in battle if

Fletcher believed that he would inflict more damage than he would receive. Fletcher still believed that he was operating under this mandate at Guadalcanal.

Under this formula Fletcher's carriers could not duel with land-based torpedo bombers with the likelihood of inflicting a greater loss than they could suffer. These thoughts help explain but do not alter what Fletcher's signal on the evening of August 8 leaves clear: he regarded the preservation of the carriers as more important than any of his other duties, including his responsibility as Expeditionary Force Commander to oversee the success of the landings ...¹⁴

It was clear from the events of 8 and 9 August 1942 that Fletcher felt he was following the intent of Admiral Nimitz's guidance. It is also apparent that Nimitz intended what Fletcher perceived. Nimitz's after action review of the disaster noted eight contributing causes. None focused on the decision to disengage the carriers from support of the landings.

THE ART OF SURPRISE

The key to the defeat of the Japanese at Coral Sea and Midway was the ability of the U.S. Navy to intercept and decode Japanese message traffic. This powerful tool was not available during most of the Guadalcanal campaign. On 28 May the Japanese had changed their cryptographic keys, which prevented the Allies from decoding messages. With the loss of this key source of intelligence, the Japanese art and practice of surprise came into play at Savo Island. Sadly for the Allied fleet, Mikawa's 0830 8 August initial message to begin preparations for the attack on Guadalcanal was intercepted, but was not decoded until 23 August.

Before Savo Island, even after the experience of Pearl Harbor, the Allies underestimated the Japanese capacity for surprise. They did not understand Japanese doctrine and the lengths to which the Japanese Navy trained to master the art of surprise. In addition, many Allied naval commanders believed that surprise was not possible in the face of radar and naval air. Coral Sea and Midway proved that a daylight decisive battle could be fought at over-the-horizon ranges. With aerial surveillance an integral part of naval operations, the chances of an enemy sneak attack were thought to be nil. The Allies failed to realize that in order to prevent surprise, you had to be able to surveil and fight at night.

The Allies simply assumed that their own inability to fight at night was mirrored in the Japanese. They were terribly wrong. The Japanese developed an extensive night fighting capability through tough, realistic training. The common fallacy of looking at your opponent as a reflection of yourself manifested itself here: "As the Allied Forces were inexpert in night fighting, they would not have dreamed of attempting a night attack. Most of the allied ships had little practice in firing, let alone night firing."¹⁵

INTELLIGENCE

As in any War, there was a great deal of disjointed intelligence. In fact, reports of enemy actions and movement can be overwhelming in the heat of battle. Attempting to discern whether information was credible and accurate was, and still is, more art than science. A great deal of intelligence was available to key leaders throughout the task force during the Battle of Savo Island. But throughout the evening and early morning of 8/9 August there was a lack of fused intelligence disseminated through the Expeditionary Force. Each commander assumed that all the other ships received the same information. This was a manifestly false assumption. In some cases information was discounted because of the source. Between 1000 and 1100, Mikawa's task force was seen twice by two RAAF planes. Most ship captains completely disregarded the sightings, assuming them to be inaccurate. This prejudice prevented a number of senior officers from making the more informed decisions which result from blending all intelligence reports. Most historians agree that most ships knew that some form of attack was imminent early on 9 August.

Intelligence collection did not fail the Allied forces that fateful night. The failure was to fuse and disseminate intelligence, and it doomed them. There were many opportunities to put the pieces together. Many sequential clues went unheeded.

1) A CINCPAC Bulletin indicated a high surface threat level. Specifically, CINCPAC warned that the *Chokai* and *Aoba* were both in Rabaul.

The author of The Role of Radio Intelligence in the American-Japanese Naval War wrote that, despite the vital missing link, it was "evident that most operational authorities were aware of the presence in the Solomons of the enemy cruisers which were eventually to destroy four allied warships in the night of 8-9 August." Nonetheless, Admiral Crutchley, with the concurrence of Admiral Turner, divided his force of heavy cruisers and thus gave lowest priority to the possibility of a surface attack.¹⁶

2) On 7 August, a B-17 assigned to raid Rabaul saw Mikawa's force heading in a westerly direction and reported it as 4 cruisers and 1 destroyer.

3) Again, on 7 August, another B-17 saw Mikawa's force in St. George's Channel heading southeast and reported it as 6 unidentified ships.

