

## CHAPTER 8

### SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC—PRELUDE TO FLOOD TIDE

THE activities of the Australian corvettes and destroyers on anti-submarine work on Australia's far western flank were matched at this period by those of their sister ships operating from Darwin in northern Australian waters. Mention has been made of operations by small ships at Timor in support of the troops carrying on guerilla warfare there, and of the carriage of Dutch troops to the Aru Islands in July. A similar though less successful operation was essayed the same month at the near-by Tanimbar Islands. All of these operations stemmed from the original garrisoning of Ambon and Timor, the loss of those islands to the Japanese and the desire of the Australians and Dutch to do something about the situation.

On 4th May eleven A.I.F. officers and men and six Dutch soldiers who had escaped from Ambon reached Darwin in the lugger *Griffioen* from Saumlaki, in the Tanimbar Islands. They reported that the Tanimbar and Aru Islands were not occupied by the Japanese. Among the A.I.F. officers who reached Darwin, one, Lieutenant Jenkins,<sup>1</sup> escaped from the prisoner-of-war camp at Tan Toey, on the eastern shore of Ambon Bay just north of the town of Ambon, on 17th March. He brought back information that the camp held approximately 1,000 prisoners (800 Australian and 200 Dutch) who were likely, because of the food situation, to be transferred to Formosa about 17th June. Ambon Island was held by some 1,200 to 1,500 Japanese marines, dispersed in five bodies. One of these, of 50 marines, constituted the guard at the camp. The prisoners of war had plans for participation in the event of an Allied attack on the island, and as a result of the information provided by Jenkins, the Director of Plans at Navy Office, Commander Wright,<sup>2</sup> produced a paper "investigating the possibilities of effecting the release" of the prisoners and bringing them to Australia, utilising the Australian destroyer *Arunta*, the Dutch cruiser *Tromp*, and a commando force. The paper concluded that the detailed scheme put forward was practicable. It was approved in principle by the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Captain Nichols; was accepted cautiously and with reservations by Rear-Admiral F. W. Coster, commanding the Netherlands Naval Forces in the S.W.P.A.; and was embraced with some enthusiasm by the First Naval Member, Admiral Royle, who recommended it to Comsouwespac, Vice-Admiral Leary, and commented "I don't think the risk to the destroyers is unduly heavy, and it should have an excellent effect on morale."<sup>3</sup> Leary, however, could not approve of any such operation, which seemed to him "entirely impracticable". He

<sup>1</sup> Maj W. T. Jenkins, MBE. 2/21 Bn and "Z" Special Unit. Builder and contractor; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Moreland, Vic. 29 Nov 1912.

<sup>2</sup> Cdr H. C. Wright, DSO; RAN, HMS *Royal Sovereign* 1939-42; Director of Plans, Navy Office 1942-43; HMAS *Australia* 1944-45. B. Boulder City, WA, 22 Feb 1904.

<sup>3</sup> Minute from Royle to Leary and Coster, 3 June 1942.

thought that "we would lose two of our fighting ships and in addition would not add to our prestige by an attempt of this nature".

So the Ambon plan withered on the vine, but other operations, of a less ambitious nature, were carried out or attempted. On 2nd May the Naval Board directed N.O.I.C. Darwin, Commodore C. J. Pope, to arrange for approximately 40 Allied persons to be brought out from Saumlaki. *Warrnambool* was given the mission. She arrived at Saumlaki—some 300 miles north of Darwin on the south-east coast of Jamdena, largest of the Tanimbar group—at 5 p.m. on 5th May. Barron, her commanding officer, landed in the motor-boat and "after having conversation with residents embarked five men, eight women and eleven children, all white", and reached Darwin without incident on the 7th.

*Warrnambool* made a second run to the islands, this time to the Aru group, some 400 miles north-east of Darwin, in July. At 3 a.m. on the 9th, in company with H.M.A.S. *Southern Cross*, she sailed from Darwin. Both ships were loaded with Dutch troops ("Plover" Force) and equipment. They crossed the Arafura Sea during the 10th and 11th—"troops all down with sea-sickness" recorded Barron—and arrived off Dobo, on the west side of Wokam Island, at 2 a.m. on the 12th. At 6.20 a.m. both ships entered harbour and, supported by R.A.A.F. aircraft, landed their troops and gear without opposition. Landings, and the discharging of stores and equipment, were completed by 10.30 a.m. on the 13th, and the ships reached Darwin next day.

*Southern Cross* took part in another operation later in the month when, in company with H.M.A.S. *Chinampa*,<sup>4</sup> an attempt was made at Saumlaki to repeat the operation carried out successfully at Dobo. On this occasion Australian troops were embarked, and the two ships sailed from Darwin on 28th July. Unfortunately, while they were on passage, their arrival at Saumlaki was forestalled by the Japanese, who landed there in some force before dawn on the 30th. Saumlaki's defending force consisted of one sergeant and twelve other ranks of the Netherlands Army, armed with Tommy-guns, a Lewis gun, and hand grenades, and entrenched in a prepared semi-circular position fronting the jetty. At 4.10 a.m. two ships were seen entering harbour, and were presumed to be *Chinampa* and *Southern Cross*, whose arrival was expected. They were, however, Japanese warships, probably large destroyers. Initial landings of approximately 300 men were made from boats on each side of the 1,500-foot jetty. As the enemy, in close formation, reached the shore end of the jetty the defenders opened fire, and the attack was repulsed with heavy Japanese casualties. Other landings were, however, effected some distance south of the jetty, and fire, directed by searchlights, was opened on the defence position from the ships. Six of the defenders were killed and the survivors driven to the bush. At 6 a.m. the town was in Japanese hands, and shortly after the Japanese ships sailed.

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<sup>4</sup> HMAS *Chinampa*, diesel ketch (built 1938; commissioned 1942), 60 tons.

At this time *Chinampa* and *Southern Cross* were still some distance from their destination, and unaware of the enemy's landings. At 9.30 a.m. *Southern Cross* suffered an engine breakdown. *Chinampa* went on alone, entered the harbour, and anchored some distance from the shore. Her commanding officer, Commissioned Warrant Officer Henderson,<sup>5</sup> landed, but was fired on and rejoined his ship to await the arrival of *Southern Cross*. When that ship arrived next morning, *Chinampa* proceeded to the jetty to make fast and disembark troops and stores, but she met heavy enemy fire which fatally wounded Henderson, and wounded Lieutenant Anderson<sup>6</sup> and a rating. Both ships thereupon withdrew without landing their troops, and proceeded to Darwin, where they arrived on 2nd August. The surviving Dutch defenders at Saumlaki made their way to Larat Island, where their numbers were swelled by other refugees, and eventually a total of 36, including two Australian soldiers, and Dutch native troops, police, and civilians, reached Bathurst Island in a ketch on 14th August.

In September *Warrnambool* made her third visit to the islands, again to the Aru group to bring out survivors of "Plover" Force. At 3 a.m. on the 15th she sailed from Darwin, and at 6 p.m. next day closed up at action stations, ran close in to shore at Ngaibor, and took off one officer and 40 N.E.I. troops, and one native civilian official with his wife and seven children. She proceeded to sea again at 7 p.m., and reached Darwin without incident at 2 p.m. on the 18th.

## II

Meanwhile, farther west, other operations involving small ships from Darwin continued at Timor, and six days after her arrival at Darwin from the Aru Islands, *Warrnambool* was caught up in the Timor activities when she went there with *Kalgoorlie* in the attempt to succour *Voyager*.

As previously stated, by the beginning of September *Kuru* had made six successful trips to Timor, and *Vigilant* had made three. These were in service to the main "Sparrow" Force on the island. But on her 6th trip *Kuru*, before calling on "Sparrow" Force at Betano, landed four members of "Z" Special Unit<sup>7</sup> at Beco, some 50 miles east of Betano. The need to sustain this force led the Naval Board to ask N.O.I.C. Darwin if he could provide a powered lugger or similar craft with volunteer crew "for three possibly four visits eastern Timor". Pope replied that in view of anticipated trips to Timor by corvettes, and future special trips by *Kuru* and *Vigilant*, he considered it impossible to place this extensive service on a voluntary basis or to differentiate between it and that indicated in the Naval Board's request, "which would be bad precedent for the former". He proposed to treat the indicated visits to eastern Timor as normal service,

<sup>5</sup> CWO F. J. Henderson, RANR. Comd HMAS's *Moruya* 1941-42, *Chinampa* 1942. Of Melbourne; b. Maitland, SA, 9 Nov 1907. Killed in action 31 Jul 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Lt W. F. Anderson, RANVR. HMAS *Chinampa*. Bank officer; of Perth, WA; b. Perth, 6 Jul 1900.

<sup>7</sup> Those landed were Captain D. K. Broadhurst and three companions. "Z" Special was a small unit of the Australian Army of a highly secret nature, responsible for special operations and special intelligence tasks.

utilising the most suitable vessel when requirements were known. The Naval Board agreed, and subsequent trips to support "Z" Special were made by *Kuru* (8th October), *Kalgoorlie* (16th November), and *Vigilant* (8th December) to Aliambata, some 50 miles east of Beco.

At the beginning of October Pope was confronted with a large Timor problem, entailing the withdrawal of the 2/2nd Independent Company (approximately 363 all ranks); the transport of 50 Dutch troops to Timor; and the withdrawal therefrom of about 190 Dutch troops. He estimated a total of five corvette loads of troops, and had two ships immediately available, *Warrnambool* and *Kalgoorlie*; and a third, *Castlemaine*, due in a few days. A fourth, *Armidale*,<sup>8</sup> would possibly arrive in about a month. But as he remarked to the G.O.C. Northern Territory Force: "From past experience it is almost impossible to know a month ahead what new urgent duty will arise or whether one or more of the corvettes allotted to me may not be removed from this area for more urgent duties at Moresby or elsewhere." *Castlemaine* arrived at Darwin from her Coral Sea escorting duties on 5th October. She made acquaintance with Timor one month later. On 5th November she loaded military mail and stores, embarked one Dutch military officer and four war correspondents, and on the 6th sailed for Betano, where she arrived on the evening of the 7th. She was back in Darwin with some troops and refugees at 10.30 a.m. on the 9th.

On 7th November *Armidale* (Lieut-Commander Richards<sup>9</sup>), who had also been employed on Coral Sea escort work, arrived in Darwin. On the 10th, Lieut-Colonel Spence,<sup>1</sup> commanding "Sparrow" Force, signalled Northern Territory Force headquarters that the 2/2nd Independent Company urgently needed relief. He himself was under orders to transfer to Northern Territory Force, and on 11th November he was succeeded in command of "Sparrow" Force by Major Callinan,<sup>2</sup> who had previously commanded the 2/2nd Independent Company. On 18th November *Kuru*, now under the command of Lieutenant Grant,<sup>3</sup> made her penultimate trip to Timor, to land stores at Betano, and to explore landing places at the Kelan River and Quicras—both some few miles to the eastward of Betano—as alternative landing places thereto if the use of Betano was denied by the enemy. *Kuru*'s operation order from Commodore Pope opened with the words: "An Allied force known as 'Lancer' Force"—this name having succeeded "Sparrow" as the force designation on 18th November. *Kuru* carried out her mission successfully, and reached Darwin on 22nd November, bringing with her from Betano Spence and eleven other members of the A.I.F., three war correspondents, and three Portuguese civilians.

<sup>8</sup> HMAS *Armidale*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts. Sunk off Timor, 1 Dec 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Cdr D. H. Richards, RD; RANR. HMAS *Kanimbla* 1939-42; comd HMAS *Armidale* 1942. Ship's officer; of Sydney; b. Williamstown, Vic, 1 Apr 1902. Died 11 Mar 1967.

<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col A. Spence, DSO. OC 2/2 Indep Coy 1941-42; comd Sparrow Force 1942, 2/9 Cav Cdo Regt 1944-45. Journalist; of Longreach, Qld; b. Bundaberg, Qld, 5 Feb 1906.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Col B. J. Callinan, DSO, MC. 2/2 Indep Coy; comd Sparrow Force 1942-43, 26 Bn 1945. Civil engineer; of Moonee Ponds, Vic; b. Moonee Ponds, 2 Feb 1913.

<sup>3</sup> Lt J. A. Grant; RANR. Comd HMAS's *Patricia Cam* 1942, *Kuru* 1942-43; HMAS *Manoora* 1943-44; comd HMAS *Katoomba* 1944-45. Of Forbes, NSW; b. Southsea, England, 6 Nov 1903.

On 24th November Allied Land Forces Headquarters approved the relief of the 2/2nd Independent Company, and the withdrawal from the island at the same time of some 150 Portuguese who wished to go to Australia. Arrangements were made, and Pope, in Darwin, put in train the withdrawal operation, using *Kuru*, *Castlemaine*, and *Armidale*. The proposal was for the three ships each to make two trips—to run into Betano on the night 30th November-1st December, land the 50 fresh Dutch troops and lift the 190 to be withdrawn, together with the 150 Portuguese, and return on the night 4th-5th December for the 2/2nd Independent Company.

*Kuru* sailed from Darwin at 10.30 p.m. on 28th November for Betano, where she was to anticipate the arrival of the corvettes by two hours and in the interval to land stores and embark the Portuguese refugees, ready to transfer them to *Castlemaine* when the corvettes arrived. *Castlemaine* would then leave for Darwin while *Kuru*—ferrying because of her lighter draft—would land the 50 Dutch troops from *Armidale*, and then load that ship with sick and wounded commandos and Dutch troops, embark her own passengers, and the two ships would leave in company for Australia. *Kuru* had overcast and rain most of the run across, was delayed by making her landfall some distance east of Betano, and finally reached there three hours late at 11.45 p.m. on 30th November.

*Castlemaine* (Senior Officer), and *Armidale*—the last named with two Dutch Army officers, 61 native troops, and three A.I.F. on board—left Darwin at 1.42 a.m. on 29th November. At 9.15 a.m. on the 30th, when they were about 120 miles from their destination, the two ships were attacked by a single aircraft which, after dropping a number of bombs without success, made off towards Timor an hour later. Lieut-Commander Sullivan, feeling that this discovery jeopardised the operation, steered an evasive course, and signalled Darwin for further orders. The reply was that fighter protection was being sent, and the operation must proceed and the risk be accepted.<sup>4</sup> The ships were subjected to two more air attacks, each by formations of five bombers according to *Armidale* (who reported that in the second attack the bombers were driven off by the promised fighters) and by “nine planes in V formation dropping not less than 45 bombs and machine-gunning from a low level” in the closing stages of the attack, according to *Castlemaine*. The ships suffered no damage or casualties, and reached Betano at 3.30 a.m. on 1st December. There was no sign of *Kuru*.

Having arrived late at Betano, Grant was in somewhat of a quandary. He did not know that the corvettes had been delayed by air attacks, and wondered if they had reached Betano ahead of him and sailed when they did not find him there. He embarked 77 Portuguese refugees and one

<sup>4</sup> *Castlemaine* to NOIC Darwin (R) *Armidale*: “10 degrees 30 min. south, 127 degrees 48 min. east, course 180 degrees speed 12 knots. Consider prospects operation doubtful. Request orders. 0020Z/30.”

