

The Battle of Savo Island Reconsidered

By Arrigo Velicogna



An artist's depiction of the northern group taking intense fire from Japanese ships. John Hamilton painting in the U.S. Navy Art Collection.

Introduction

In early August 1942 the US Navy stood ready to launch the first major American offensive of the whole war. The plan was to land a Marine division on an almost unknown island called Guadalcanal, seize the airfield under construction there by the Japanese, and then use it as a springboard for a further advance toward the big prize in the South Pacific: the sprawling complex of enemy bases around Rabaul.

A massive armada – including three fleet carriers, one new fast battleship and a score of cruisers and destroyers – escorted the transports and cargo ships toward the objective.

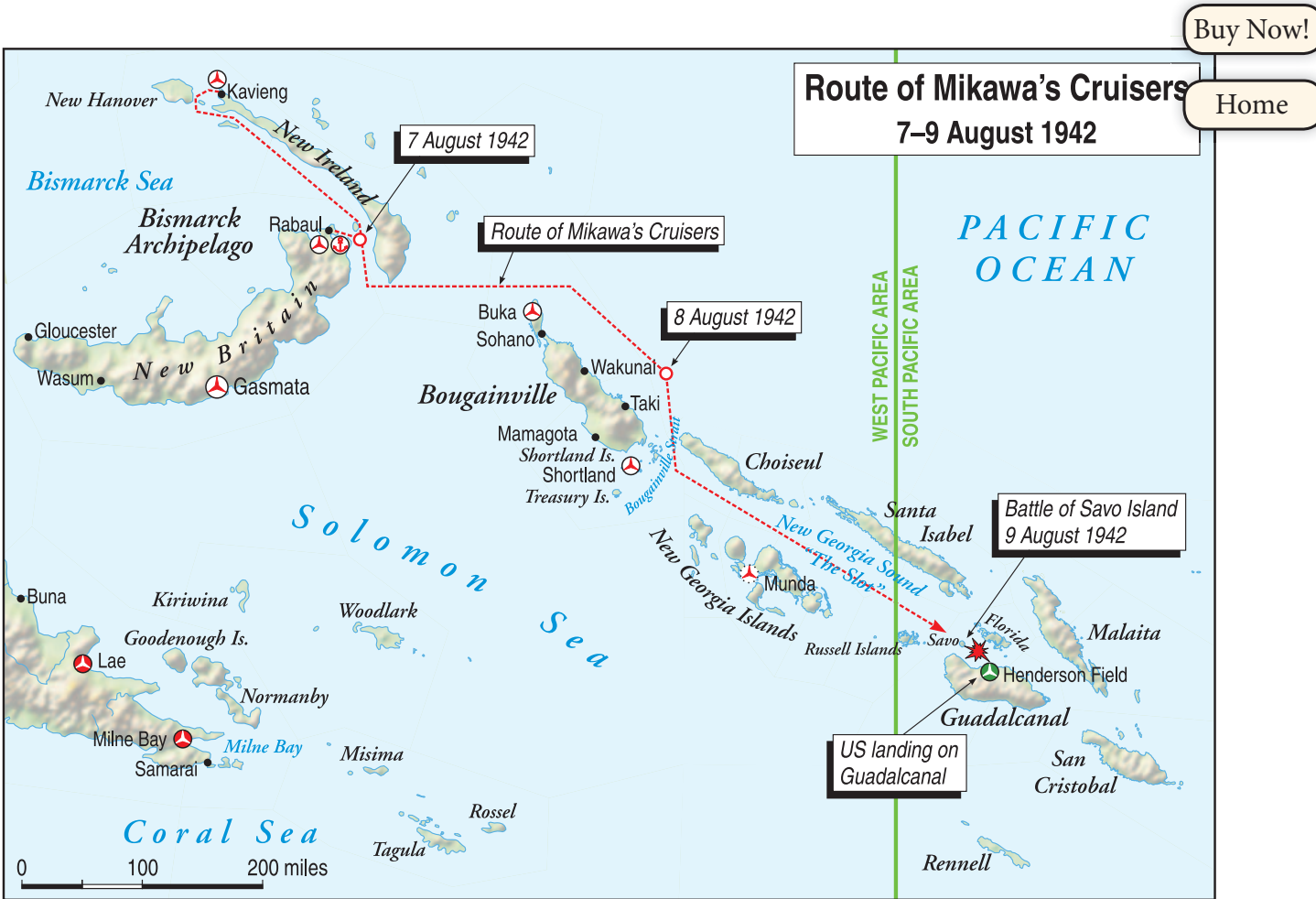
On 7 August, with almost complete surprise, the Marines landed. Two days later, at dawn on 9 August, the entire operation seemed on the verge of collapsing after four heavy cruisers had been sunk in the worst defeat inflicted on the USN since Pearl Harbor.