4) At 2030 on 7 August, the USS S-38 submarine was setting up an ambush 20 miles south of Cape St. George when Mikawa's entire Fleet passed him within a hundred yards. The encounter was so close that the S-38 could not fire its torpedoes. This information, along with the two B-17 sightings, was reported to Turner at 0700 on 8 August. The report did not worry Turner because of the size of the force in comparison to his own and the fact that if they

continued to head towards Guadalcanal, Allied reconnaissance planes would give him early warning.

5) An Australian Hudson aircraft identified the Japanese Fleet mid-morning on 8 August and broke radio silence at 1040. This report was received in the early afternoon or early evening on 8 August and given to Admiral Turner. *HMAS Australia*, Crutchley's flagship, received this report via "Bells," the regular Australian broadcast at 1818. *USS McCawley*, Turner's flagship, received it at 1842 over "FOX," the scheduled U.S. Navy broadcast from Pearl Harbor. The report gave Admiral Turner seven hours to prepare for an incoming attack. Unfortunately, the message misidentified the ships as three cruisers, three destroyers and two seaplane tenders or gunboats. Admiral Turner focused on the two seaplane tenders and assumed that the ships were headed for Rekata Bay, only 155 miles from Savo Island, to conduct follow-on air attacks the next day. In fact, Turner notified Admiral McCain of the possibility and requested an air attack against Rekata Bay for the next morning. "His real error resided in failing to follow the fundamental principle of identifying the most dangerous enemy capability and guarding against it."¹⁷ During the evening meeting on 8 August, Turner voiced his theory to Crutchley, who agreed. Crutchley also believed that Mikawa would not risk a night attack. Even taking a worst case view of the threat, Allied forces were far superior in numbers to anything that the enemy surface force could muster.

6) Another Australian aircraft sighted Mikawa at 1100 and reported two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and one small unidentified vessel; without mention of seaplane tenders. This report was received in Turner's flagship at 2135, 8 August.

7) At 2345 on 8 August, *USS Patterson* spotted an unidentified reconnaissance plane from Mikawa's fleet and sent a warning out over TBS. "Warning! Warning! Plane over Savo Island heading east." The message was repeated for several minutes without reply. The plane was assumed to be friendly. "In the *Vincennes*, Captain Reifkohl failed to associate the unidentified planes with the "seaplane tenders" reported by one of the RAAF Hudsons. Instead of assuming an attack might be imminent, he retired to his emergency cabin to rest."¹⁸ This attitude was prevalent throughout the screening force that night.

The astonishing consensus that planes overhead were friendly contributed substantially to the disaster that followed. If they were not, everyone assumed, Admiral Turner would have sent a warning. The hints about Japanese intentions accumulated, and were ignored. Like the clues in a detective story, the plot was there to be read. No one in authority got it right.¹⁹

Adverse weather had a direct impact on intelligence gathering when it caused the cancellation of a number of reconnaissance flights. These flights were a key part of Turner's

early warning system which he fully expected to catch any attempted attack. The reconnaissance plan called for over-flights by sector but, due to weather, the flights only covered half of the sector through which Mikawa passed. In addition, Admiral Turner had requested that Admiral McCain's air task force conduct a reconnaissance flight of the "slot" on the afternoon of the 8th. Had this over-flight taken place, Mikawa's Fleet would have been seen. This was an inexcusable breakdown in light of all the hostile sightings on the 7th of August. Negative information combines poorly with assumptions. Turner assumed that there was no impending attack since he had not received any reports of enemy ships. He therefore concluded that the absence of reports of an enemy force confirmed his belief of an air attack in the morning. He did not find out until 2330 on 8 August that the requested reconnaissance flight did not occur.

When Turner learned that the needed reconnaissance mission had not been conducted, he neglected to look internally for some other resource to survey the slot.