NOIC Darwin to *Castlemaine*: “Steer evasive course to north-east for one hour. Beauplighters about 0230Z. Your 0020Z acknowledged. Risk must be accepted. 0102Z/30.”

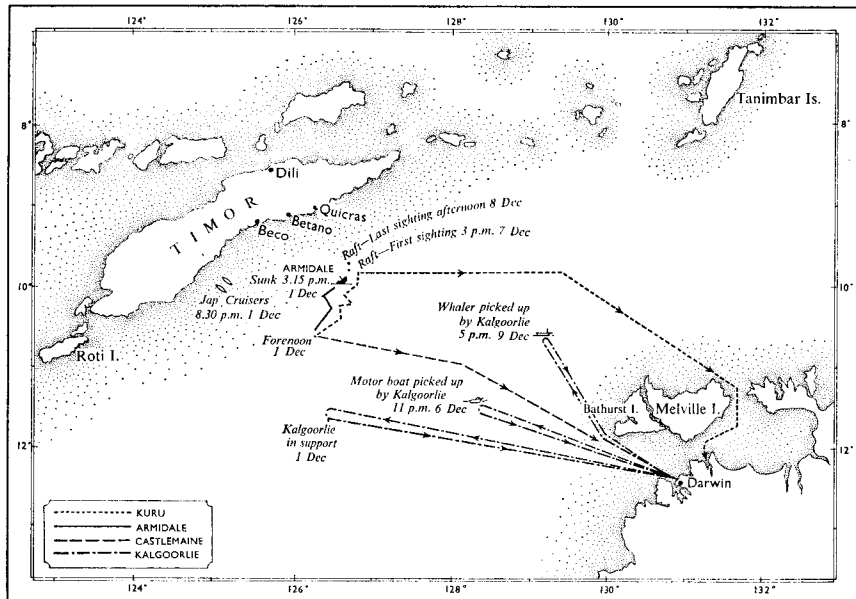
A.I.F. stretcher case, and, there still being no sign of the corvettes, sailed about 2 a.m. on 1st December, after sending a signal to Pope through "Lancer" Force: "Have 70 women and children on board. No contact. Returning Darwin." Pope's reply directed him to repeat the operation on the night 1st-2nd December, and at 5 a.m. on 1st December Pope sailed *Kalgoorlie* to a position about 250 miles W by N of Darwin to give general support. Actually it was concern lest *Kuru* might have awaited him at Betano that caused Sullivan to enter the bay at 3.30 a.m., though it was then far too late to proceed with the operation. Once he was sure that *Kuru* was not there he sailed, and the two corvettes made as much southing as possible before daylight. *Kuru* was sighted some 70 miles south of Betano and closed soon after dawn, and her passengers transferred to *Castlemaine*, at which time Sullivan was told by Grant that *Kuru* was to return to Betano "and do the job tonight". The transfer was barely completed when enemy bombers appeared and *Kuru* ran for the cover of a rain squall.

Sullivan swiftly assessed the situation: *Kuru* was going back to Betano; *Armidale* had on board troops to land there; somebody had to search for two airmen from a missing Beaufighter (N.O.I.C. Darwin had given position and instructions); could *Armidale* and *Castlemaine* exchange passengers and roles, and *Castlemaine* accompany *Kuru* back to Betano? The presence of enemy aircraft clearly made any thought of the two corvettes exchanging passengers out of the question. Sullivan, as Senior Officer, was thus forced to the distasteful recommendation to Pope that *Kuru* and *Armidale* return to Betano to complete the troop operation, while *Castlemaine* searched for the Beaufighter pilots some 150 miles south-east of Betano, on her way back to Darwin. Pope approved, and directed Sullivan to instruct *Kuru* and *Armidale* accordingly, and the ships parted company.

Back in Darwin, Pope, for some hours, could follow events only through the medium of signals, helping as much as he could by arranging the provision of fighter protection and giving meteorological advice.<sup>5</sup> News of air attacks on *Kuru* and *Armidale* was soon forthcoming. *Kuru* reported being bombed at 12.28 p.m. on the 1st, and within half an hour *Armidale* also reported being attacked, at 12.54 p.m. She was then in position 10 degrees 35 minutes South, 126 degrees 16 minutes East, some 90 miles south of Betano. She and *Kuru* were not in company, nor within sight of each other. *Kuru*'s second "attack signal" was at the same time as *Armidale*'s, 12.54, and her third at 1.9 p.m. At 1.30 *Armidale* reported, from a position a few miles nearer Betano than at her immediately previous signal, that she was being bombed by nine aircraft—"no fighters arrived"; and 28 minutes later she gave the bare facts of being attacked by "nine

<sup>5</sup> Just after noon on the 1st, for example, he signalled to Sullivan to "steer 155 degrees until dark to take advantage of local storms to southward". Sullivan subsequently reported: "After parting company with *Armidale* and proceeding in search of airmen the cover of several rain-storms was gained until receipt of NOIC Darwin's instruction to steer 155 degrees which was obeyed."

bombers, four fighters. Absolutely no fighter support." *Kuru's* next signal was at 2.45 p.m., and that was followed by repeated reports from her of attacks by formations of up to ten bombers, at 3.51 p.m.,<sup>6</sup> 6.26 p.m., and 6.43 p.m. Grant estimated that during the 6 hours 50 minutes *Kuru* was subjected to these attacks, she was the object of attention of 44 bomber aircraft in 23 individual attacks, and that she was the target for approximately 200 bombs. Near misses averaged 5 feet to 100 feet from the ship.



Loss of H.M.A.S. *Armidale*

In the 2.45 p.m. attack she suffered some engine damage from shrapnel, and Grant signalled to Darwin that he was returning, unable to complete the operation. Pope replied that the operation must be carried through.<sup>7</sup> At about 8 p.m., however, he received news of an enemy threat additional to the air attacks, which caused him to order abandonment of the operation. At 8.5 p.m. Allied aircraft reported two Japanese cruisers about 60 miles south-west of Betano and about the same distance from *Armidale's* last reported (12.54 p.m.) position, steaming at 25 knots and steering south-easterly towards that position. At 8.30 p.m. they were attacked by

<sup>6</sup> In this attack *Kuru* was straddled: "Two on my bows, about ten feet off, one aft, which blew up our assault boat, which was being towed by ten feet of line. This straddle shook up the ship's clock, an eight-bell striking clock, and rang the bell. One of the ratings, Signalman Jamieson, looked up at the planes and said: 'Tojo, you've got a bloody cigar!'". *Kuru*, Captain's "Report of Proceedings".

<sup>7</sup> NOIC Darwin to *Armidale*, *Kuru*, 0601Z (Greenwich time, 4.31 p.m. local time) 1st December. "You are to proceed to Betano to carry out this important operation. Recognition as for last night. Air attack is to be accepted as ordinary routine secondary warfare. *Armidale* be prepared to begin operation without assistance from *Kuru*."

Hudson aircraft of the R.A.A.F. But by this time *Armidale* presented no target for this new enemy. She had for nearly five hours been lying on the bed of the Timor Sea in position 10 degrees South, 126 degrees 30 minutes East, about 70 miles S.S.E. of Betano. At 3.15 p.m. on 1st December, in an attack by nine bombers, three fighters, and one float plane, *Armidale* was struck by two torpedoes and possibly one bomb. She turned over and sank in three or four minutes. During the action one bomber and one fighter were seen to crash into the sea some distance from the ship, victims to the ship's anti-aircraft fire. The bomber fell to Ordinary Seaman Sheean<sup>8</sup> at the after oerlikon, who remained at the gun when the ship sank.<sup>9</sup>

Of all of this, Pope, in Darwin, was unaware at the time. During the afternoon he signalled to all four ships—*Kalgoorlie*, *Castlemaine*, *Armidale* and *Kuru*—directing courses to be steered and positions reached to enable fighter protection to be arranged and *Kalgoorlie*'s cover to be effective. On receiving the enemy cruiser sighting he cancelled the operation and directed *Armidale* and *Kuru* to "return Darwin forthwith steer initial course east for 100 miles thence via Cape Don" (Dundas Strait, the western extremity of the Cobourg Peninsula), and told *Castlemaine* and *Kalgoorlie* to return to Darwin "with all despatch. Maintain W/T silence."

*Castlemaine* was the first home at 9.39 a.m. on 2nd December, followed about three hours later by *Kalgoorlie*. Pope still assumed that *Armidale* was returning to Darwin in accordance with his previous instructions, and at 7 p.m. on the 2nd he told her by signal she could return by Cape Fourcroy (the western cape of Bathurst Island) if desired, and to report her position at 2.30 a.m. on the 3rd. About the same time he signalled to Navy Office:

What is the earliest date at which I can expect Fairmiles?<sup>1</sup> Requirements Timor operations becoming increasingly difficult with slow vessels available. Last one was unsuccessful except for partial evacuation of refugees. Ships subject continuous air attack and were withdrawn on threat of surface attack. Expect all ships will have returned intact by tomorrow Thursday except that *Kuru* is very slightly damaged but making good speed.

*Kuru* reached Darwin at 5.26 p.m. on 3rd December. Some hours earlier doubts as to *Armidale*'s safety had arisen in Darwin, and at 11.36 a.m.

<sup>8</sup> OD E. Sheean, H1617. HMAS *Armidale*. Of Hobart; b. Barrington, Tas, 28 Dec 1923. Killed in action 1 Dec 1942.

<sup>9</sup> There were numerous references to Ordinary Seaman Sheean in reports by survivors. Richards, *Armidale*'s commanding officer, singled him out for special mention: "Ordinary Seaman Edward Sheean, although wounded, remained at his post at the after oerlikon, and was responsible for bringing down one enemy bomber. He continued firing until he was killed at his gun." "Report of Proceedings of HMAS *Armidale*."

Ordinary Seaman R. M. Caro, PM4100, in an account of the action, wrote: "During the attack a plane had been brought down and for this the credit went to Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean. Teddy died, but none of us who survived, I am sure, will ever forget his gallant deed which won him a Mention in Despatches. He was a loader number on the after oerlikon gun. When the order 'Abandon ship' was given, he made for the side, only to be hit twice by the bullets of an attacking Zero. None of us will ever know what made him do it, but he went back to his gun, strapped himself in, and brought down a Jap plane, still firing as he disappeared beneath the waves."

<sup>1</sup> The first Fairmile motor launch built in Australia (ML813) was laid down at the yard of Lars Halvorsen and Sons, Sydney, on 25th March 1942 and launched on 7th October 1942. She commissioned on 16th November 1942. ML814 was the second Fairmile to arrive in Darwin, 25th May 1943 (Lieutenant R. R. Lewis). The first Fairmile to arrive in Darwin was ML815, 8th April 1943 (Lieutenant C. A. J. Inman).



on the 3rd, Pope expressed these to the Naval Board, referring to the air attacks she had reported, and concluding: "Possibility she was sunk by aircraft or damaged and subsequently located by enemy cruisers. Air search is proceeding." The air searches produced results at 10.15 a.m. on 5th December, when a boat with survivors was sighted in 11 degrees 19 minutes South, 128 degrees 20 minutes East—about 115 miles west of Bathurst Island.

When *Armidale* was struck by torpedoes at 3.15 p.m. on 1st December she had on board a total of 149, comprising ship's company of 83, three A.I.F., two Dutch Army officers, and 61 Indonesian troops. About two-thirds of the Indonesian troops were in the forward mess deck and were killed by the blast of the first torpedo. The ship swiftly took a heavy list to port and when, within a minute or so, this reached 50 degrees, "Abandon Ship" was ordered, and the survivors left the ship in the motor-boat and on a Carley float and wreckage. They were machine-gunned from the aircraft, and a number killed and wounded (two of the wounded subsequently died). Of the ship's company there were killed in the initial explosion, by subsequent machine-gunning in the water, or died shortly afterwards, one officer, Engineer Lieutenant Jenkyn,<sup>2</sup> R.A.N.R., 9 ratings and 37 N.E.I. troops.

The wounded were put in the motor-boat, which collected flotsam for rafts; and next morning a raft was built, using two french floats from the ship's minesweeping gear as a foundation. It was hoped that Allied reconnaissance aircraft would find them, but when, by midday, none had been sighted, the commanding officer—Lieut-Commander Richards—decided to make for Darwin in the motor-boat for help. This was a painful decision (reached after consultation with the ship's company) forced upon him by the fact that the First Lieutenant, Lieutenant Whitting,<sup>3</sup> the only other officer capable of navigating, was paralysed from the hips down, and incapable of taking the boat away. Those in the motor-boat totalled 22—Richards, Whitting, 16 ratings, and four N.E.I. soldiers. The boat set off in the afternoon of Wednesday, 2nd December. She had fuel for about 100 miles, but at the outset the motor would not function, and for 28 hours she was rowed. The motor was then started, and she motored for 20 hours. When she was sighted by a reconnaissance aircraft from Darwin on Saturday, 5th December, at 10.15 a.m., she was about 150 miles W.N.W. of Darwin (and about 150 miles E.S.E. of where *Armidale* was sunk) and making slow progress under sail. This sighting gave Pope, in Darwin, the first certain indication of the loss of *Armidale*. He at once dispatched *Kalgoorlie* to the position, and she sailed from Darwin at 11.40 a.m.

By this time another boat with *Armidale* survivors was on its way. When

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<sup>2</sup> Engr Lt H. F. M. Jenkyn, RANR; HMAS *Armidale*. Of Cammeray, NSW; b. Sydney, 14 Aug 1909. Killed in action 1 Dec 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Lt W. G. Whitting, DSC; RANR. Comd HMAS *Vendetta* 1941-42; HMAS *Armidale* 1942; comd HMAS *Colac* 1943-44. Ship's officer; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Cardiff, Wales, 14 Jul 1915.

the motor-boat set out the previous Wednesday, 80 survivors were left on the rafts and wreckage—55 of the ship's company, three A.I.F., and 22 N.E.I. troops. *Armidale's* gunnery officer, Lieutenant Palmer,<sup>4</sup> was in charge. Among the wreckage was *Armidale's* whaler, which was badly holed, submerged, and suspended about four feet below the surface by two 44-gallon drums to which she was lashed. She gave slight additional support to about 25 men wearing lifebelts. On Thursday the survivors managed to haul one end of the waterlogged craft on to the rafts, to bale out, and to repair her sufficiently to keep her afloat with continuous baling. Since no Allied aircraft had been sighted by 11.15 a.m. on Saturday, 5th December (by which time the survivors were reduced by two with the deaths of Leading Cook Williams<sup>5</sup> and one N.E.I. soldier), Lieutenant Palmer decided to try to reach the Allied reconnaissance area in the whaler. He took in her 25 of *Armidale's* ratings and the three A.I.F. soldiers, and steered south-east. There remained on the raft 28 of the ship's company, and on the Carley float 21 Dutch troops, including the two officers. The whole party was in charge of Sub-Lieutenant Buckland.<sup>6</sup>

*Kalgoorlie* left Darwin at 11.40 a.m. on 5th December. She reached the vicinity of the sighting of *Armidale's* motor-boat at 2.30 next morning, and proceeded to search the area. That afternoon a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft sighted her, and two bombers attacked for half an hour from 4.40 p.m. and aimed a total of 16 bombs at the ship, the nearest landing some 50 feet distant. *Kalgoorlie* fought back. At 10 o'clock that night, Sunday, 6th December, *Kalgoorlie* sighted a red Very light, and an hour later she picked up the 20 survivors from the motor-boat (two of its original company had died—Ordinary Seaman Smith<sup>7</sup> and one N.E.I. soldier) and hoisted the boat inboard. They were in poor shape. Many were wounded (two died in *Kalgoorlie*) and Richards, *Armidale's* commanding officer, was speechless with exhaustion, and unable to impart much information. This particular Timor operation was one of difficult decisions, and Litchfield, *Kalgoorlie's* commanding officer, was now faced with the alternative of seeking the rafts, or returning to Darwin with the survivors he had on board. The balance lay between his placing *Kalgoorlie* in an area where she might well suffer *Armidale's* fate, and the possibility that the rafts would be found by a flying boat and their survivors rescued before *Kalgoorlie* could arrive. He decided to return to Darwin, and reached there at 1.30 p.m. on the 7th.