That “Battle of Savo Island” was one of those defeats in which no one was willing to take direct responsibility for the outcome. The gunnery and torpedo exchange itself was straightforward and is well documented. We also have a wealth of primary documents, including ship logs and, thanks to an in-depth US Navy investigation, it’s possible to pinpoint the position of the involved ships and understand what they were doing on an almost

moment-by-moment basis. What’s less easy to understand is how the attacking Japanese were able to achieve complete surprise over a force marginally superior to them and that, in addition, had control of the air, was supported by better intelligence, and had superior technology available in the form of radar.

The problem in answering the question of responsibility, then, comes from the fact the story of the battle had been from the first – often purposefully – mistakenly reported, and several myths have emerged as a result.

The commonly offered version has been that the amphibious portion of the USN task force, along with its surface escorts, had been abandoned by overly timid Adm. Frank Fletcher,



who'd earlier simply run away with his carriers. The Japanese were thereby able to mass overwhelming force against what was left behind of the Allied armada but, after sinking the bulk of that remaining surface combat force, their commander stupidly turned and steamed away from the decisive victory that was his for the taking.

The explanation of the aftermath of the battle is often also muddled. Some accounts have it that the US transports simply abandoned the Marines on the island. Another interpretation is that the amphibious force commander, Rear Adm. Richmond Turner, courageously decided to complete the unloading without any protection.

That entire story was mainly created by Turner, and was subsequently accepted into the postwar accounts, most importantly in the US Naval War College analysis and Adm. Samuel Morison's seminal multi-volume work on US Navy operations in World War II. Thus the information available in the original documents has been largely obscured by the interpretations generated in those later official and semi-official histories.

The Navy's institutional need to

create a scapegoat for the disaster singled out the commander who actually had the least responsibility for it. Further, that same investigation, while underscoring the abysmal command performance of several officers during the battle, failed to take into account the technical reason for the defeat, placing the blame on persons rather than on systems or doctrines. The truth about Savo Island is complicated. Only more recently, due to the research of historians Richard Frank and John Lundstrom, have we finally been able to see through the “fog of war” that’s surrounded this battle.

Prelude

Immediately after receiving confirmation a large Allied force was operating around Guadalcanal and had landed troops there, the Japanese command on Rabaul set in motion a series of countermeasures. The basis of Japanese strategy in regard to any enemy initiatives was to stop them and then move to regain that initiative. The problem was insufficient forces were available. The main effort in the region for that summer had been directed

against New Guinea, and the army formations in-theater had already been committed there along with the bulk of the air support. In addition, continuous combat operations over New Guinea had eroded air strength.

Japanese strategy had also been based on the assumption American carrier strength had suffered severe attrition at Midway: they believed two carriers had been sunk there. No major US offensive was therefore expected until 1943.

Thus only the four oldest heavy cruisers in the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), along with a single modern heavy cruiser (*Chokai*) and a collection of destroyers and a couple light cruisers, none of which had ever previously operated together, were available for an immediate counteroffensive.

Even so, the commander of IJN *Eighth Fleet*, headquartered at Rabaul, Vice Adm. Mikawa Gunichi, immediately set about organizing a counterattack. The equivalent of an infantry battalion was assembled from naval base personnel and boarded in transports. A search-and-attack mission was planned using the available land-based air forces on Rabaul, and a cruiser group



An iconic painting of the Battle of Savo Island. IJN YUBARI opens fire on the American cruisers ASTORIA, QUINCY and VINCENNES, each of which are bathed in Japanese searchlights. A John Hamilton painting in the U.S. Navy Art Collection.

was organized to strike at the enemy naval concentration near Guadalcanal.

That first effort was ineffective. Japanese land-based medium naval bombers, the famed G4M Type 1 “Bettys,” had been readying for a strike on Milne Bay carrying general-purpose bombs. To save time they weren’t rearmed with anti-ship torpedoes. Twenty-seven of the bombers and 18 fighters took off from Rabaul followed by nine D3A1 “Val” carrier dive bomb-

ers that, lacking sufficient range, would have to ditch on their return flight near the Japanese base at Shortland.

Japanese lookouts on Guadalcanal had the US carriers under observation, but were unable to establish radio contact with Rabaul. So the bombers, unable to find the carriers, instead engaged the transports. Having received warning of the incoming air raid, fighter protection over the US carriers was reinforced; however,

Turner’s amphibious force flagship, *USS McCawley*, had problems with its communication equipment to the point of effectively severing contact between it and the carriers.