Turner...like so many inexperienced commanders, ... failed to employ all weapons available to him: specifically, the more than fifteen scouting planes of the cruiser force. Had they been sent out to scour the area south of Rekata Bay at sunset, they could not have failed to locate the oncoming enemy force before nightfall...instead, these planes, many with tanks filled with gasoline, remained on their catapults or on deck and became gigantic infernos when ignited by the first enemy projectiles...In short, Turner had ample means of his own to detect Mikawa's approaching cruisers, but failed to use them. This is the irrefutable answer to the Battle of Savo controversy.²⁰

In Turner's defense, he had dealt with two significant Japanese bombing raids that day and when Fletcher declared his need to depart the area, preservation of his amphibious task force consumed much of Turner's thoughts and actions. Receipt of Fletcher's message about the early withdrawal of the carriers set off a chain reaction that dramatically affected later events. Fletcher's announced departure caused Turner to call the meeting which caused Crutchley to go off-station and weaken the defensive formation. This one decision had more to do with the tragic results at Savo Island than any other.

A summary of the available intelligence reports places about eleven Japanese cruisers, thirteen destroyers, two seaplane tenders, and fifteen submarines in the Solomon Islands at that particular time. This surely would give a casual observer the impression that some mischief was afoot.

While the Allied intelligence machine was in disarray, Mikawa was gaining superb intelligence from his organic reconnaissance planes. At noon on 8 August, one of Mikawa's reconnaissance planes reported that the ships off Guadalcanal were divided by Savo Island. In

addition, the report noted the presence of eighteen transports, six cruisers, nineteen destroyers, and a battleship. Although Mikawa was apparently out gunned twenty-six warships to his eight, he hoped to hit the divided allied task force with successive blows: that is exactly what he did.

In sum, the failure of the Allies to adequately fuse, correlate and assess all available intelligence reports played a major role in the destruction of 9 August.

TRAINING

“Train the way you fight” is a much overused phrase in military vernacular. This training mantra was far from the motto of the United States Navy in 1942. From weapons qualification to night fighting, to combat battle drills, and on to coordinated battle exercises, very little training was going on in the Navy. There were many reasons for this and Admiral Turner sums them up best:

I have concluded that our forces, both sea and land, at that time simply were not battle-minded. None had been in surface action of any kind. Few had even been in action against aircraft or submarines. Training schedules had very largely been relaxed since the beginning of the war. There had been few coordinated battle exercises and very little target practice. The Navy was still obsessed with a strong feeling of technical and mental superiority over the enemy. In spite of ample evidence as to enemy capabilities, most of our officers and men despised the enemy and felt themselves sure victors in all encounters under any circumstances.²¹

Additionally, while the Japanese were able to keep cruiser and destroyer crews intact, experienced U.S. Navy crews were redistributed to man the newly commissioned warships being delivered under the naval expansion program. Keeping experienced crews was nearly impossible during the early days of the war in the Pacific. The combination of a rapid build up of personnel coupled with the ship building program bled the experienced crews throughout the fleet. Instead of more intensive training to prevent the shortfall described by Turner, the Navy used this turmoil as an excuse not to train. The results were apparent at Savo Island

Since the turn of the century, the United States has placed great emphasis on the use of technology. Savo Island was an example of the costs of over reliance on technology. The Allies had focused their training on the new technology of radar and its use. The Japanese had sought out recruits with the best night vision and trained them with the finest night binoculars of the time. More importantly, the Japanese Navy employed their lookouts as part of a weapons system. In the “test” at Savo Island, U.S. radar failed to pick up the Japanese task force while Mikawa’s lookouts spotted the screening force at nearly 5000 yards. Clearly the lesson learned was that technology is a force multiplier, but technology cannot replace the battle

trained sailor who must use it and the officers who must understand its capabilities and limitations. This lesson of the past remains valid as our military places increasing emphasis on technology.

Task Force 62 had never exercised together before the battle. In fact, the commanders of the ships did not know one another. The only ships that had trained together were the Australian ships (*Australia*, *Canberra*, and *Hobart*). The only pre-landing exercise was the amphibious rehearsal. This was a complete disaster because the rehearsal beach was screened by reefs and few of the assault landing craft actually landed on the shore. This failure precluded rehearsal of the procedures to off-load supplies. Having exhausted time for rehearsing, the next amphibious assault for real. This would cost the Allies greatly on the assault beaches.

On the other hand, Japanese training was realistic and intense; the cost of a misstep in training was death.