An hour or two after *Kalgoorlie* reached Darwin, an aircraft sighted the rafts, in position about 280 miles N.W. by W. of Darwin—about 33 miles north-east of where *Armidale* had sunk. There appeared to be 25

<sup>4</sup> Lt L. G. Palmer, VRD; RANR. HMAS's *Kanimbla*, *Armidale*, *Shepparton* and *Kalgoorlie*. Plumber; of Williamstown, Vic; b. Williamstown, 19 Oct 1915.

<sup>5</sup> Ldg Cook W. B. Williams, 22022. HMAS's *Australia* and *Armidale*. Hall porter; of Hobart; b. Hobart, 2 Feb 1920. Lost in sinking of *Armidale*, 2 Dec 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Sub-Lt J. R. Buckland, RANVR; HMAS *Armidale*. Student; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 6 Apr 1920. Killed in action 8 Dec 1942.

<sup>7</sup> OD F. F. Smith, S5399; HMAS *Armidale*. Of Brighton-le-Sands, NSW; b. Brighton-le-Sands, 27 Jul 1918. Lost in sinking of *Armidale*, 1 Dec 1942.

to 35 men in three groups, near to each other. The last sighting by this aircraft was at 3.56 p.m. Within minutes of the aircraft's report being received, Pope ordered *Vigilant* to the position, but soon afterwards cancelled the order on learning that a Catalina aircraft had been sent from Cairns, and directed *Vigilant* to lie off the north-west corner of Melville Island in anticipation of the aircraft sighting the raft. This the Catalina did in the afternoon of the 8th, in a position seven miles N.N.E. of the earlier sighting. By this time the occupants of the raft had dwindled to "20 at the most". The flying boat was unable to alight because of the state of the sea, and Pope ordered *Vigilant* to the position. In addition to sighting the rafts the Catalina, on its return flight to Darwin, sighted the whaler—then about 150 miles north-west of Darwin and approximately the same distance south of the rafts. Pope again sent *Kalgoorlie*, who left Darwin in the morning of the 9th and sighted the whaler at 4.57 p.m.<sup>8</sup> Within an hour she embarked the 29 survivors and hoisted the whaler inboard, and delivered the rescued men at Darwin at 11.25 a.m. on the 10th. Nothing more was seen of the rafts and their tragic, dwindling company, in spite of extensive and exhaustive air searches carried out daily until 13th December, and surface runs through the area, including one by the Dutch destroyer *Tjerk Hiddes*.

It will be recalled that when *Castlemaine* returned to Darwin on 2nd December and it became clear that the operation had gone astray, though the loss of *Armidale* was not yet known, Pope asked the Naval Board when he could expect Fairmiles to replace the slow vessels he was forced to employ for Timor operations. Two days later he told both the Naval Board and Comsouwespacfor (Vice-Admiral A. S. Carpender, U.S.N., who succeeded Vice-Admiral Leary on 11th September) that it was urgently required to withdraw from Timor 51 sick and wounded, 295 2/2nd Independent Company, 176 Dutch and 326 Portuguese. "Urgently request destroyer be sent Darwin to run about three trips." Carpender responded at once by directing Commander Task Force 51 (Rear-Admiral C. A. Lockwood, U.S.N.), in Fremantle, to send a destroyer forthwith to Darwin. *Tjerk Hiddes* reached the northern port on 9th December and sailed next morning for Betano. She was back in Darwin in the afternoon of the 11th with 49 sick and wounded, 64 2/2nd Independent Company, 192 Dutch and 87 Portuguese. Between 10th and 19th December she transported in three trips approximately 950 persons from Timor to Darwin "with great efficiency".<sup>9</sup> She left Darwin to return to Fremantle on the 20th.

By then "Finis" had been written to the unsuccessful attempt by the corvettes to carry out the operation, and hope for the recovery of any more survivors from *Armidale* had died. *Vigilant*, ordered to the last known position of the rafts on 8th December, fell a victim to serious engine

<sup>8</sup> From the time of its sighting by the Catalina, the whaler was kept under observation by "one long procession of aircraft, we were dropped big tins of water by parachute, prunes, cigarettes, medical supplies, in fact everything we wanted". Account by survivor Ordinary Seaman Caro.

<sup>9</sup> Signal (6.25 p.m. 19th December) from NOIC Darwin to Comsouwespacfor, Naval Board, CTF51.

defects and had to return to port. Her place was taken by *Kalgoorlie*, who left Darwin on the 11th and searched unsuccessfully until the 13th (she sighted both *Tjerk Hiddes* and *Vigilant* during the period) and she was recalled to Darwin by Pope when the air and surface search was "reluctantly abandoned". In this operation there was throughout wholehearted and valuable cooperation by the R.A.A.F. Although the Beaufighters from Darwin were unable to give adequate close air cover to the ships, they gave indirect protection by destroying five Japanese aircraft and damaging approximately 20 others on Koepang aerodrome; and the extent of the air searches may be appreciated by the fact that the R.A.A.F. aircraft made 43 sorties and flew more than 40,000 miles over a total period of 300 flying hours.

As remarked, this operation was notable for the painful and difficult decisions which had to be made by all those in the various commands. In his over-all responsibility at Darwin, Commodore Pope's position was comparable with that of Admiral Cunningham's in Alexandria in May 1941, when he had to order units of the Mediterranean Fleet to suffer heavy air attacks and heavy losses in the Battle of Crete. Sullivan so felt the responsibility of his own decision in recommending the return of *Castlemaine* to Darwin while *Armidale* and *Kuru* continued the Timor operation (particularly after he, in his signal to Pope of 30th November, had expressed his doubts of the operation's prospects) that he sought an inquiry, an action which Pope, at first, thought implied criticism of his own conduct of affairs.<sup>1</sup> Similar difficult and distasteful decisions had to be reached by Richards with regard to *Armidale*'s motor-boat, and Litchfield and *Kalgoorlie* when he picked up the first of *Armidale*'s survivors.

The subsequent inquiry paid particular attention to all aspects of the operation, and in every regard the finding of the Naval Board was favourable, and the decisions and actions of the various commanding officers fully endorsed. Of the over-all conduct of the operation by N.O.I.C. Darwin "in the face of possible risk from air and surface attack", the Board remarked:

We have to remember that similar operations had been taking place during the last two or three months. We have to remember that many naval risks and serious losses have been incurred in supporting the garrisons of Tobruk and Malta and in passing convoys to Russia under insistent air and submarine attack. This operation, though on a much smaller scale, had as its object the reinforcement of "Lancer" Force which was heavily outnumbered on the island, and the evacuation of refugees whose position was precarious. . . . The Naval Board consider that the carrying out of the operation with the forces available was a justifiable war risk.

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<sup>1</sup> "In view of the opinion expressed in my 0020/30 that prospects of the operation were doubtful and inter alia the subsequent results confirming that view I submit that the operation as a whole should be the subject matter of an inquiry." Sullivan, final paragraph of "Report on Operation", 7th December 1942. "With reference to the final paragraph of C.O. *Castlemaine*'s report I had at first thought this to be a direct criticism of my conduct of the operations and, as from a Junior Officer under my operational command, subversive of discipline. I am now satisfied that the paragraph which might have been better expressed was in no sense intended in that light." Pope, Report "Operation Hamburger. Loss of HMAS *Armidale*." Darwin, 14th December 1942.

During December 1942, an "Appreciation for the capture of the Island of Timor" was produced.<sup>2</sup> The preliminary plan, "Madrigal" (a copy of which was sent to the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Captain Nichols, on 17th December), envisaged an operation in two phases, the capture of Koepang and its development as an advanced base, and operations to secure the remainder of the island, the operation to be carried out between April and October 1943. An estimate of the naval forces required ("if the main Japanese forces are not occupied elsewhere") was one battleship, three aircraft carriers, eight heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and 22 destroyers, with auxiliaries; and transport ships and landing craft were estimated at six Landing Ships Infantry, six troopships, and six cargo ships. Commenting on the Appreciation, the Director of Plans at Navy Office, Commander Dowling,<sup>3</sup> told D.C.N.S. that he was not happy concerning the proposed strength of the covering naval force, which he considered unbalanced. "It was put up, I feel, without a thorough investigation; in fact the naval side has not been investigated. . . . I cannot imagine, at present, from where we are to get the troop and store carrying craft which are necessary if this operation is to be carried out." On 25th January 1943 General MacArthur ruled "Madrigal" out of place in the period proposed for it, by defining any plans for the taking of Timor as a "long-distance project", which was, in the event, never embarked upon.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile the role of the guerilla forces in Timor was discussed in relation to the proposed "Madrigal" operation, and the view was advanced by the planners that their retention on the island could only be justified if their presence would materially assist the operation. It was considered that they could not so assist except by the provision of Intelligence and information, and it was therefore recommended "that our future activities should be confined to establishing and maintaining information channels only. This would entail (a) withdrawing the majority of the guerillas from the island, (b) forbidding such parties and individuals as are left behind from indulging in any aggressive acts and confining their activities to observation and reporting."<sup>5</sup>

On 2nd January 1943, N.O.I.C. Darwin told the Naval Board and Comsouwespac that the total withdrawal of Lancer Force might be necessary within the near future, and requested the allocation of a destroyer

<sup>2</sup> The appreciation was prepared by Captain J. Carson, USN; Lt-Col M. W. Hope, RA; Lt-Col T. K. Walker, RM; and Wing Commander W. N. Gibson, RAAF.

<sup>3</sup> Vice-Admiral Sir Roy Dowling, KBE, CB, DSO; RAN, Comd HMS *Naiad* 1939-42; Dir of Plans, Navy Office 1942-43; DCNS 1943-44; Capt HMAS *Hobart* 1944-46; Flag Offr Comdg Aust Fleet 1953-54; First Naval Member and CNS 1955-59; Chairman Aust Chiefs of Staff Cttee 1959-61. B. Condong, Tweed River, NSW, 28 May 1901.

<sup>4</sup> On 25th January 1943 the following observations of General MacArthur were conveyed to the Advisory War Council. "General MacArthur said that he viewed the increase in Japanese strength in Timor as purely defensive to secure themselves against any attack from Australia and to suppress continuation of the successful commando tactics which had been pursued by the Australian and Dutch forces. The C-in-C added that he definitely did not possess the resources to retake Timor. Furthermore the Japanese have control of the seas in this region and MacArthur could not land by air from Australia and keep supplied by air the force that would be necessary for the recapture of this island. Any plans for the taking of Timor were a long-distance project." AWC Minute No. 1121, Strategic Importance of Timor, 25 Jan 1943.

<sup>5</sup> "Annexure X" to copy of "Appreciation for the capture of Timor" forwarded to D.C.G.S. by Lt-Col Hope "in accordance with your Minute of 2nd October 1942".

for the task. *Arunta* was allocated. She reached Darwin from Cairns on 7th January, embarked eight Army assault craft, and sailed from Darwin at 7 a.m. on the 9th. She crossed the Timor Sea in weather "overcast with heavy rain and wind squalls which provided excellent cover from enemy reconnaissance planes" and at 1.30 a.m. on the 10th anchored in 27 fathoms about three-quarters of a mile from the beach at Quicras. Beach conditions were bad, with a heavy surf running and capsizing and swamping several of the assault boats, and it was found impossible to load them with their correct complement of 15 men and crew of five. At 4 a.m. Morrow, *Arunta's* captain, told the beach that no more equipment or stores would be taken "and that the men must swim through the surf and board the assault craft outside it, otherwise there would be no chance of getting them off before daylight". At 5 a.m. there were still about 100 men on shore, but Morrow decided to wait and get them off if possible before daylight, hoping to run into bad cyclonic weather when about 30 miles clear of the coast. The last boats returned to the ship at 6.20 a.m., and ten minutes later Morrow

proceeded at my best speed. At 0710 it was daylight and much too clear, but I could see squalls about twenty miles to port of my course and steered towards them and from 0815 onwards the visibility was never more than two miles until I was approaching Darwin.

*Arunta* secured alongside at Darwin at 7 p.m. on 10th January, bringing with her 24 officers and 258 other ranks of "Lancer" Force, eleven women and children, and twenty Portuguese who had been working with the army. Morrow, in his report, stated that Mr Ley,<sup>6</sup> Commissioned Gunner (T), was in charge of the boats inshore, "and I consider that it was only due to his fine seamanship and drive that all the troops were brought off. He was most ably assisted by Leading Seaman Power<sup>7</sup> and Able Seaman Asser,<sup>8</sup> who were outstanding in handling their boats and generally taking charge."

### III

As stated earlier, the Japanese High Command decided on 31st August 1942 to abandon the attempt to capture Milne Bay for use as a staging point for a seaborne attack on Port Moresby, and to concentrate on the recapture of Guadalcanal. Next day Admiral Turner—of course unaware of the enemy's decision—wrote to Admiral Ghormley expressing his faith in the value of Guadalcanal, "an unsinkable aircraft carrier which I believe may finally be multiplied into an invincible fleet adequate for a decisive move". He remarked that this would require patience, and adequate forces, and continued:

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<sup>6</sup> Lt F. H. R. Ley; RAN. HMAS's *Stuart*, *Arunta*. Of Yarrowitch, NSW; b. Croyde, England, 25 Mar 1900. Died 28 Aug 1959.

<sup>7</sup> PO J. J. Power, DSM, 18457. HMAS *Arunta*. B. Maryborough, Qld, 16 Jun 1909.

<sup>8</sup> CPO H. E. B. Asser, 21453. HMAS's *Napier*, *Stuart*, *Arunta*, *Nizam*. B. Semaphore, SA, 20 Jul 1920.