Japanese aircraft losses were light, but they failed to score any damage. More importantly, though, the appearance of the Japanese carrier dive bombers prompted a debate within the US command over the nearby presence of an enemy carrier, even though all intelligence reports at the time put all IJN carriers in home island waters.

The next day that pattern in USN operations – a lack of communication between the two force commanders and failure to properly direct fighter cover – was repeated. Despite that, on 8 August the attacking Japanese aircraft were slaughtered by the USN defense. Of 23 planes that reached the Allied force that day, 17 were shot down; one crashed on landing and the other five were severely damaged.

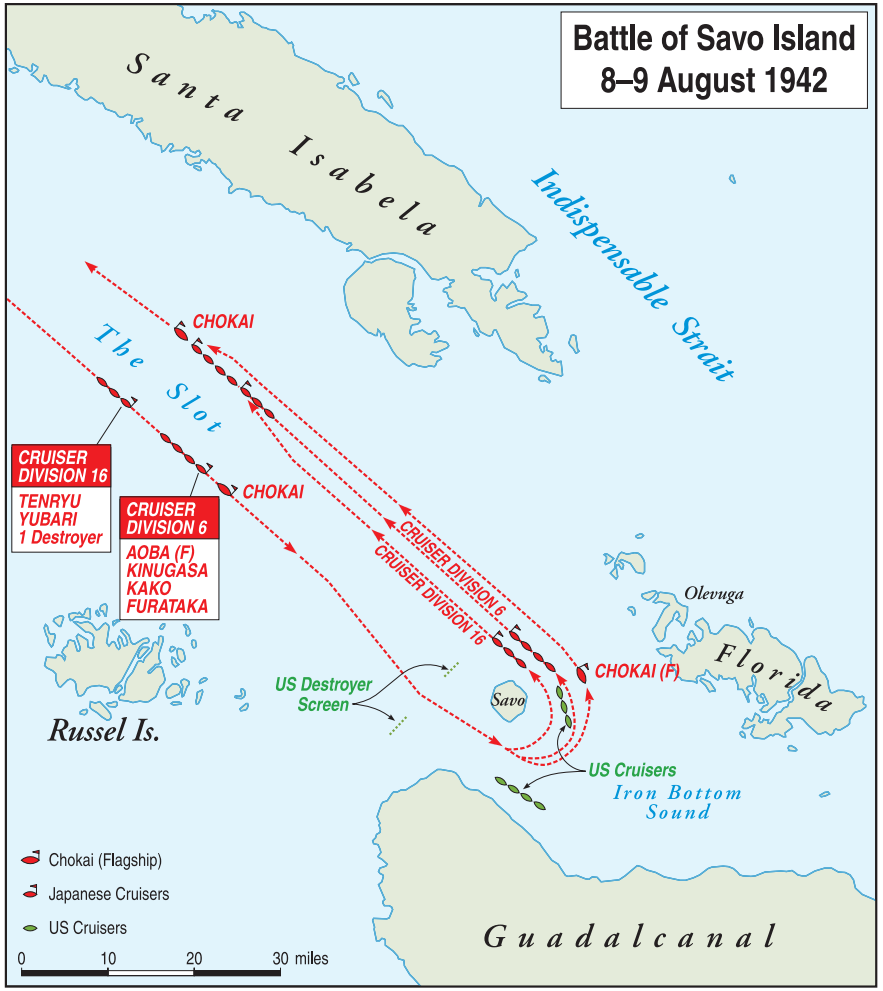
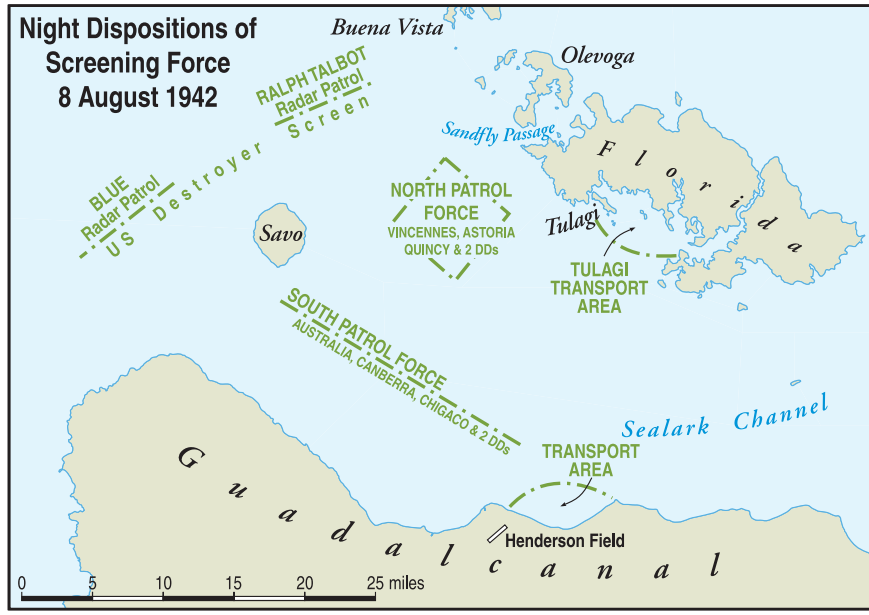
Even so, the new intelligence picture the Americans were building was bad. Except for the original nine carrier dive bombers, all Japanese planes subsequently engaged were land-based. While those bombers had proven easy targets for the USN F4F Wildcats, their Zero escorts fared well against those same fighters. Fifty