With the fanaticism of their race the Japanese had gone about night battle practice in the 1930's with the ferocity of the real thing. Ships were sunk in collision, men were lost without qualm; nothing was spared to achieve utter realism in war games...The enlisted men, selected from the nation's fittest youth, had undergone rigors the like of which had never been seen in any Navy. Driven and beaten, literally, by their officers, they had been tempered to a fighting edge. Month after month, seven days a week, they had trained in the frigid seas north of Japan. Time and again men were carried overboard in the raging ocean. No ship turned back. Men fell at their post from exhaustion, and were slapped back to sensibility. Not a word of this reached home, and from this system, strangely enough, the Japanese built an esprit and a competence that was to amaze the world.²²

In the end, it was the night fighting ability of Mikawa's Strike Force that won the battle. Examination of Japanese firing records for the morning of 9 August, reveals that they fired a total of 1,844 shells, with 159 definite and 64 likely hits for a total of 223 hits. The allies fired 471 shells with only 10 hits. In fact, the Americans had lived up to their billing in a Japanese training manual which stated:

Westerners—being very haughty, effeminate and cowardly—intensely dislike fighting in the rain or mist or in the dark. They cannot conceive night to be a proper time for battle—though it is excellent for dancing. In these weaknesses lie our great opportunity.²³

Through this painful lesson, the Allies learned much about the need to be able to fight at night. This deficiency was corrected overtime as the war progressed and manning stabilized.

TORPEDOES

In the early stages of the war, no weapons system was more effective than the Japanese torpedo. It was dropped from airplanes, launched from just about every type of Japanese surface warship, and used by submarines. The Japanese torpedo caused more trepidation among naval commanders than any other type of munition. It would consume Admiral Crutchley's defense of Guadalcanal. It would drive Fletcher's focus to the security of his carrier group. The very threat of its presence would force Fletcher and Turner into an early exit from the landing areas.

There was good reason to respect the huge Japanese advantage in torpedoes. Their Long Lance torpedo dwarfed any U.S. torpedoes. The biggest advantage of the Japanese torpedo was that, unlike its American counterpart, it worked. The Long Lance exploded when it hit its target. The Long Lance weighed 1,090 pounds, could hit targets out to 22,000 yards (40,000 yards when traveling at 35 knots), and traveled at 49 knots. Powered by oxygen instead of air, unlike standard torpedoes the Japanese torpedo left a nearly wakeless trail. In comparison, the U.S. Torpedo Mark XV had a much smaller warhead and could only reach 6,000 yards at 45 knots or 15,000 yards at 26.5 knots. More discouragingly, U.S. torpedoes seldom detonated, even when scoring direct hits. A Long Lance torpedo sank one of Admiral Fletcher's carriers during the Battle of Coral Sea.

TACTICAL DISPOSITION

Admiral Crutchley's strategy to defend Guadalcanal was suspect at best. By dividing his combat power, he violated one of the Navy's oldest principles. Placing his two task forces in positions which precluded mutual support, Crutchley allowed Mikawa to destroy his force in detail. Admiral Turner bears a share of the responsibility because he had reviewed the plan and approved it.

In essence, Crutchley did not have a tactical plan. He gave little guidance to his subordinates in executing the defense of Guadalcanal. There was neither coordinated defense nor planning for mutual support.

Captain Riefkohl [Captain of the Vincennes] pointed out that it was possible for the two groups to be as much as seventeen miles apart and also for them to be so close together that they could interfere with each other. To reduce the danger, Riefkohl decided to patrol clockwise. It was at this point that he asked Crutchley for his plan of operations for the Australia group and received no reply.²⁴

In addition, Crutchley's use of only two destroyers to secure the entrances around Savo Island stretched the radars beyond their capability. Even had the picket destroyers detected the

invading force, they were too close-in to provide adequate warning. Turner later admitted that he had made a mistake by not assigning four destroyers to the screening mission. The destroyers *Blue* and *Ralph Talbot* had the responsibility to screen the slot for enemy ships. These ships had the latest radar and best operators in the fleet. All concerned, however, had greatly overestimated the capabilities of radar. The radar proved good only to about seven miles. The patrol lines of the *Blue* and *Ralph Talbot* were not coordinated and could create a gap of up to twenty miles. When Mikawa reached the screening pickets, *Blue* and *Ralph Talbot* were about fourteen miles apart. Mikawa's Fleet easily slipped between the two destroyers.