The enemy is now hampered by his adventures in the Aleutians and Eastern New Guinea. I believe that the immediate consolidation and extension of our [Guadalcanal-Tulagi] position is now possible and advisable, and is a golden military opportunity that ought not to be missed.<sup>9</sup>

Simultaneously General MacArthur was expressing to the War Department, Washington, concern at the situation and outlook in New Guinea. On 28th August he warned the War Department that the Japanese might strike at New Guinea under cover of the Solomons operations, and that he was "powerless to prevent this due to the absence of S.W.P.A. naval forces in the Soupac area", and he recommended that Soupac be given the additional mission of covering Milne Bay. Two days later MacArthur followed this with another warning to Washington "of acute danger rapidly developing in Pacific theatre as Japanese have slackened efforts in China and thinned garrisons in occupied zones to move centre of gravity towards S.W.P.A." In a reply on 31st August he was told that his concern was appreciated in Washington; that all S.W.P.A. naval units had been returned from other duty (this referred to Task Force 44 being detached that day from Soupac command); and that the situation would depend on cooperation and coordination among MacArthur and Nimitz and Ghormley. Authority was granted for him to deal directly with the two admirals "to effect mutual support in Soupac and S.W.P.A." At the conference in Ghormley's flagship at Noumea on 4th September, when an attempt was made to adjust the situation as between Soupac and S.W.P.A., Nimitz told MacArthur's representatives—Sutherland and Kenney—that he could not spare MacArthur any ships, additional air cover, or trained amphibious troops, which Sutherland said were needed for any attempt to occupy the north coast of New Guinea. Unless Soupac itself was reinforced "the enemy could recover Guadalcanal whenever he really tried".<sup>1</sup> In Noumea at the time, the American Under-Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, was impressed with the situation and returned promptly to Washington to seek reinforcements for Ghormley and Vandegrift. These were, from time to time, forthcoming.

Meanwhile MacArthur resumed his efforts to get naval support for New Guinea operations. In a personal message to Marshall on 6th September he urged

that attack to clear the north coast of New Guinea be undertaken as soon as possible. If defensive attitude only is maintained the situation will soon become serious. The enemy attack has developed and is now revealed as infiltration from the north in ever-increasing pressure. Adverse weather and other conditions make it impossible to prevent his landing with great freedom on the north shore. . . . Due to lack of maritime resources I am unable to increase ground forces in New Guinea as I cannot maintain them. I have temporary air superiority there. It is imperative that shipping and naval forces for escort duty be increased to ensure communication between Australian mainland and south coast of New Guinea. With these additional naval facilities I can dispatch large ground reinforcements to New Guinea with the

<sup>9</sup> Morison, Vol V, pp. 114-15.

<sup>1</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 116.

objective of counter infiltration towards the north at the same time making creeping advances along the north coast with small vessels and marine amphibious forces. Such action will secure a situation which otherwise is doubtful. If New Guinea goes the results will be disastrous. This is urgent.

The Allies and Japanese faced similar problems in both Guadalcanal and New Guinea, but each side realised that in the solution of those facing it in the southern Solomons lay the answer to those confronting it in New Guinea, and that thus the determination of the Guadalcanal question was the more immediately urgent. That determination could be reached only through command of the sea, and to that objective each side now bent its full energies.

#### IV

The Guadalcanal prize was the Henderson Field, and it was the focal point of the bloody fighting which, both on the island itself and the seas around it, raged in American-Japanese clashes during the last four months of 1942. It was saved for the Americans by the success of the Marines in hand-to-hand fighting against fanatical Japanese attacks during the nights of 12th-13th and 13th-14th September, in the crucial ground actions of Bloody Ridge, on the southern edge of the airfield. On the 14th Admiral Turner sailed from Espiritu Santo escorting six transports of reinforcements—the 7th Marine Regiment. In distant support to the southward of Guadalcanal were the carriers *Wasp* and *Hornet*, with cruisers and destroyers and the battleship *North Carolina*. To the north and north-westward of the island were Japanese carriers and battleships and "Tokyo Express" groups, deterred from making an offensive sortie by the American carrier groups. It fell to an enemy submarine, or submarines, to take toll of these. In the early afternoon of the 15th *Wasp*, manoeuvring to fly off and land on aircraft, was struck by three torpedoes from *I 19*. Shortly afterwards a torpedo—probably from *I 15* which was in company with *Wasp*'s attacker—struck *North Carolina*, and another blew a gaping hole in the bow of destroyer *O'Brien*.<sup>2</sup> Carrier and destroyer were sunk. The battleship reached Pearl Harbour, and was repaired. The operation they had been supporting was concluded successfully on 18th September, when Turner disembarked "tanks, vehicles, weapons, bullets, food, fuel and assorted supplies along with nearly 4,000 men" at Lunga. But the loss of the three ships was one that could be ill-afforded. Since the initial landing on 7th August, American Pacific Fleet carrier strength had dwindled from four to one,<sup>3</sup> and the damage to *North Carolina* left only one new battleship, *Washington*, operating in the Pacific. In these important capital ship categories the Japanese in the area were superior.

Another American reinforcement move led to the Battle of Cape Esperance in which the Americans got some revenge for their earlier losses. On 9th October Turner left Noumea in *McCawley* with transport *Zeilin*

<sup>2</sup> *O'Brien*, US destroyer (1940), 1,570 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 35 kts. Sunk off Guadalcanal 15 Sept 1942.

<sup>3</sup> *Enterprise* damaged at the Battle of the Eastern Solomons on 24th August; *Saratoga* damaged by torpedo from *I 26* on 31st August; and now *Wasp*.



(10,000 tons) and destroyer escorts, carrying the 164th Infantry Regiment of the Americal Division for Guadalcanal. Distant covering forces were in three groups—carrier *Hornet* group some 180 miles south-west of the island, battleship *Washington* group about 50 miles east of Malaita, and a cruiser group commanded by Rear-Admiral Scott in *San Francisco* in the vicinity of Rennell Island. Scott's instructions from Ghormley were to protect the American convoy by offensive action and to "search for and destroy enemy ships and landing craft", and from this position he could move north in the afternoon to be in position to reach Savo Island before midnight should the Japanese ships come south. The enemy's "Tokyo Express" runs down "The Slot" from the Shortland Islands were successful in landing on occasions as many as 900 men a night near the north-western cape of Guadalcanal.<sup>4</sup> On the 11th, Japanese plans were to run a strong force down "The Slot" not only to land troops and artillery but to carry out a heavy bombardment of Henderson Field. The bombardment force comprised *Aoba*, *Kinugasa* and *Furutaka* of the 6th Cruiser Squadron—victors of the Savo Island battle of 9th August—under command of Rear-Admiral Goto, and the reinforcement group consisted of the seaplane carriers *Nisshin*<sup>5</sup> and *Chitose*, with six destroyers. Allied air reconnaissance reported the south-speeding Japanese (as two cruisers and six destroyers) in the afternoon of 11th October, and Scott—who on the 9th and 10th had made fruitless afternoon runs northward towards Guadalcanal—now hastened towards them to anticipate their arrival at Savo. He missed the appointment with the enemy's reinforcement group which was ahead of Goto's force, and which, when Scott reached the area, was already within the Sound off the Guadalcanal shore. Scott received both aircraft and radar reports of the reinforcement group as "one large and two small vessels", but decided to seek the larger game of the original air report, and to patrol across the entrance to the Sound outside Savo Island. Thus, just after 11 p.m., he was steaming at 30 knots in column in the order cruisers *San Francisco*, *Boise*, *Salt Lake City* and *Helena*, with destroyers extending the column ahead and astern, north-east across the entrance between Guadalcanal's Cape Esperance and Savo Island in just about the position in which destroyer *Blue* kept radar watch for Mikawa's force on the night of 8th-9th August. At 11.30 p.m. Scott reversed course, to steer south-west just as *Blue* had done, and, just as Mikawa had raced down the stretch of sea to the southern entrance to the Sound, so on this Sunday night just nine weeks after the battle of Savo Island, Goto's force, the three cruisers in column, *Aoba* in the van with destroyers *Hatsuyuki* and *Fubuki* on the port and starboard beam respectively, raced in at 26 knots for the entrance, intent on the bombardment of Henderson Field. But this night it was the Japanese who were taken by surprise, with Scott's

<sup>4</sup> The American situation was very similar to that of Admiral Cunningham at the Battle of Crete in May 1941, when the British forces raced up from the south each afternoon to sweep around the north of Crete to prevent German seaborne landings on that island.

<sup>5</sup> *Nisshin*, Japanese seaplane carrier (1939), 9,000 tons, six 5-in AA guns, 20 aircraft, 20 kts. Sunk off Buin, 22 Jul 1943.

force "crossing the T" and the enemy unaware of its presence. In the fierce night clash that resulted, fatal wounds were inflicted on cruiser *Furutaka* and destroyer *Fubuki*, and 40 hits on *Aoba* entailed her return to Japan for major repairs. Admiral Goto died of wounds. Scott's force lost the destroyer *Duncan*<sup>6</sup> sunk, and cruiser *Boise* severely damaged. The Japanese also lost destroyers *Natsugumo*<sup>7</sup> and *Murakumo* of the Reinforcement Group.

Cape Esperance was an American victory, but, as the American naval historian remarked:

The Japanese accomplished their main object. Not only did fresh troops get ashore at Tassafaronga while Goto and Scott were fighting, but seaplane carriers *Nisshin* and *Chitose* unloaded heavy artillery, which meant trouble for the Marines.<sup>8</sup>

The American reinforcements were safely landed also, on 13th October; and within a few hours these newcomers of the Americal Division received a baptism of fire in a furious bombardment of Henderson Field by battleships *Kongo* and *Haruna* which, commanded by Vice-Admiral Kurita, in the darkness of the first hours of 13th October poured nearly 1,000 14-inch shells on to the airfield, putting it out of action for some time. It was a performance on a scale that led to its being remembered by Guadalcanal veterans as "The Bombardment".

In October, with their depleted naval strength, the American position in the Solomons was parlous. On the 15th of the month Admiral Nimitz stated: "It now appears that we are unable to control the sea in the Guadalcanal area. Thus our supply of the positions will only be done at great expense to us. The situation is not hopeless, but it is certainly critical."

It was at this juncture that a change was made in the naval command with the appointment of Admiral Halsey to succeed Admiral Ghormley. For some months Halsey had been suffering from aggravated dermatitis, but now back to health he assumed his new office on 18th October. At the same time plans were made to reinforce the Soupac area. On the naval side a task group built round the new battleship *Indiana*<sup>9</sup> was ordered to transfer to the Pacific from the Atlantic, and the carrier *Enterprise*, her damage in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons repaired, was sent post haste to the Solomons. Meanwhile the Japanese were preparing for an all-out attack on Guadalcanal, the preliminaries of which were the various bombardments of the airfield, the landing of the reinforcements on 11th October and of another 4,500 on the 15th, and the capture of the Henderson Field. Not until this last mentioned was effected would they commit their main naval force. Unfortunately for the plan, Henderson Field was not captured by 22nd October according to schedule, and the delay enabled

<sup>6</sup> *Duncan*, US destroyer (1942), 1,630 tons, four 5-in guns, five 21-in torpedo tubes, 33 kts. Sunk off Savo I, 12 Oct 1942.

<sup>7</sup> *Natsugumo*, Japanese destroyer (1938), 1,500 tons, six 5-in guns, eight 24-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts. Sunk off Guadalcanal, 11 Oct 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> *Indiana*, US battleship (1942), 35,000 tons, nine 16-in, twenty 5-in guns, three aircraft, 27 kts.

*Enterprise* to take her place in the next naval encounter—the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands.

Indications of an impending major Japanese attempt on Guadalcanal were given in mid-October by air reconnaissance and coastwatchers' reports. Sightings on the 14th and 15th indicated strong enemy forces operating to the north-west of the Santa Cruz Islands, and including two or three battleships, at least one carrier, five or six cruisers, and destroyers. Three days later the "Daily Appreciation—Pacific and Indian Ocean Naval Activity", produced by Combined Operations and Intelligence Centre, Navy Office, Melbourne, noted that there were no further reports of enemy naval operations north of the Santa Cruz group, and continued:

The enemy force appears to have retired, after failing to draw Allied naval opposition. The tactical purpose of this force was evidently . . . to deal with any Allied naval force proceeding to Guadalcanal from the south-east, or alternatively to draw off the forces already operating in that area: the enemy task force appeared in the vicinity of Ndeni during the morning 14/10, and the landing on Guadalcanal followed on the morning of 15/10.

The inference as to the tactical purpose of the Japanese force was correct—the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Yamamoto, to his subordinate commanders were "to apprehend and annihilate any powerful forces in the Solomons area, as well as any reinforcements". The Japanese had "failed to draw" Allied naval opposition because the Americans were not then ready, as the Japanese themselves were not ready for their major stroke pending news of the capture of Henderson Field. This was promised to Yamamoto by the evening of the 24th, and again his naval forces resumed position for their part in the final subjugation of Guadalcanal, and C.O.I.C.'s "daily Appreciation" recorded for the 25th air sightings of

a strong fleet operating in three groups in the general area approximately 250 miles NW Santa Cruz Islands. Present Intelligence indicates that the forces include 12, 13, 14 ships respectively as follows: Force 'A', 2 aircraft carriers, 2 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, 4 destroyers; Force 'B', 3 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, 6 destroyers; Force 'C', 14 warships (no details).

But the Japanese army's promise to Yamamoto was not kept. The Americans on Guadalcanal defeated all attempts to take the airfield.

By this time the Americans had concentrated opposition. Task Force 16 (Rear-Admiral Kinkaid flying his flag in *Enterprise*) with battleship *South Dakota*<sup>1</sup> (which had arrived from the Atlantic some weeks earlier with *Washington*, but had suffered hull damage from a coral reef and had repaired at Pearl Harbour), cruisers *Portland* and *San Juan*, and eight destroyers, met Task Force 17 (Rear-Admiral George D. Murray in *Hornet*) with cruisers *Northampton*, *Pensacola*, *San Diego* and *Juneau*,<sup>2</sup> and six destroyers, on the 24th, some 200 miles east of the Santa Cruz Islands. Around 500 miles to the westward of them, between Rennell and

<sup>1</sup> *South Dakota*, US battleship (1942), 35,000 tons, nine 16-in and twenty 5-in guns, 3 aircraft, 27 kts.

<sup>2</sup> *Juneau*, US cruiser (1942), 6,000 tons, twelve 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 32 kts. Sunk off Guadalcanal, 13 Nov 1942.

San Cristobal Islands, was Rear-Admiral Willis A. Lee's Task Force 64, battleship *Washington*, cruisers *San Francisco*, *Helena*, *Atlanta*, and six destroyers. Halsey's instructions to Kinkaid, who was in operational command, were to sweep north of the Santa Cruz Islands and then change course to the south-west to be in a position to intercept enemy forces approaching Guadalcanal.

The Japanese striking force under Vice-Admiral Kondo—carriers *Shokaku*, *Zuikaku*, *Zuiho* and *Junyo*, battleships *Kongo* and *Haruna*, six cruisers and 23 destroyers—was 300 miles north of Guadalcanal awaiting news of the capture of Henderson Field. Ahead of Kondo was Rear-Admiral Abe's vanguard group of battleships *Hiyei* and *Kirishima*, four cruisers and seven destroyers.