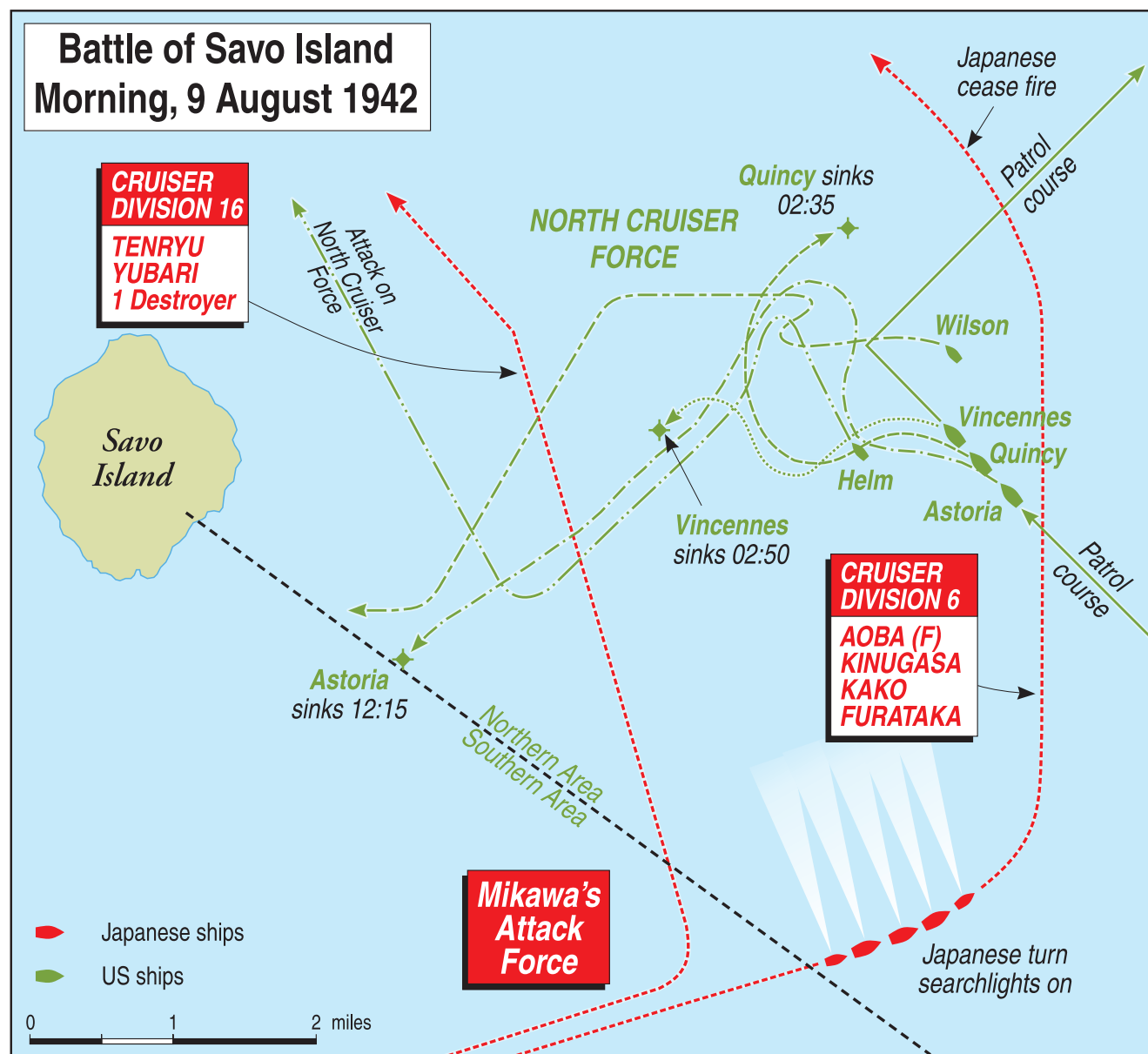
percent of the American fighters engaged were lost, and after the second day’s aerial combat the overall losses to the on-hand fighter component reached 20 percent.