Air support against the attacking force was nonexistent. This, of course, was no fault of Crutchley. Fletcher and his carriers were approximately 150 miles from Savo Island at the time of the attack and were thus in no position to respond to Mikawa's striking force. Fletcher's decision to leave early created a security dilemma for the allied forces. His stated reasons for the withdrawal of the carrier group were low fuel and his aircraft losses. His rationale appears questionable. Fletcher possessed more aircraft at Guadalcanal than he had had at either Coral Sea or Midway. In addition, the carriers had sufficient fuel for at least four more days of operations.

The results that night could have been quite different, even with the lapses committed by the defending force up until the attack on the *Chicago*. If only Captain Bode had alerted the Northern Force that he was under attack, the results of that night may have been considerably better for the Allied forces. When Mikawa's force hit the Northern element, virtually all the Northern Group perceived that they were under attack by friendly forces and fired a warning volley of flares. This only served to mark Riefkohl's ships for follow-on fire. If this move was costly in damage, it was also costly in time, allowing the enemy to zero in on the targets for maximum effectiveness. Not only did Bode fail to warn the Northern Group, he turned his ship away from Mikawa's force and provided the Japanese with unimpeded access to the rest of the invasion fleet.

Bode's inexcusable lapse in not warning the Northern Group had a devastating impact on Captain Riefkohl's task force, and denied Admiral Scott's Eastern Task Force, consisting of two light cruisers and two destroyers, the opportunity to support the Northern Task Force.

While the Allied dispositions were shaky at best, Mikawa's sailors were fresh, armed with updated intelligence, and possessed of all the benefits of the offense. With a superb reconnaissance effort, they knew what they were looking for and had a decided night time advantage. The defending allied forces had no idea what lay in store for them.

READINESS

After two hard days of fighting off air attacks, two attacks on the 7th and one on the 8th, Admiral Turner attempted to give his crews some rest. He reduced the readiness status of the task force to 2nd Degree readiness. This status allowed many to sleep with reduced manning of guns. A weakness of combined operations manifested here, as words have different meaning to different navies. 2nd Degree readiness translated to a lower readiness posture in Australian ships than in their U.S. counterparts. For *HMAS Canberra*, it meant that two turrets were unmanned with gun crews sleeping near their stations. One 4 inch gun on each side of the ship was manned, but all other guns were empty. The guns were unloaded as they could not be simultaneously ready for attack by aircraft, bombing, and surface ships. The *Canberra*'s captain assumed, as most of the fleet had done, that the attack would come by air in the morning. In the U.S. ships, on the other hand, 2nd Degree readiness meant half the crew on watch with half the guns manned. The first ships engaged by Mikawa were the Australian ships. Compounding the problem, Mikawa's attack found every captain in the Northern and Southern Task Forces asleep. They were awakened to a fight for their lives; there was no time to gain even partial situational awareness.

Adding to the problem was the presence of excessive flammable substances in many ships. Their lifeboats were wooden, as were many of the ships' decks. They also retained linoleum and interior paint, and in a number of ships, a wooden piano in the captain's cabin. Through inexperience and lack of training, U.S. crews failed to eliminate a number of flammable items on ships such as exposed seaplanes and fuel caches. This contributed to a short, disastrous chain of events in the spread of fire once a ship was hit. The initial torpedo or gun hits extensively damaged ships, setting fires. These fires identified targets for follow-on rounds.

As is always true at sea, weather played a critical role. The night was dark and humid. Periodic severe rain squalls soaked the sailors. There was no moon and visibility ranged from moderate to bad, varying from 4,000 to 12,000 yards. Poor weather always has a negative effect on defense systems, particularly people. The poor weather that night had a significant effect on the alertness of the already exhausted Allied sailors. Those on duty were nearly catatonic before the first rounds hit.

COMMUNICATIONS

By today's standards there were no effective communications between the ships at Savo Island. The Australian ships in the Southern Task Force possessed no short-range radio system (TBS) and their only communications between ships was by signal lamp.

For improbable reasons of security, the Royal Australian Navy avoided the very-short-range radios (TBS) used by the Americans. Communication between ships in the Northern Group was no better. Their dependence on TBS so overloaded the circuits that the tactical voice radio became more or less useless, delaying or completely preventing the dispatch and receipt of critical signals. When the attack began, panic took hold and nothing of importance got through.²⁵

As an aside, at this stage of the war there was also no capability to communicate directly between allied aircraft and ground forces. This prevented the full integration of the air support with the amphibious landing force. This significant shortfall played a minor role in this situation as all of Turner's air support was tactically unavailable, and was rectified later in the development of the superb close air support which became the hallmark of the Marine Corps.