The Americans were well served by Intelligence, and had information of Japanese positions on the 25th. Kinkaid was then west of the Santa Cruz Islands, with the Japanese carriers 360 miles to the north-west of him and unaware of his position. Throughout the night of the 25th-26th Kinkaid moved north-westerly. Just after midnight on the 25th air reconnaissance reported the enemy fleet about 300 miles to the north-west. With daylight both sides launched searches. Sixteen aircraft, each armed with a 500-lb bomb, took off from *Enterprise*. From them Kinkaid learned of Abe's presence at 6.30, and twenty minutes later received a report of the Japanese carriers less than 200 miles north-west of the Americans. The Japanese *Zuiho* was at this stage put out of action by bombs from the search planes, damage to the flight deck debarring her from operating aircraft.

Japanese sighting of the American carriers was simultaneous with Kinkaid's awareness of theirs, and the respective striking forces of aircraft launched by the antagonists passed each other in flight. The Japanese, first to launch, were first to reach their targets about 9 a.m. A providential rain squall concealed *Enterprise*, but *Hornet*, with no such shelter, received the undivided attention of the attacking aircraft. Despite fighter protection and anti-aircraft fire (which between them accounted for 25 of 27 bombers) the Japanese hit hard and accurately, with bomb and torpedo, and within ten minutes of the first bomb hit "the sky was clear of enemy planes" and in *Hornet* "fires were raging from bow to stern and from signal bridge to fourth deck. Torpedo hits had let in the sea and given the carrier an eight-degree list."<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile *Hornet's* aircraft reached the enemy carriers and scored bomb hits on *Shokaku* which crippled her and put her out of the war for nine months. They also hit cruiser *Chikuma*, wounding her enough to cause her retirement from the battlefield. The striking group from *Enterprise*—about half of which were shot down by enemy fighters when the opposing aircraft passed each other on the way to their targets—had no successes.

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<sup>3</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 213.

The Japanese struck the final blows of the encounter. During the morning striking groups from *Zuikaku*, *Shokaku*, and *Junyo*, attacked *Enterprise* and her screen. The carrier suffered two bomb hits and a near miss which inflicted considerable damage and casualties, but did not destroy her effectiveness. *South Dakota*, cruiser *San Juan*, and destroyer *Smith*<sup>4</sup> were damaged. Ships sunk in the engagement were American—the destroyer *Porter*<sup>5</sup> torpedoed by *I 21* while she was picking up the crew of a shot-down bomber during the morning, and *Hornet*, further crippled by air attack while in tow during the afternoon and finally sunk by destroyers of Abe's force at 1.35 a.m. on the 27th. The Japanese suffered *Shokaku*'s ineffectiveness for nine months, and lesser damage to *Chikuma* and *Zuiho*. Both sides endured heavy aircraft losses and considerable casualties. As to the effect of the battle on the situation in the Solomons:

Measured in combat tonnage sunk, the Japanese had won a tactical victory, but other losses forced them back to . . . Truk. . . . The land assault against the Marines had ended in a fizzle; the sea effort had dangerously reduced Japanese air strength . . . the Battle of Santa Cruz Islands had gained priceless time for the Americans—days in which to reinforce and prepare.<sup>6</sup>

It was going to pay dividends.

The Battle of Santa Cruz did nothing to determine the Guadalcanal issue. On shore the Japanese could not take the Henderson Field. At sea neither side could ensure its ability to supply and reinforce its troops, nor deny the other access to the island. On 30th October Scott escorted to Guadalcanal transports carrying heavy artillery for the Marines; and between 2nd and 10th November the Japanese landed 65 destroyer loads and two cruiser loads of troops in western Guadalcanal. Each side determined to force the issue as soon as possible, and in the meantime each side ran in supplies and reinforcements. The main American effort at reinforcement was in the hands of Admiral Turner, and comprised three attack cargo ships which, escorted from Espiritu Santo by Scott in *Atlanta* with four destroyers, reached Lunga on 11th November, and four transports from Noumea commanded by Turner in *McCawley*, which, escorted by two cruisers and three destroyers, reached Lunga next day. Evidence of Japanese intentions was not wanting. On 7th November Read, the Australian coastwatcher at the north end of Bougainville Island, reported a convoy of 12 large transports headed south, and on the 10th his colleague Mason, overlooking Buin in the south of the island, told of "at least 61 ships this area, viz: 2 *Nachi*, 1 *Aoba*, 1 *Mogami*, 1 *Kiso*, 1 *Tatsuta*, 2 sloops, 33 destroyers, 17 cargo, 2 tankers, 1 passenger liner of 8,000 tons". Armed with photographs of silhouettes taken from the pages of *Jane's Fighting Ships* and dropped to him from aircraft, Mason produced identifications remarkable in their accuracy. His report, with others from air

<sup>4</sup> *Smith*, US destroyer (1936), 1,500 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpdo tubes, 36½ kts.

<sup>5</sup> *Porter*, US destroyer (1936), 1,850 tons, five 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 37½ kts. Sunk off Santa Cruz Is, 26 Oct 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 224.

reconnaissance, resulted in the build-up of an accurate picture of Japanese strength and probable intentions. Japanese Intelligence was similarly efficient.

To meet the Japanese threat Halsey concentrated formidable covering forces under Rear-Admiral Kinkaid for the seven transports and cargo ships which, with their support and escort groups of five cruisers and 14 destroyers, comprised the reinforcement groups. The covering forces were Kinkaid's Task Force 16, *Enterprise*, cruisers *Northampton* and *San Diego* and six destroyers, and Rear-Admiral Lee's Task Force 64, *Washington* (flag), *South Dakota*, and four destroyers. If *Enterprise* (still under repair at Noumea) could not reach the scene in time, the battleships of T.F. 64 would be detached for independent action.

In the event, that was what happened. Soon after the first reinforcement group of three attack cargo ships anchored off Lunga on 11th November, warning from the faithful coastwatchers on Bougainville prepared them for a dive-bombing attack in which few of the attackers escaped and no ship was hit. Next day, Turner's ships arrived and were unloading when a message from Mason at Buin told of another impending attack.<sup>7</sup>

Mason's warning forearmed Turner, and resulted in the decisive defeat of the attacking torpedo bombers, all but one of which were shot down. On the American side the cruiser *San Francisco* was crashed by a wounded aircraft, causing damage and casualties.

In the meantime air reconnaissance reported enemy surface forces to the northward, including carriers and battleships. Kinkaid's carriers and battleships were too far away to help, and Turner, conjecturing that the reported Japanese ships (because no transports were among them) intended a night bombardment of Henderson Field, decided to withdraw his transports, leaving the support group of four cruisers and eight destroyers—under Rear-Admiral D. J. Callaghan—plus *Atlanta* and Scott to oppose the Japanese.

Callaghan was in tactical command. The transports departed eastward through Lengo Channel at dusk, and after seeing them safely clear, Callaghan returned westward into the Sound to obstruct the passage of the Japanese past Savo. Callaghan—as was Crutchley before him—was bedevilled by the fact that few of his ships had previously operated together. He steamed in column formation: four destroyers in the van; then *Atlanta*, *San Francisco*, *Portland*, *Helena*, *Juneau*, in that order; and four destroyers in the rear. At 1.30 a.m. on Friday, 13th November, his column was steaming north-east by east parallel to the Guadalcanal coast, with Savo Island fine on the starboard bow distant some 10 miles, in much the same

<sup>7</sup> The work of the coastwatchers in these vital days for Guadalcanal was invaluable. At this period Mackenzie on Guadalcanal arranged for the landing of additional coastwatchers, and in October Lieutenant Josselyn and Sub-Lieutenant J. R. Keenan were landed on Vella Lavella, and Lieutenant Waddell and Sergeant C. W. Seton, A.I.F., were put on shore at Choiseul. Both parties were landed in enemy held territory from the submarine U.S.S. *Grampus*.

Keenan, R.A.N.V.R., was a patrol officer from New Guinea who joined the navy on his arrival in Australia from the territory.

Seton was a planter from the Shortland Islands who had joined the A.I.F. and had been seconded from his unit in Port Moresby, where his knowledge and experience were wasted.

position as was Crutchley's southern screening force in the early hours of 9th August. And steaming towards him at 23 knots, entering the Sound between Cape Esperance and Savo Island, was Admiral Abe's Japanese bombardment force, battleships *Hiyei* (flag) and *Kirishima*, screened by cruiser *Nagara* and 11 destroyers.

It was 1.40 a.m. on 9th August when Wight, on *Canberra*'s bridge, saw the explosion broad on the starboard bow which was the prelude to the first Battle of Savo Island. It was 1.40 a.m. on 13th November when Callaghan's van destroyer *Cushing*<sup>8</sup> (now steering due north, Callaghan having altered course thereto at 1.32 a.m.) sighted Japanese destroyers crossing ahead from port to starboard. Action was joined at 1.50 a.m. It opened with Japanese illumination of, and concentration of fire upon, *Atlanta*, who retaliated with accurate gunfire on enemy ships on both bows. But very shortly, *Atlanta*, torpedoed, savagely hit by gunfire, was out of the fight, immobile and shattered, with Scott among those killed on her bridge. From then on "Japanese and American ships mingled like minnows in a bucket"<sup>9</sup> in a general mêlée.

Within fifteen minutes of the opening clash, the main issue had been decided—there would be no bombardment of Henderson Field that night. The Americans had suffered, but on the Japanese side flagship *Hiyei* was crippled, and at 2 a.m. on the 13th Admiral Abe ordered both battleships to retire.

As a result of that first encounter the Americans lost *Atlanta*, and destroyers *Cushing*, *Laffey*, *Barton*<sup>1</sup> and *Monssen* sunk, had the cruiser *Portland* crippled, and *San Francisco* and other ships damaged, and among the killed counted both Admirals—Scott and Callaghan. Later in the day, as the effective survivors were retiring to Espiritu Santo, cruiser *Juneau* was torpedoed by submarine *I 26* and vanished in a vast explosion. On the Japanese side, *Hiyei* was immobilised a few miles north-west of Savo, destroyers *Akatsuki*<sup>2</sup> and *Yudachi* were sunk, other ships were damaged, and the mission was frustrated.

Neither side had time to lick wounds. The Japanese had intended the bombardment of Henderson Field to be a preparation for a large-scale reinforcement operation. Eleven transports carrying some 10,000 troops and large quantities of supplies, and escorted by eleven destroyers, the whole under the command of Rear-Admiral Tanaka, had left the Shortlands at nightfall on the 12th, but were recalled when the American opposition developed. Now, at 6.30 a.m. on the 13th, another bombardment group, Mikawa in *Chokai* with four heavy cruisers, sailed from the Shortlands to pave the way for the delayed landing to take place after nightfall

<sup>8</sup> *Cushing*, US destroyer (1936), 1,450 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 36½ kts. Sunk off Savo Island, 14 Nov 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 244.

<sup>1</sup> *Laffey* and *Barton*, US destroyers (1942), 1,620 tons, four 5-in guns, five 21-in torpedo tubes, 33 kts. Sunk off Guadalcanal, 13 Nov 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *Akatsuki*, Japanese destroyer (1932), 1,950 tons, six 5-in guns, nine 24-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts. Sunk off Savo Island, 13 Nov 1942.

on the 14th. At the same time arrangements were made to succour *Hiyei*, and for the main Japanese force under Vice-Admiral Kondo to cover the operation.

All day on the 13th American aircraft—from Henderson, from Espiritu Santo, and from *Enterprise* hurrying up from the south—hammered at whatever enemy targets were offering. Among them was *Hiyei* which, smitten by torpedoes and bombs, sank at 6 p.m. about five miles north-west of Savo. Mikawa's force, however, carried out its scheduled bombardment of Henderson Field on the night 13th-14th unopposed—though the field was still operational when they finished. Aircraft from it got some revenge at 8 a.m. on the 14th when they attacked the retiring Mikawa about 140 miles up "The Slot" and holed *Kinugasa* with a torpedo. Further hits in subsequent attacks sank this cruiser around 10 a.m., and damaged *Chokai* and *Maya*. Meanwhile Tanaka's Reinforcement Group also came in for punishment from the air, and "all day long the noise of battle roll'd" as flight after flight of aircraft from Henderson and from *Enterprise* unloaded their bombs on the transports. Tanaka lost seven of them that day, with all their supplies and many troops. He strove gallantly on with the remaining four, and eleven destroyers. Coming down astern of him was Kondo, with battleship *Kirishima*, four cruisers and destroyers, to bombard Henderson Field while Tanaka landed the remnants of his troops. At 6 p.m. on the 14th Kondo was about 100 miles north of Guadalcanal.

Twenty-four hours earlier Rear-Admiral Lee's battleship task force, T.F. 64, had detached from Kinkaid and hurried northward. Too late to intervene in Mikawa's bombardment Lee remained south-west of Guadalcanal during the 14th, and early in the evening, in column, destroyers leading *Washington* and *South Dakota* in that order, steamed north past Guadalcanal's western end, rounded Savo Island from the west northabout, altered course S.S.E. into the Sound to the east of Savo at 9.48 p.m., and at 8 minutes to 11, when about in the position where *Canberra* sighted the enemy on her fateful night, altered course to the westward to pass between Savo and Guadalcanal. Eight minutes later he made radar contact with a target nine miles distant to the northward. It was *Sendai*.

As he came speeding down "The Slot", Kondo had his force in three sections: cruiser *Sendai* and three destroyers three miles or so in the van; cruiser *Nagara* and six destroyers forming a close screen; and then the bombardment group of cruisers *Atago* (flag) and *Takao* and battleship *Kirishima*. Approaching Savo, the Japanese force was split when *Sendai* sighted Lee's force northbound to the west of the island and, making an enemy report, followed astern of the Americans with destroyer *Shikinami* while her two other destroyers, *Ayanami* and *Uranami*,<sup>3</sup> were detached to reconnoitre south of Savo. On receiving *Sendai*'s enemy report, Kondo detached *Nagara* and four destroyers from his screen as an advance-guard

<sup>3</sup> *Ayanami* and *Uranami*, Japanese destroyers (1929-30), 1,950 tons, six 5-in guns, nine 24-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts. *Ayanami* sunk off Savo Island, 15 Nov 1942; *Uranami* sunk in Leyte Gulf, 26 Oct 1944.



to replace the *Sendai* group, and ordered them to enter the Sound at full speed behind *Ayanami* and *Uranami*.

Action opened at 11.17 p.m. on 14th November, when the American battleships fired at *Sendai*, now visible to the northwards. The Japanese cruiser retired behind smoke. Five minutes later the American destroyers sighted and engaged *Ayanami* and *Uranami* steering eastward in the shadow of Savo, and shortly after became involved with the *Nagara* vanguard group also. Their position against the darkening backdrop of Savo Island favoured the Japanese ships, and they took heavy toll of their adversaries with gun and torpedo. Between 11.22 and 11.35 p.m. all four American destroyers—none of which fired a torpedo—were put out of action. Three of them, *Walke*, *Preston*<sup>4</sup> and *Benham*,<sup>5</sup> subsequently sank. One Japanese destroyer was fatally damaged.