Fuel on the destroyers was also running low. A scheduled refueling on 5 and 6 August failed to take place because the two oilers tasked for it were late arriving. The near constant activity during the two days of aerial attacks also worked to increase fuel consumption beyond the norm.

The air attacks had also disrupted the unloading, but Turner failed to notify Fletcher of that fact. Fletcher therefore still assumed Turner’s original estimate, made before the operation began, of two days to complete unloading the main group of transports and another 48 hours for the secondary group, was holding.

Further complicating matters, during the afternoon of 8 August several imprecise aerial reconnaissance reports came in about an IJN surface force coming down from Rabaul. It was in fact Mikawa’s *Eighth Fleet*, with five heavy and two light cruisers and one destroyer; however, the force as reported was said to consist of one seaplane tender and just two heavy cruisers. Further, that same force was variously





reported as both speeding toward and withdrawing from Guadalcanal. Turner's assessment of the situation was the Japanese were intending to establish a new seaplane base from which to harass the surface naval force at Guadalcanal. He passed that assessment to Fletcher, and that particular message was indeed received. It was then Fletcher made his almost universally criticized decision to withdraw his carriers. His orders from Nimitz, however, were strict: he was operating under the principle of calculated risk, and was to accept the chance of damage to the carriers only if there was the possibility of inflicting more damage on the enemy. Clearly, though, the only target then available for certain was Rabaul, and the carriers had little chance to inflict severe damage there. At the same time, fighter strength was

being whittled down and the destroyers needed to refuel. Even more, there still seemed the real possibility an IJN carrier force was prowling around. Taking all that into account, Fletcher determined being caught by the suspected IJN carrier force while his escorts were low on fuel was simply too risky. At the same time, there was no immediate Japanese threat and the bulk of the transports were scheduled to withdraw during the evening of 8 August anyway. Fletcher thus recommended to the overall commander of the operation, Vice Adm. Robert Ghormley, to withdraw the carriers on the evening of the 8th, one day earlier than originally planned. His recommendation was accepted. That in turn caused problems for Turner: with his unloading schedule delayed, his covering force was about to withdraw. He issued a tentative plan

for the simultaneous withdrawal of the part of his force that had completed unloading, then reversed that decision and called a command conference on his flagship. That meeting included the Marine general in charge of the invasion, Alexander Vandergrift, as well as Rear Adm. Victor Crutchley, the Royal Navy officer in charge of the combined Australian and USN cruisers and destroyers protecting the transports. Because of the timing of the meeting at night, coupled with his ship's current disposition, Crutchley decided to go to the meeting on *HMS Australia*. That left Capt. Howard Bode, commanding officer of the *USS Chicago*, in charge of the remaining surface force.



Maj. Gen. Vandergrift

Battle

While those officers met to discuss what to do, the Japanese force was steadily advancing toward Guadalcanal. The first noteworthy incident took place at 44 minutes past midnight, when the Japanese entered the theoretical radar range of the *USS Ralph Talbot*. That destroyer was sighted by Mikawa's lookouts, but the US radar failed to pick up the Japanese, who were then at a distance of 16,000 yards. Mikawa decided not to engage the picket ship once he was sure his column hadn't been spotted by it. He continued to move ahead toward the transport anchorage area. The Japanese continued to advance unimpeded until 1:43 a.m., when a sighting report was finally issued by Southern Force (see map). It was too late: at that time Mikawa's seaplanes started to drop flares and his guns opened fire while Long Lance torpedoes started going into the water.

HMAS Canberra was the first hit. The *USS Patterson* started a gun duel with the two Japanese light cruisers, *Tenryu* and *Yubari*. *USS Chicago* moved about trying to find a target until 1:47 a.m. when a Long Lance found her. Then another torpedo slammed in amidships but failed to explode. *Chicago* was still combat-capable, though, and she engaged the *Tenryu*, scoring at least one hit. Then she resumed maneuvering without reporting the engagement to Crutchley or warning Northern Force or the transports of the situation.