CONCLUSION

The Battle of Savo Island was the worst open-sea defeat in the United States naval history. Over a thousand sailors were lost, four heavy cruisers were sunk, and a severe blow was dealt to our military ego. How could our Navy, after significant wins at Coral Sea and Midway, let this happen? As in any complex story, it happened for many reasons. It was caused by errors at every level from the strategic to the tactical. It was caused by an ineffective command and control organization, poor leadership, misguided priorities, failure to understand the enemy, over-reliance on technology, and a rush to execute a military campaign. It was also caused by the fog of war, inflicted upon sailors operating under incredible pressure at the edge of exhaustion. Then there was the factor of luck. On this day, Admiral Mikawa had all the luck, while "Murphy" was embarked with the Allied Fleet.

Among these many factors, the overriding reason for the debacle off Savo Island to emerge -- the absence of a coherent command structure. The decision to place Admiral Fletcher in tactical command, reflected in Nimitz and Ghormley's Operation Plans, was a proper decision. Admiral Fletcher, however, did not act as the Officer in Tactical Command or, by today's doctrine, as the Commander of the Joint Task Force (CJTF). Instead, he acted as the carrier group commander with paramount concern for preserving his three carriers. Fletcher's early withdrawal forced Admiral Turner to his own early withdraw, leaving the poorly supplied Marines ashore. This situation might have been rectified by providing Admiral Fletcher with his own command and control vessel and placing it in the Guadalcanal area. In addition, Fletcher might have seen his role differently had he directly commanded McCain's land based aircraft. He might at least have been able to better synchronize the entire operation. Such an organization might have precluded the lapse aerial coverage that allowed Mikawa to sail up the slot undetected. It certainly would have ensured Fletcher's awareness that the sorties hadnot

been flown. In sum, making Fletcher the Commander of the Joint Task Force (CJTF), in his own command and control ship would have forced him to synchronize all of his sea, air and land assets under one coherent plan and underscored his responsibility to execute.

Although this was a dark day for the Allies in World War II, it might have been bleaker. Admiral Mikawa missed a great opportunity to come around Savo Island a second time and complete the destruction of the amphibious task force. Instead, he decided to leave the area after smashing the screening forces. The Japanese also missed a grand operational opportunity to finish off the task force through their failure to immediately follow up on Mikawa's initial success. This would cost them dearly as the Guadalcanal campaign continued. "Mikawa let the last big opportunity of the war slip through his fingers. The Battle of Savo Island was a great Japanese naval victory; it was also the beginning of the end for Japan."²⁶

There is always good to find from the bad. The Allies learned many important lessons at Savo Island, most notably the importance of the ability to fight at night. Many tactics and techniques used at Savo Island were turned against the Japanese during later naval battles.

The bright harvest of this battle, for Americans, was the speed and ingenuity with which the U.S. Navy adapted to the enemy's tactic, mastered it, and turned it against him. In a way, the Pacific sea war was fought and won in these dark waters, for the enemy could never recover from the punishment sustained here. It was a heroic period in the history of the United States Navy, of which this is only the first chapter.²⁷

In the end of this first chapter of the Guadalcanal campaign, Admiral Turner made conclusions based on what he thought the enemy would do and neglected to assess what they could do. He discounted the very course of action that Mikawa executed. When the Navy left, the Marines had rations for thirty-seven days and ammunition for four days of heavy fighting. The Marines were left without exterior communications or support of any kind, no assurance that any help was on the way, no source of information or observation except for a primitive tower left by the fleeing Japanese. The legacy of the Navy's abandonment of the Marines generated hard feelings for decades to come.

WORD COUNT = 10,748

ENDNOTES

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¹⁶ Ibid, 73.

¹⁷ Ibid, 96.

¹⁸ Ibid, 105.

¹⁹ Ibid, 106.

²⁰ Merrill B. Twining, No Bended Knee – The Battle for Guadalcanal (California: Presidio Press, 1994), 71.

²¹ Warner, 253.

²² Newcomb, 27.

²³ Toland, 415.

²⁴ Warner, 76.

²⁵ Ibid, 106.

²⁶ Ibid, 259.

²⁷ Newcomb, X.

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