The main forces clashed just before midnight, when Kondo, heading south-east for the southern entrance to the Sound, sighted *South Dakota* who, turning sharply to clear crippled and burning destroyers, had become separated from *Washington*, and briefly was the target for the guns of the three heavy enemy ships and suffered severe casualties and damage. Fortunately *Washington* was able shortly to intervene, and at midnight opened fire while the enemy ships were concentrating on *South Dakota*. She scored direct hits on *Kirishima* with nine 16-inch and about forty 5-inch shells, and within seven minutes the Japanese battleship was out of the fight, on fire and unsteerable. The engagement was brief, and by 25 minutes after midnight Kondo (less *Kirishima*) was retiring up "The Slot", while *South Dakota* was withdrawing to the south-west, and *Washington* closed the Russell Islands to the westward to draw off enemy interest that might remain in her consort. Only the remnants of Tanaka's Reinforcement Group remained in the Sound. By 4 a.m. on the 15th the four transports were grounded on the beach at Tassafaronga, and their troops landed—only some 2,000 of the 10,000 embarked got ashore. With daylight the Allied airmen started systematically wrecking the transports with bombs and destroying enemy supplies on the beach. Aircraft from *Enterprise* "were aided and abetted by Marine and Army fliers who entered into the game with great gusto but whose sporting instincts were so sorely tried by this necessary butchery, and by bloodstained waters covered with dismembered human members, that they retched and puked".<sup>6</sup> The eleven destroyers survived, and were safely back in the Shortlands by midnight on the 15th.

*Kirishima*, second Japanese battleship to be lost within 34 hours, was scuttled by her crew, and sank near to her sister *Hiyei* at 3.20 a.m. on the 15th. Damaged destroyer *Ayanami* was self-sunk also. *Washington* and *South Dakota*—this last with 91 casualties (39 fatal) and damaged

<sup>4</sup> *Preston*, US destroyer (1936), 1,450 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 36½ kts. Sunk off Savo Island, 15 Nov 1942.

<sup>5</sup> *Benham*, US destroyer (1939), 1,500 tons, four 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts. Sunk off Savo Island, 15 Nov 1942.

<sup>6</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 283.

to an extent that necessitated her proceeding to the United States for repair—met at 9 a.m. on the 15th at a pre-arranged rendezvous, and made for Noumea. Lee's force, like its predecessors in this series of actions in the Solomons, suffered from being a "scratch team, destroyer and battleship captains alike being unfamiliar with each other and with their commander".<sup>7</sup> The Americans sustained, over the whole battle, the greater loss of combat ships. But the two battleships and 11 transports lost by the Japanese were irreplaceable by them. The enemy, in the Battle of Guadalcanal, lost a decisive battle. Its conclusion marked the shift of the Americans from the defensive to the offensive in the Pacific war, and the end of any Japanese attempt to establish control of the seas washing the Solomons' shores.

## V

On 6th August 1942 General MacArthur issued Operations Instructions No. 15—New Guinea Force. They outlined the mission of the New Guinea Force with regard to the immediate defence of Australian New Guinea and the impending move over to the offensive, this entailing development at the earliest practicable date in the vicinity of Milne Bay of an amphibious force, equipped with small boats, for coastwise operations. The instructions continued:

With the amphibious force and overland detachments, and in conjunction with the Allied Air Forces, operate along the north-east coast of New Guinea with the objective of securing the coastline from East Cape to Tufi inclusive and be prepared, in conjunction with other forces upon later orders from this headquarters, to assist in the capture of the Buna-Gona area.

Operations Instructions No. 15, "in order to apply the principle of unity of command within the New Guinea Force", also directed the Commander Allied Naval Forces (Vice-Admiral Leary) to designate an officer as Naval Commander, New Guinea Force. Unfortunately there was a long delay before this was done. Not until 30th January 1943, as the result of a conference between representatives of G.H.Q., the Naval Board, and Comsouwespacfor, was the N.O.I.C. Port Moresby (Commander Hunt) designated Naval Commander, New Guinea Force, by the Commander Allied Naval Forces (now Vice-Admiral Carpenter, U.S.N., who had succeeded Leary as Comsouwespacfor on 11th September 1942). In designating the N.O.I.C. Naval Commander, Carpenter reviewed the function of Naval Officers-in-Charge of ports, each being

responsible in general for the movement and control of all shipping in his area except striking forces operating therein by direction of higher authority. In addition to provision of escort protection, this control includes routeing, time of entry and departure from harbour, assignment of berths and anchorages, arrangements for fuelling and watering, and harbour administration generally—but NOT cargo handling, stowage, etc.

Carpenter pointed out that, as a corollary to this, was the desirability of the N.O.I.C. being "included in discussions pertaining to operations of

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<sup>7</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 282.

any nature involving coordination between land and naval units". Meanwhile, as late as 26th January 1943

although presumably Naval Adviser to General Officer Commanding New Guinea Force, N.O.I.C. Port Moresby is *not* consulted or informed regarding future operations. This means that all arrangements for transport of troops and equipment by sea are merely extemporised, and forward planning of naval requirements is impossible. It also reacts on the operation itself, as ships and men are not always available at short notice. This in turn leads to dissatisfaction on both sides and has produced a most unhappy atmosphere.<sup>8</sup>

The situation was complicated by the creation and activities of small ship groups, operating under various controls. By instruction of General MacArthur on 5th October, the Combined Operational Services Command was established, to operate under the control of the Commander, New Guinea Force, and to include all Australian Lines of Communication units and the United States Services of Supply. Among its activities were listed:

the coordinated utilisation of ocean shipping consisting of both large ships operated under the Army Transport Service of USASOS, and under Movement Control of the Australian Army, as well as small ships, trawlers, tug and harbour boats, operated under U.S. Advanced Base, the Australian Army Water Transport Group, and Angau. The action of C.O.S.C. with respect to large ships was concerned with coordination of shipping operations between New Guinea and the mainland of Australia, and of the employment on missions in this theatre of certain of these ships.<sup>9</sup>

There were thus too many cooks, and an overlapping of functions, particularly those of the Naval Officers-in-Charge and C.O.S.C., and resultant confusion and friction. It was stated in January 1943 (in the Agenda for the discussions between Carpenter and Royle) that

The Naval Board have not so far been informed of the functions of this body [C.O.S.C.] but it is understood that it includes

- (a) maintenance of lines of communication and supply,
- (b) maintenance of aerodromes, roads etc,
- (c) all new construction except in forward areas,
- (d) construction and development of port facilities,
- (e) maintenance and control of shipping services.

The main difficulty appears to be that C.O.S.C. officers are not prepared to obey instructions or meet the wishes of the Naval Officer-in-Charge in such matters as times of sailing, routing, berthing and harbour administration generally. Vessels operated by this Command are generally badly equipped with charts and navigational and signalling gear, and unforeseen demands for these causes embarrassment and friction.

Hunt's position was made invidious by the disparity in rank between him—an acting commander—and his fellow commanding officers in New Guinea. That of C.O.S.C. was an American brigadier-general, with an Australian brigadier as his deputy; the Australian Air Force commander was an air vice-marshal; the army commander was the Commander, Allied Land Forces, General Blamey, under whose direct command Hunt came

<sup>8</sup> Notes for Agenda for conference between Comsouwespacfor (Carpenter) and 1st Naval Member A.C.N.B. (Royle) at G.H.Q. Brisbane, 26th January 1943.

<sup>9</sup> D. McCarthy, *South-West Pacific Area—First Year*, p. 351.

—since, excepting striking forces and task forces, all naval forces in the area were an integral part of New Guinea Force—in all matters affecting operations in the area. The result was a tendency towards usurpation of naval functions which was productive of an unhappy situation in regard to forthcoming Buna-Gona operations.

Essential for these operations was a survey of the coastal waters between East Cape and Buna, since they were reef-studded and uncharted. In September MacArthur's headquarters directed "Ferdinand", a section of the Allied Intelligence Bureau (A.I.B.) of which the coastwatching organisation in the South-West Pacific was now a part, to carry out this work.

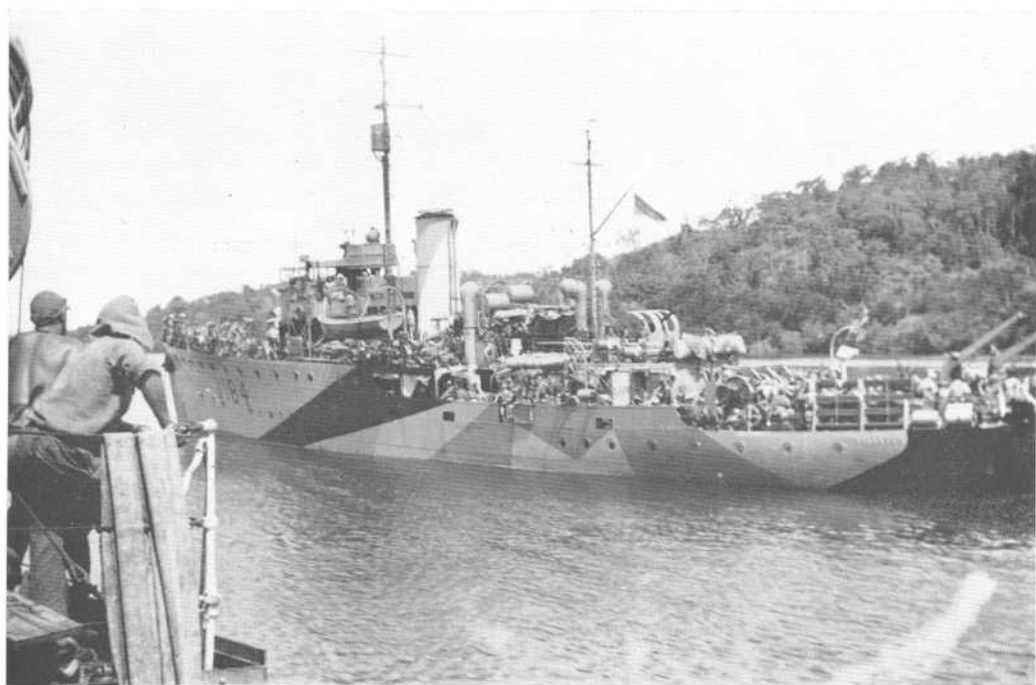
A.I.B. was conceived by Long, the Australian Director of Naval Intelligence, as a unit formed (in the interests of economy and efficiency in administration) from all Services, acting directly under MacArthur's headquarters, for carrying out activities behind the enemy lines. It would be supported by funds from the countries concerned, the resources of all being available to each. Long's ideas, outlined at a conference he convened in Melbourne of all concerned in Intelligence and related matters, were adopted. A.I.B. was born early in June 1942 as a G.H.Q. unit. Directly under Brigadier-General Charles A. Willoughby, MacArthur's Chief Intelligence Officer, it was controlled by an Australian, Colonel Roberts.<sup>1</sup> The coastwatching organisation in the S.W.P.A. became part of A.I.B., but that in the Soupac Area remained part of Australian Naval Intelligence. Commander Feldt, as S.I.O. (Supervising Intelligence Officer), was put in charge of the coastwatchers in both areas, responsible to Roberts for those in the S.W.P.A., and to Long for those in the Soupac Area. The coastwatching organisation had originally been formed with the intention that its members would report from behind their own lines. Now they were operating from behind the enemy's, being inserted there if not already in position; and to differentiate between purely naval Intelligence duties (which Feldt controlled as S.I.O.) and the activities behind the enemy lines of the coastwatchers for whom he was also responsible, the code name "Ferdinand"<sup>2</sup> was chosen for the latter tasks.

As stated earlier, MacArthur, in June 1942, had plans for an early attack on Rabaul. As a preliminary, G.H.Q. sought Intelligence of the objective, and Ferdinand was asked to place parties in position by November to observe Rabaul from all sides just before the attack. A vessel to carry the parties to their destination was sought. Choice was made of H.M.A.S. *Paluma*,<sup>3</sup> the examination vessel at Thursday Island, and the navy made her available. But in July the Japanese landed at Buna, and next month invaded Milne Bay. The Rabaul plan was shelved, and *Paluma*, which had been refitted and prepared for the Rabaul task, was now allotted

<sup>1</sup> Col. C. G. Roberts, MC. (1914-18: Lt RE.) DDMI AHQ 1941-42; Controller AIB 1942-44. Civil engineer; of Kew, Vic; b. Balmain, NSW (son of Tom Roberts, the artist), 31 Jan 1898.

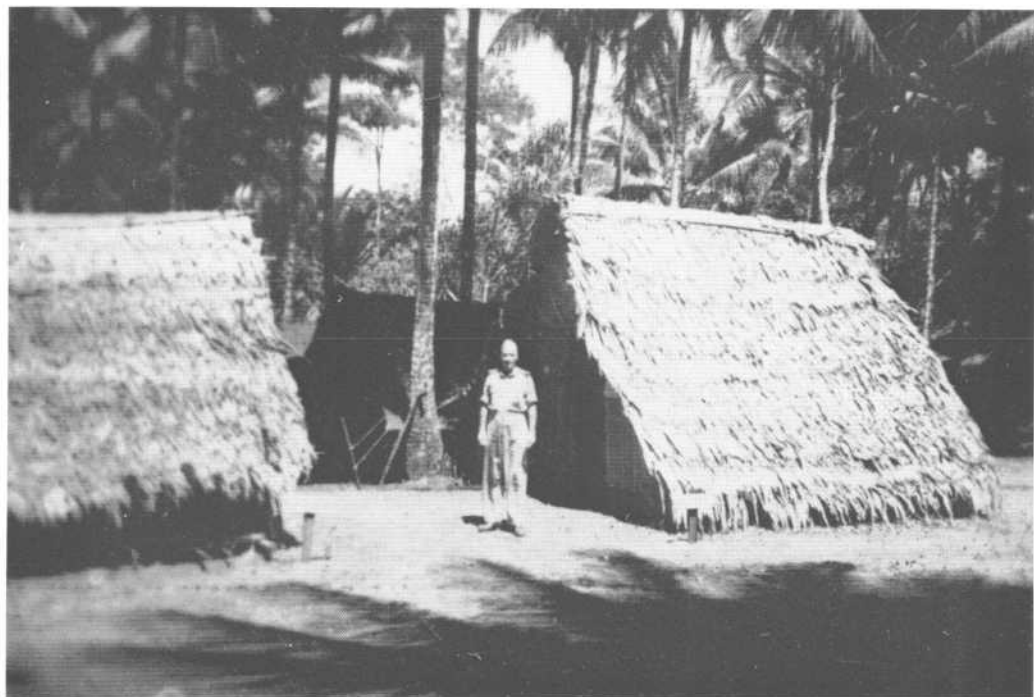
<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand was the name of a bull who did not fight but sat under a tree and smelled flowers, in one of the fantasies of the popular American artist, Walt Disney. It reminded coastwatchers that it was their job to sit unobtrusively gathering information.

<sup>3</sup> HMAS *Paluma*, examination vessel (1942), 45 tons, 11 kts.



(Author)

H.M.A.S. *Ballarat*, with troops of the 2/9th Battalion, leaving MacLaren Harbour, New Guinea, 14th December 1942.