The main target of the Japanese then quickly became Northern Force. (The attack on Southern Force had been conducted without even slowing.) Again the Japanese were able to inflict a combination of gunnery and torpedo hits on their targets. No Allied ship was ready for action. On the bridge of *USS*

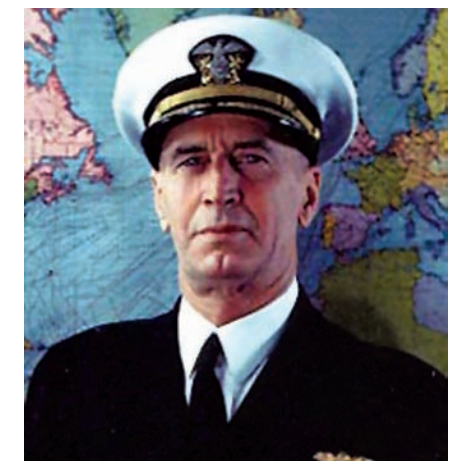


Vice Adm. Robert Ghormley

Vincennes the commanding officer had been informed of gun flashes to the southwest, but he discounted them on the basis of the fact there had been no radioed alert nor could anyone actually see any illuminated targets. Among the three heavy cruisers and two destroyers in Northern Force, only the *USS Astoria* opened fire, and that was only done on the initiative of her gunnery officer. Her captain quickly ordered a ceasefire. Then, in rapid succession, the scout planes onboard *Vincennes* and *Astoria* were hit. As they burned they provided perfect illumination for the Japanese gunners. Quickly they and the *USS Quincy* were gone, while the escorting destroyers were also put out of action.

Mikawa then had to make a decision: regroup and engage the suddenly defenseless transports or withdraw to safety. Historians and analysts have criticized the Japanese admiral for taking the latter course of action. Yet Mikawa had a scattered force and only four hours before daylight, and he believed USN carriers were nearby. He only had the reports of the sighting of the carrier force, not its departure; and he wasn't privy to the Fletcher, Turner and Ghormley deliberations.

Attacking the transports would've ultimately meant – according to the information available to Mikawa – risking being hammered by US carrier planes in daylight while his force was still in the closed waters around Guadalcanal. At the time IJN air defense doctrine still relied on individual ship maneuver rather than massed fire, and his cruisers weren't designed for that. If his force were caught in daylight still fighting a surface battle, he would surely incur severe losses. Withdrawing was indeed the doctrinally correct decision.



Fleet Adm. King

Aftermath

The end of the action sparked even more command troubles for the Americans. Turner had no clear picture of what had happened until several hours after the Japanese left. In turn, he didn't send a meaningful report to Fletcher, still his superior, until later in the day. Not until late afternoon was Fletcher able to understand the extent of the disaster, and by then it was too late. His destroyers had an average 35 percent fuel, and fuel levels on the big ships were also approaching dangerous low levels. His only alternative was to continue to the rendezvous with the oilers and refuel.

That morning he'd also gotten several coast watcher reports of another incoming air raid. Knowing his carriers were those planes' main targets, he decided to continue out of the area, refuel, and then move back.

Those same reports reached Turner at 8:40 a.m. He ordered a halt to the unloading and herded the entire remaining naval force into a tight air defense formation. When no strike appeared, he started to consider withdrawing. Orders from Ghormley calling for that course of action were received at 6:50 p.m., but Turner had already begun to do so at 3:00 p.m. While some supplies and equipment were moved ashore that day, about 1,400 Marines from 2nd Regiment were still on the transports.

The recriminations began even as the last transport left the area. Every commander blamed someone else. Turner blamed Fletcher for having withdrawn the carriers, and he blamed Vandergrift because his Marines had milled about, creating "confusion" on the beaches and thus further slowing the unloading. Vandergrift in

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turn blamed the officers in charge of the transport groups. His Assistant Chief of Staff, Gen. Merrill B Twining, pointed out that after the air attack on the morning of 8 August little unloading had been performed.

Even so, despite the losses on the Allied side, the Battle of Savo Island didn't settle anything. The famous contention made by Morison that the overall campaign was delayed by the debacle is groundless.

Henderson Field remained in American hands. Even though the Marines were temporarily deprived of naval gunfire support, the issue wasn't overly critical because there was no immediate threat to the US lodgment. The counter-invasion envisioned by Mikawa had been turned back when the small convoy carrying his assault force was engaged by submarine S-38 in Saint George Channel and one of the transports was sunk. The possibility of a timely Japanese counteroffensive on the ground was thus zero.

Of course, the departure of the carriers also temporarily deprived the US ground force of air cover; however, according to the plan the carriers were to have withdrawn on 9 August anyway.