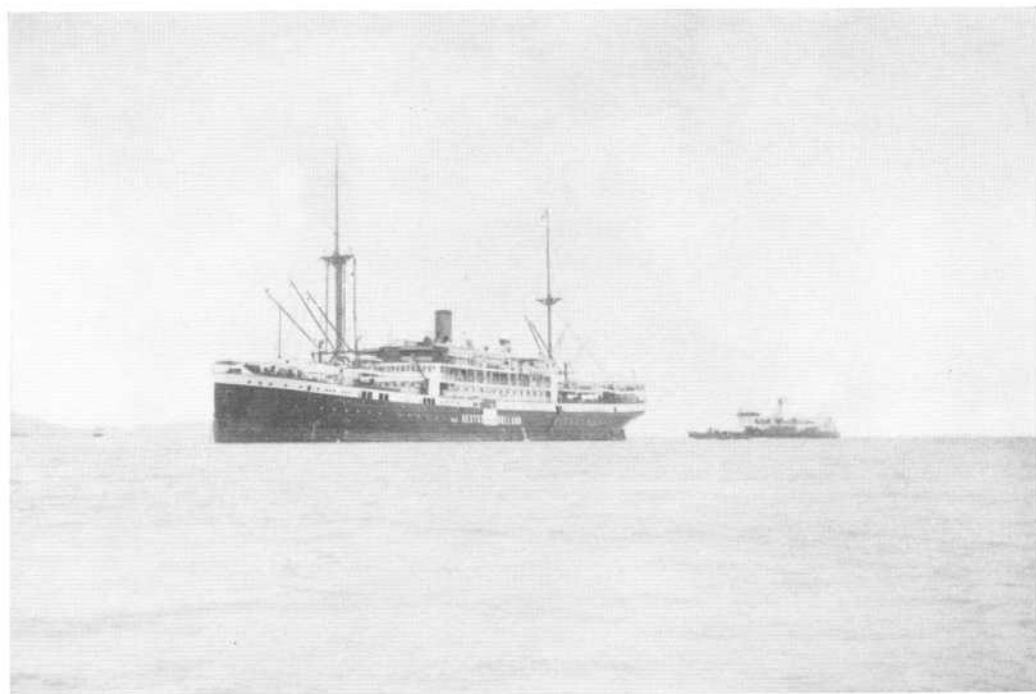
(R.A.N. Historical Section)

Navy Office, Oro Bay, with Commander C. J. R. Webb, N.O.I.C., 1943.



(Author)

Port War Signal Station, "Boogie Woogie Villa", Milne Bay.



(Ship's 3rd Engr Van Burok)

Dutch transport *Van Heutsz* in Oro Bay, 9th January 1943.

by G.H.Q. the job of carrying out the coastal survey between Milne Bay and Buna, installing necessary lights, and landing reporting parties. Lieutenant Champion (who on 9th April brought survivors out of New Britain after the Japanese invasion) was put in command of the ship and the survey work. The duties of *Paluma* were to make sketch surveys of reefs and locate suitable harbours for ships of up to 6,000 tons in the Cape Nelson area; buoy, beacon, and light reefs at essential points to ensure the safe passage of ships; guide and pilot ships through the resulting passages; and place shore parties to reconnoitre the coast and hinterland, establish teleradio stations, and tend navigational lights. Captain J. K. McCarthy, A.I.F. (it will be recalled that he played a prominent part in the rescue of survivors from Rabaul<sup>4</sup>) commanded the shore parties.

This project, as was remarked by the hydrographic authorities at Navy Office, Melbourne, when they learned of the G.H.Q. project late in September, would amount to a major survey, for which greater facilities than those proposed would be needed. Accordingly the Hydrographic Branch of the navy undertook surveys to establish the shortest safe navigable routes from Milne Bay into Goschen Strait and thence to Ward Hunt Strait. Lieut-Commander Tancred<sup>5</sup> was put in charge of the survey. Between 24th and 30th October in H.M.A.S. *Warrego* (Lieut-Commander Inglis<sup>6</sup>), Tancred established a safe navigable channel from Milne Bay to Cape Nelson through Goschen and Ward Hunt Straits, and also carried out surveys of the coasts of Goodenough Island. Meanwhile the *Paluma* party completed sketch surveys of suitable harbours in the Cape Nelson area up to Oro Bay, landed the shore parties, and established teleradio stations, lights and beacons. An American army officer, Lieut-Colonel H. W. Miller, was accommodated in *Paluma* to gain local knowledge, and accompanied one of the parties, commanded by Lieutenant Fairfax-Ross,<sup>7</sup> A.I.F., on reconnaissance from Porlock Harbour to Pongani. Throughout November and December Tancred continued survey work in the Cape Nelson area, with H.M.A. Ships *Stella* and *Polaris*.<sup>8</sup> It was the start of a survey task in which surveying ships of the R.A.N. were to spearhead the assaults of the Allies right through the S.W.P.A. to final victory.

First fruits of the survey were that, early in December, the first sizeable ships went through to Oro Bay. These were the Dutch *Karsik*, with tanks for the assault on Buna, soon followed by the first flight of operation LILLIPUT, which was set up by G.H.Q. Operations Instructions No. 21 of 20th October 1942, "to cover reinforcement, supply, and development of the Buna-Gona area upon its anticipated capture". To initiate this a

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<sup>4</sup> *Royal Australian Navy, 1939-1942*, pp. 545-9.

<sup>5</sup> Capt G. D. Tancred, OBE, DSC; RAN. Comd HMAS's *Wyrallah* and *Vigilant* 1940-41; Deputy OIC Hydrographic Branch, Sydney, 1941-42; in charge hydrographic surveys in New Guinea, Philippines and Borneo 1942-45. B. Nanango, Qld, 24 Jan 1907.

<sup>6</sup> Lt-Cdr A. D. C. Inglis; RAN and RN. HMAS's *Perth* 1939-40 and *Adelaide* 1940-42; comd HMAS's *Warrego* 1942-44, *Swan* 1944. B. Saltash, Cornwall, England, 16 Jul 1908.

<sup>7</sup> Maj B. Fairfax-Ross, CBE. 2/12 Bn and "M" Special Unit. Plantation inspector; of Rabaul, TNG; b. Springwood, NSW, 4 Apr 1910.

<sup>8</sup> HMAS's *Stella* and *Polaris*, survey vessels (1942), 111 and 50 tons respectively.

convoy was to be assembled at Milne Bay under New Guinea Force. The necessary and rapid build-up of Milne Bay was presaged by this. As stated earlier, Australian resident naval representation there in the early months was by a Beachmaster—first Lieut-Commander Stephenson and later Lieut-Commander Andrewartha. From this beginning a naval base staff now grew. Naval Intelligence was early represented there with the appointment in mid-October of Lieutenant Mogg<sup>1</sup> as N.I.O. In mid-November Commander J. L. Sinclair arrived to take up the appointment of Beachmaster, Oro Bay, in anticipation of LILLIPUT. Sinclair may be recalled as the former Singapore pilot who, as commanding officer of H.M.S. *Kedah*, led the withdrawal convoy to Singapore on the night 11th-12th February 1942.<sup>2</sup> He was seconded to the R.A.N. on his arrival in Australia after the fall of Singapore. The growing importance of Milne Bay was further evidenced by the arrival there on 26th November of Commander Branson<sup>3</sup> to assume the appointment of Naval Officer-in-Charge, thus superseding Andrewartha and the position of Beachmaster.

Plans for LILLIPUT were discussed at Headquarters, New Guinea Force, on 2nd November. It was decided that ships would be tactically loaded in Australia and sailed to Port Moresby, thence to Milne Bay, from where they would be sailed to Buna in flights of two vessels at a time, escorted by one or two corvettes. The first LILLIPUT convoy of nine ships<sup>4</sup> left Townsville in the evening of 15th November, escorted by H.M.A. Ships *Arunta*, *Ballarat* and *Katoomba*. About 130 miles S.S.E. of Moresby, at 7.30 p.m. on the 17th, the convoy split. Five ships proceeded to Moresby with *Arunta*, while the corvettes escorted the remaining four—*Japara*, *Balikpapan*, *Bantam* and *J. B. Ashe*—to Milne Bay, the three Dutch ships to form the first LILLIPUT flight to Buna.

## VI

On 27th November, General Blamey in a message to General MacArthur sought destroyer escort for the LILLIPUT ships north of New Guinea. Remarking that movement beyond Cape Nelson was risky, Blamey said that ships

should be protected from surface and submarine attack by destroyers operating under cover of land-based aircraft. If not desirable move out into Solomons Sea, a deep water passage exists from Milne Bay under cover of D'Entrecasteaux Islands.

The request was referred by MacArthur to Carpenter, and he rejected the suggestion that destroyers should be used. For this he had sound grounds. He had, just at that time, desired Crutchley to operate with

<sup>1</sup> Lt F. R. Mogg, RANVR; Naval Intelligence Officer, Milne Bay 1942-43. Commercial broadcasting manager; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 13 Jan 1904.

<sup>2</sup> *Royal Australian Navy, 1939-1942*, pp. 567-9.

<sup>3</sup> Capt G. C. F. Branson; RN and RAN. HMS *Kanimbla*; NOIC Milne Bay 1942-43; "Z" Special Unit; comd HMS *Lothian* Nov 1944. B. Richmond, Surrey, England, 15 Nov 1900.

<sup>4</sup> *Maatsuyker*; *Cremar* (4,608 tons); *Bontekoe*; *Japara*; *Bantam*; *Balikpapan*; *Both*; *J. B. Ashe*; and *Jesse Applegate*. It will be remarked that the Dutch continued their valuable contribution in the SWPA. The seven LILLIPUT ships in this convoy were Dutch—as were nearly all the ships in LILLIPUT.



Task Force 44 in the Coral Sea in readiness to combat a possible Japanese diversion there to assist their forthcoming major attempt on Guadalcanal, or in case it was necessary to supplement Allied naval forces in the Solomons. The six destroyers of Desron 4—*Selfridge*, *Bagley*, *Patterson*, *Mugford*, *Henley*, and *Helm*—could thus not be released from their squadron duties. The immediate task in the Coral Sea was completed with the conclusion of the Battle of Guadalcanal, but another at once replaced it, that of the protection of LILLIPUT movements for which, on 15th November (the date LILLIPUT sailed from Townsville), Carpenter required a force of one cruiser and three destroyers continuously at sea south of New Guinea, and the remainder of Task Force 44 based at a reef anchorage at short notice for steam. That afternoon Crutchley sailed *Phoenix*, with *Mugford*, *Patterson*, and *Helm*, to operate in a rectangle embraced between the south-east tip of New Guinea and Cooktown on Cape York Peninsula, while the remainder of the force, *Hobart* (Flag),<sup>5</sup> *Selfridge*, *Henley* and *Bagley*, based on Challenger Bay, Palm Islands. Until the end of the year the two groups alternated in mounting a continuous Coral Sea patrol.

The only other two destroyers Carpenter had in eastern Australian waters were *Arunta* and *Stuart*, both engaged on convoy escort. But, further to lacking destroyers for the mission for which Blamey sought them, Carpenter rightly held that these ships were in any case unsuitable for use in the Milne Bay-Buna coastal area as things then were, with the area poorly surveyed and ill charted, and reef strewn to an extent limiting manoeuvre under air attack. Destroyers would constitute only a minor surface force when in the vicinity of Buna, where the enemy could easily concentrate much greater strength. He considered, said Carpenter, that corvettes were the best type of escort vessel to use, and that the greatest possible advantage should be taken of darkness both for passage and while unloading in the Buna area.

The LILLIPUT ships reached Port Moresby and Milne Bay on the 18th and 19th November respectively. But meanwhile the capture of Buna was held up, as thus were the LILLIPUT ships in their respective ports, and on 28th November those in Moresby disembarked their troops. A conference to discuss the situation was held at Headquarters New Guinea Force, on 1st December. Those present included representatives of the Australian and American army forces, the Fifth Air Force, with the navy represented by Hunt. Doubts were expressed by the air force representative as to whether adequate air cover could be provided for the LILLIPUT movement, and Hunt felt that with the lack of air cover the passage of ships, and their protection in harbour, would be hazardous. He suggested that small ships could be passed singly up the coast with a reasonable chance of escaping detection, and could approach the Buna area in darkness and unload until about noon, taking advantage of existing fighter cover. If their unloading was incomplete they could retire until nightfall to Porlock

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<sup>5</sup> *Australia* was undergoing five weeks' dockyard refit in Sydney.

Harbour which was protected against sea and air raids. It was agreed that it would be advantageous to commence ferrying supplies in small craft. The bigger ships could take over later.

On 10th December the LILLIPUT ships in Port Moresby started to discharge their cargo, and on the 13th the operation as originally planned was cancelled except for the first flight, and the Port Moresby ships returned to Australia. It was decided to send the ships of the first flight forward one at a time to Oro Bay at 48-hour intervals. Meanwhile small ships carried on, and it was in tending to one of these that Commander Sinclair was fatally wounded when enemy dive bombers attacked the motor vessel *Kurimarau* (288 tons) which he was piloting off Porlock Harbour on 6th December. *Kurimarau* was towing a barge carrying two 25-pounder guns which Captain Nix,<sup>6</sup> 2/5th Field Regiment, was trying to get forward from Oro Bay to Hariko, where they eventually arrived on the night of 8th December. Something of this story is recounted in the history of the 2/5th Field Regiment:

Spirits were ebbing fast [at Oro Bay] when the familiar *Kuri Marau* appeared on the scene again. At Milne Bay it was discovered that there had been a mistake; the vessel had been required at Porlock, of all places. Nix pressed his claims so vigorously that *Kuri Marau* soon started on its way to Hariko, the big, awkward barge blundering along in tow. . . . Just before dusk, three Jap planes came bombing and strafing. . . . The damage forced the ship to return to Porlock.<sup>7</sup>

Sinclair died in Port Moresby on 7th December. He was succeeded as Beachmaster, Oro Bay, by Lieut-Commander W.I.L. Legg, R.N.V.R., who left Port Moresby for Oro Bay in the Dutch *Karsik* on 8th December.

Two days earlier Blamey had discussed with MacArthur the opportunity offered by the shallow depth of the Japanese positions along the sea front from Cape Endaiadere to Buna, and it was decided to take advantage of this by landing a force on the beach. Writing to MacArthur on 8th December, Blamey recalled of the discussion that:

The two aspects considered were—

- (i) To endeavour to land tanks in rear of 32 US Div to attack from the south;
- (ii) To endeavour to land a force by night east of Buna to operate in conjunction with an attack by 32 US Div with tanks.

It will take approximately one week to prepare the operation.

The tanks can be landed and are expected to leave Moresby for Porlock today. [They did so, they were in *Karsik*.] They will be towed forward from there. Plans have been made for this and engineering and landing arrangements are in hand. There will be no movement between the hour of 1230 hours and darkness forward of Porlock.

The resources at my disposal in regard to landing a force are limited. At best I can muster small craft sufficient to move approximately 400 men and this at the cost of reducing maintenance. This is too small a force for the task. At least one full battalion should be used.

<sup>6</sup> Maj L. F. Nix, 2/5 Fd Regt; 1 Naval Bombardment Gp 1944-45. Solicitor; of Bondi, NSW; b. Brisbane, 8 Feb 1914.

<sup>7</sup> J. W. O'Brien, *Guns and Gunners* (1950), p. 175.

I submit it is the duty of the Navy—

(a) to move the force by sea,

(b) to take protective action to cover the landing.