The other contention, that the battle forced the transports to run away, thereby starving the Marines ashore, is also unfounded. Turner had already decided to withdraw the fleet from Guadalcanal at dawn on the 9th. The intervening naval disaster actually moved him to accede to Vandergrift request: some further unloading was performed that day.

So, the questions remain: what had the Japanese actually won, and could Mikawa have obtained a bigger victory?

Undoubtedly, he could've engaged the transports. He was unaware, though, that the US carriers had left, and his entire operation had therefore been conceived on the assumption his force had to break contact before daylight.

An attack on the transports certainly would've been dramatic, but again: the bulk of the Marines had landed and there was no Japanese ground counterattack in the offing. Quickly replacing the lost transports and the supplies they still carried would've been difficult for the Allies in the short term, but not impossible.

As for the actual losses among the Allied surface force, back in Washington Adm. Earnest King, overall head of the USN, pointed out to

President Roosevelt that sending *USS Washington*, *South Dakota* and *Juneau* to the area would more than offset those losses – which was then done.

In the end, with the forces at hand, Mikawa simply wasn't in a position to achieve anything more than he actually did. He swept the area and forced a temporary USN withdrawal, but no single surface engagement at that time could've changed the course of the campaign. There were limits on what naval forces could do against ground troops, and Mikawa's ships could do nothing to eliminate those already ashore.

Thus, as far as the outcome of the overall campaign was concerned, the Battle of Savo Island was meaningless. The Allies lost several cruisers and destroyers, the Japanese a heavy cruiser and a transport. Those losses weren't sufficient to alter the larger balance of force in the theater one way or the other.

Immediate Consequences

From a doctrinal and technical standpoint, the IJN confirmed its night combat superiority due to better training, optics and flashless powder. The Allied performance correspondingly demonstrated that, despite superior technology in the form of radar, they were still unable to engage the Japanese on equal terms at night. There was in fact a definite over-reliance on radar, coupled with a lack of understanding of its true capacities. It was looked on more like a magic black box rather than as a complement to existing capabilities.

The USN's pre-war doctrinal faith in the superiority of its gunfire was, at least for the moment, also shown to be misplaced. The battle also exposed a lack of ability on the parts of several American officers.

At the same time, though, the engagement demonstrated the IJN wasn't able to operate freely in daylight in the Solomons area. Their reliance on individual ship maneuver, instead of massed anti-aircraft fire, meant being caught by air attack while in narrow waters could spell disaster. So, until American air power was defeated within that area, Guadalcanal's waters were out of bounds for IJN daytime operations.

At the time, the Japanese didn't draw any new lessons from the battle. All they saw was their naval victory



South of Savo Island, destroyers tend to HMAS CANBERRA in the morning hours of 9 August 1942. A U.S. Navy photo in the Brent Jones collection

and an ignominious Allied rout. Their approach to the following struggle was conditioned by that view.

Command Problems

As mentioned above, immediately after the battle the search for a culprit started. Usually Crutchley and Fletcher were singled out; the former for his supposedly faulty tactical dispositions, and the latter for his order to withdraw the carriers. The truth is their culpability was much less than that of Turner and Bode.

The latter's mistakes were tactical. His failure to alert anyone after initially learning of the attack is staggering, and his handling of the *Chicago* was poor.

At the operational level, Turner was the main culprit. Despite his attempts to focus the blame on Fletcher, it was he who mishandled the unloading of the transports and then continued to provide inaccurate estimates and erratic reports to Fletcher. He also failed to address the communications problems aboard his flagship even as it became clear that system was breaking down. He played the central role in the debacle, both because he failed to anticipate a night naval attack and, more importantly, because of his mishandling of the landing operation.

A realistic estimate of the remaining time needed for unloading would've undoubtedly prompted Fletcher to revise his own thinking. When Fletcher recommended withdrawing the carriers, he did so under the impression Turner was also going to pull out the transports as previously agreed.

At the strategic level, Savo exposed the fact the entire US command chain for the operation was faulty. Given the larger organization of Allied forces across the area, "on paper" the whole Guadalcanal operation should've been under MacArthur, the overall US area commander. King and Nimitz insisted, though, on setting up a special Navy command to manage it because they couldn't abide having fleet carriers subordinated to an army officer (particularly if that one officer was MacArthur). That worked to divide what was geographically one operational area into two artificial sectors, each depending on a different chain of command and using different communication systems.

The boundary ran almost through the middle of the Solomon Island chain (see map), with Rabaul in the Army area and Guadalcanal in that of the Navy. One result was the two commands set up different and uncoordinated air search operations, which then

proved unable to share reports in a timely manner. Having sustained a defeat, the involved commanders did reassess coordination and control procedures. The boundary between Ghormley's and MacArthur's areas was redrawn to provide for better reconnaissance and reporting.

More importantly, Savo also forced Nimitz to reassess the island's importance in terms of his own larger strategy. He had to commit fully to Guadalcanal and drop his previously ambiguous support for the operation. Once he committed himself to the idea Guadalcanal was a major operation, and not a raid, he rescinded his "calculated risk" directive, allowing a more aggressive use of the carriers.

Doctrines

Savo was a night battle that showcased the differences regarding surface combat in the two opposing navies. The IJN undertook extensive training for that type of combat; the US Navy lacked it. There's no historical revisionism that can change that fact. The initial inquiry credited the poor performance of American and Australian crews to that lack of training. That finding also can't be disputed, but there were also other factors involved.

One of the most misunderstood consequences of Savo was that USN surface combat doctrine was shattered to its foundation. No one fully realized it at that moment, because the abysmal overall performance obscured two key technical issues. First, radar proved less decisive than everyone was expecting. Poor technical performance of the deployed radar sets, coupled with a still poor understanding of the new technology among those using it, reduced the theoretical night fighting advantage it might otherwise have provided.

Second, it was shown Japanese torpedoes could effectively outrange American gunfire. The US ships had been built on the assumption their larger guns would engage the Japanese before their torpedoes could be brought into effective range. At Savo, some Japanese torpedoes were in the water before the Americans were even aware of the presence of enemy ships. The same problem continued to hinder USN surface operations until well into 1943, when the true range of Japanese torpedoes came to be realized. The refusal to acknowledge the capabilities of the Long Lance was one of the worst errors of the US

Navy command structure, on par with its early-war refusal to acknowledge problems with its own torpedoes.

More particularly, in regard to surface combat doctrines, before the start of the war both the USN and IJN had embarked on two different courses. The Americans decided the key to winning any engagement would be long-range accurate gunfire. While they developed torpedoes, they considered them as only a secondary weapon. For instance, while they explored the concept, they never thought of long-range torpedoes using oxygen as fuel as realistic. The consensus was, since oxygen in concentration is extremely flammable, such weapons would be more dangerous to their users than to their targets. Thus the USN placed all its hopes in guns and superior fire control.

When the USN learned of the Japanese development of heavy destroyers with powerful torpedo batteries, the answer was, starting in 1933, to design light cruisers of the Brooklyn-class equipped with 15 rapid-fire 6-inch guns. Concurrently, the Navy also invested in radar technology to produce more accurate and speedier fire. The rationale was to put massive “broad-sides” on any target sufficient to speedily obliterate it by weight of fire.

The corollary to that reliance on gunnery was – since the main aiming method depended on optical range finders and splash observation – gun battles would be conducted mainly in daylight. Night engagements were only to be affairs involving small, light vessels. Only as radar became more available did the USN again become interested in night combat.

The IJN started with almost the same assumptions: the decisive battle would be fought in daylight by long-range gunnery. Yet – due to the inescapable fact they faced a more

powerful navy, and one supported by a larger industrial base – the Japanese also explored different ways to reduce the US material advantage prior to the decisive encounter.

One of those ways was airpower; the other was night action by light and cruiser forces using a combination of guns and torpedoes. The IJN therefore invested heavily in developing a reliable long-range torpedo, using what all other navies had deemed unfeasible: oxygen fuel. The resulting weapon, while potentially dangerous to its users, proved powerful enough to sink a medium-sized ship with a single hit while also outranging its guns.

The IJN also began intensive training for night combat in which they stressed accuracy of visual observation, the use of flashless powder and the combined use of guns and torpedoes. Such night actions were in fact to become the mainstay tactic for cruisers and destroyers.

Those efforts paid off, because Japanese visual observation proved a match for USN surface search radar for the duration of the war, and the combination of flashless powder and torpedoes was likewise effective. ★

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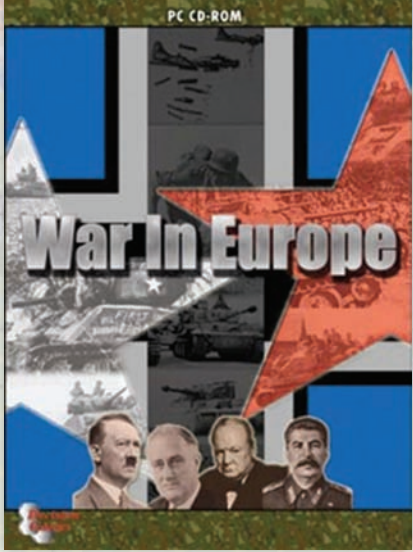
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