This requires at least two destroyers and two corvettes. I understand that the Navy is reluctant to risk its vessels. I desire to point out that the Navy is only being asked to go where the Japanese have gone frequently.

Further there does not appear to be great risk in making an immediate reconnaissance both by sea and air by naval officers to select a reasonably safe route in view of the daily protection given by our Air Force.

Enemy destroyers when bombed in the vicinity of the proposed landing have moved freely in these waters without meeting with disasters from reefs or other sea dangers.

Preparations for the operation will be continued but unless the Navy is prepared to cooperate the risks are great owing to the reduced numbers that can be transported. It is somewhat difficult to understand the Navy attitude of non-cooperation because of risk. "Safety First" as a Naval motto—Shades of Nelson.

In so writing, Blamey was out of his depth, and less than just to the navy. He was in error when he remarked that "the navy is only being asked to go where the Japanese have frequently gone". The Japanese had not gone with destroyers over the route between Milne Bay and Buna inside the D'Entrecasteaux Islands. It will be recalled that when they attempted to land troops from Buna to make a flank attack on Milne Bay from the north at the end of August, the vessels used to transport the troops were barges. The Japanese cruisers and destroyers on their incursions into Milne Bay came straight down across the Solomon Sea, well to the east of the Trobriand Islands, and came in to Milne Bay from the north-east. The navy had already made "a reconnaissance by sea . . . to select a reasonably safe route", and was then engaged in making a detailed survey of the Cape Nelson area and beyond. Blamey remarked that enemy destroyers when bombed in the vicinity of the proposed landing had moved freely "without meeting with disasters from reefs or other sea dangers"; but it was the incompletely surveyed and reef-strewn stretch between that vicinity and Milne Bay that caused navigational concern to the navy—not the vicinity of Buna itself. The jobs of both the R.A.N survey group and the "Ferdinand" party had been to find a passage through the reefs, not to chart every reef in the area. As was remarked of their task: "In this operation we reversed the usual surveying procedure. Normally obstructions to navigation are charted—we found the clear water and did not fix the position of anything else."<sup>8</sup> It was the obvious procedure in circumstances when time was of the essence, but until a full survey could be carried out it limited the water in which the ships could navigate and manoeuvre. The position at Buna was different. The Japanese could run in there from the north—but even so they now avoided the actual vicinity of Buna for their landings, and carried these out farther north. That the navy did not fail to cooperate, and though not agreeing to use destroyers at this stage in the navigationally dangerous waters between Milne Bay

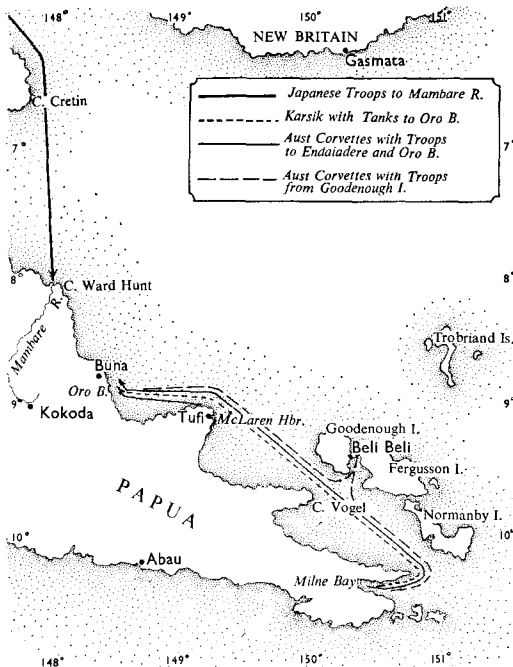
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<sup>8</sup> Feldt, *The Coast Watchers*, p. 189.

and Buna yet carried out its duty to move the tanks and the required battalions by sea, was made evident by the events of the next few days—even though General Blamey refused to admit it.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to moving the Allied troops forward where desired, the navy also endeavoured where possible to stop the enemy landing troops in the Buna area. On 26th November Intelligence indicated an enemy intention to run troops and supplies into Buna by submarines on the night 28th-29th. To circumvent this, *Katoomba* (Commander A. P. Cousin) and *Ballarat* (Lieut-Com-mander Barling), which left Milne Bay on the 27th escorting *Mulima* to Portlock Harbour where they arrived in the afternoon of the 28th, left there again immediately for Holnicote Bay, just west of Buna, and there carried out anti-submarine patrol throughout the night. No submarines were detected, but for an hour from 6.40 p.m. the two ships were subjected to intensive attacks by 10 dive bombers. Both ships were near-missed numerous times, the bomb explosions "lifting the ship out of the water",<sup>1</sup> but apart from some boiler and engine defects in *Katoomba* caused by the heavy jarring of near misses, suffered neither damage nor casualties. One Japanese aircraft was shot down, and two were damaged, by anti-aircraft fire. Cousin remarked in his report that "the excellent manoeuvrability of the corvettes appeared to surprise the Japanese pilots".

As stated above, the tanks for the attack on Cape Endaiadere were taken to Oro Bay in the Dutch *Karsik*. She left Milne Bay at 3 a.m. on 10th December, escorted by H.M.A.S. *Lithgow* (Commander A. V. Knight) who had *Champion* on board to assist with local knowledge, and who led *Karsik* through the surveyed channel to Spear Island, where



<sup>9</sup> At a press conference at HQ New Guinea Force on 21st December, when the tanks and the battalion were in action at Cape Endaiadere, General Blamey outlined the development of the attack on Buna, and the indications of the future Allied advance along the north coast. One of the pressmen suggested that the navy would probably come more prominently into the picture then. "The navy," said Blamey, "why the navy? The navy's done nothing so far."

<sup>1</sup> *Katoomba*, Letter of Proceedings.

Tancred embarked in the Dutch ship as pilot. At 10.35 p.m. the two ships arrived

off what was thought to be Oro Bay. *Karsik* however remained stationary throughout the night and I carried out A/S patrol in the vicinity. Steady heavy rain set in at 0130 Friday 11th, and at daylight entered Oro Bay and commenced off loading of tanks, ammunition and supplies. Our bombers were observed raiding the Buna area during the forenoon.<sup>2</sup>

*Karsik* completed unloading at noon on the 11th, and at 10.50 next morning both ships were back at Gili Gili in Milne Bay. They repeated the operation two days later, and left Milne Bay in the early morning of the 14th, reached Oro Bay that night, and were back in Milne Bay at 10 a.m. on the 16th. *Karsik*'s first trip with tanks to Oro Bay was designated "Operation Karsik"; the second was "Operation Tramsik".

At 8 p.m. on the 14th, when about 30 miles east of Oro Bay heading for their destination across Dyke Acland Bay, *Karsik* and *Lithgow* overhauled and passed three corvettes also bound for Oro Bay. They were solving Blamey's second problem, that of transporting a battalion of troops by sea and landing them east of Buna. H.M.A. Ships *Colac*<sup>3</sup> (Lieut-Commander Komoll,<sup>4</sup> Senior Officer), *Ballarat*, and *Broome* (Lieut-Commander Denovan<sup>5</sup>) with a total of 762 officers and men of the 2/9th Battalion, left Milne Bay at 3 a.m. on 13th December to land the troops as far forward as possible in the Buna area. Lieutenant Champion and Mr Molloy<sup>6</sup> embarked in *Colac* to act as pilots for the passage past Cape Nelson and in the Oro Bay-Cape Sudest area. Arrangements were made for the ships to meet eight landing barges (under the command of Lieutenant Verdon,<sup>7</sup> Assistant Beachmaster Oro Bay) off Cape Sudest, five miles south of Buna New Strip, at 11.30 p.m. on the 13th.

While this operation was afoot, a Japanese landing at the mouth of the Mambare River, just west of Cape Ward Hunt, 40 miles north-west of Buna, was in shape. A convoy of five destroyers (or two cruisers and three destroyers) with some 800 men of the *I Battalion, 170th Regiment* left Rabaul on the 12th. They were sighted at noon on the 13th approximately 85 miles N.N.W. of Madang, and were shadowed by air reconnaissance, but bad weather precluded attacks on them and at this stage they were last sighted off Cape Ward Hunt at 3.20 a.m. on the 14th.

Meanwhile the three Australian corvettes reached Cape Sudest at midnight on the 13th—the final approach through reefs north of Oro Bay being made at reduced speed, feeling the way with the help of Asdic

<sup>2</sup> *Lithgow*, Letter of Proceedings.

<sup>3</sup> HMAS *Colac*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts.

<sup>4</sup> Lt-Cdr S. B. Komoll, RANR. HMAS *Westralia* 1939-42; comd HMAS's *Colac* 1942-43, *Toowoomba* 1945. Ship's officer; of Sydney; b. Semaphore, SA, 3 Jan 1896.

<sup>5</sup> Cdr R. A. Denovan, MBE, VRD; RANVR. Comd HMAS's *St Giles* 1941-42, *Broome* 1942-45. *Grazier*; of Armidale, NSW; b. Killara, NSW, 1 Jan 1905.

<sup>6</sup> WO R. T. Molloy, RANR. Comd HMAS's *Winnilya* 1941-42 and *Bonthorpe* 1944; HMAS *Koala* 1945. Mariner; of Palmyra, WA; b. Coolgardie, WA, 14 Sep 1903.

<sup>7</sup> Lt R. A. Verdon, RANVR. HMS *Atmosphere*, HMAS *Toorie*; Asst Beachmaster, Oro Bay; HMAS *Wato*. Trade instructor; of Sandgate, Qld; b. Ryde, England, 18 Sep 1901.

echoes—and anchored one mile south-east of the cape. There was heavy overcast, through which, a few minutes after anchoring, unidentified aircraft close overhead began dropping parachute flares. One landing barge, with Verdon on board, came alongside *Colac* just after 1 a.m. on the 14th, and 46 troops were disembarked into it. Verdon, however, reported that owing to the inexperience of the barge crews (untrained American soldiers) and lack of navigational aids, it would probably be some two hours before the remainder of the barges arrived, and it would be impossible to complete the operation before daylight. All this time aircraft continued dropping flares. In view of the inability to complete the landing before daylight, the threat of air attack read into the continued flare dropping, and the reported proximity of the Japanese surface force, Komoll decided to postpone completion of the operation, and weighed and retired to the southward, directing *Ballarat* and *Broome* to follow. The three ships entered MacLaren Harbour, just north of Cape Tufi, soon after 9 a.m. on the 14th, their passage, from 3 a.m. to 6.15 a.m., being in a heavy electrical rain storm with visibility reduced to less than 100 yards. Back at Cape Sudest, Verdon landed his 46 men, collected his eight landing barges, and made towards Oro Bay. Soon after daylight his flotilla was bombed and machine-gunned by Boston aircraft from No. 22 Squadron R.A.A.F. Two of the barges were stranded, three made useless, and seven soldiers were wounded. The incident, which resulted from failure to inform the Fifth Air Force and C.O.I.C. Port Moresby of the operation, suggests that the decision to withdraw the three ships was a wise one, in view of the fact that they would still have been at anchor and discharging troops at the time of this attack on the barges.

Farther north the Japanese enjoyed an immunity from air attack which enabled them successfully to land their troops. Allied air attacks after daylight on the 14th sank some small landing craft the destroyers brought with them; and attacks were made on the destroyers during their retirement on the 14th, but without apparent result. That night the three Australian corvettes also landed their troops, this time at Oro Bay. They left MacLaren Harbour during the afternoon, crossed Dyke Acland Bay after dark, and skirted the land whose heavy honey scent reached out over a still sea, and followed *Karsik* into Oro Bay (*Lithgow* maintained anti-submarine patrol outside) just before midnight. Disembarkation was carried out with Verdon's remaining three landing barges and the ships' boats, and the three corvettes completed disembarkation and sailed by 5 a.m., with *Lithgow* and *Karsik* following a few minutes later, all to return to Milne Bay.

Between 16th and 19th December, *Colac*, *Ballarat* and *Broome* carried out a similar operation when they transported a total of 298 A.M.F. troops from Milne Bay to Porlock Harbour, and carried between them 699 officers and men of the 2/10th Battalion from Porlock to Oro Bay, where they disembarked them during the night 18th-19th. A few days later a third related move was made when *Colac*, *Broome* and *Whyalla*

(Lieut-Commander Oom<sup>8</sup>) proceeded to Beli Beli anchorage, Goodenough Island, and lifted thence 615 officers and men of the 2/12th Battalion (who, it will be recalled, had been disembarked there by *Arunta* and *Stuart* on 23rd October) to land them in the early hours of 29th December at Oro Bay. Thus, between the 11th and 29th December the corvettes and *Karsik* landed eight tanks, and 2,076 troops at Oro Bay. By the time those from Goodenough Island were landed there, the tanks, and the troops of the first two flights, had for days been in fierce and bloody action against a brave and fanatical enemy at Cape Endaiadere and on to Buna, which fell to the combined attacks of the Australians from the south-east and the Americans from the south just after the turn of the year. When, on 2nd January 1943, the 2/12th gathered at Giropa Point, their casualties

brought the total losses in the three 18th Brigade battalions to 55 officers and 808 men for the period 18th December to 2nd January inclusive—about 45 per cent of the numbers with which the units had first arrived on the Buna coast, although these numbers had been augmented during the sixteen days by the arrival of some reinforcements and the return of original members of the battalions. It was a heavy cost by any standards, particularly so by those of bush warfare.<sup>9</sup>

So, by the end of the year, the plan discussed in Blamey's letter of 8th December to MacArthur was brought to fruition, with the cooperation of the navy. Here, as in the Solomons, the question of reinforcement and supply was the deciding one; and here, as in the Solomons, it was answered in favour of the Allies, though not without them receiving some hard knocks.

## VII

One such hard knock, while the situation was developing along the New Guinea coast from East Cape to Buna, was suffered by the Americans when the last major sea battle in the southern Solomons, Tassafaronga, was fought during the last hour of November 1942. As with its predecessors, it arose out of a Japanese attempt to run reinforcements into Guadalcanal. On 30th November coastwatcher Paul Mason in southern Bougainville reported that two light cruisers and at least six destroyers had left the Buin area during the night 29th-30th, and the C.O.I.C. "Daily Appreciation" commented that "it is probable that an attempt is being made to land troops on Guadalcanal", an assumption strengthened by the fact that Mason's report followed a build-up of enemy shipping in the Buin-Shortlands area. On the strength of this Halsey (who had been promoted Admiral a few days earlier because of his success and the growing importance of his command) directed Rear-Admiral C. H. Wright, U.S.N., in command of a cruiser force (heavy cruisers *Minneapolis*, *New Orleans*, *Northampton*, and *Pensacola*, light cruiser *Honolulu*, and four destroyers) to sail from Espiritu Santo to intercept a Japanese force which might

<sup>8</sup> Cdr K. E. Oom, OBE; RAN. Comd HMS *Gleaner* 1941-42, HMAS's *Whyalla* 1942-43, *Shepparton* 1943; OIC Hydrographic Branch 1943-46. Of Sydney; b. 27 May 1904.

<sup>9</sup> McCarthy, p. 484.

include transports, might be destroyers only, and could reach the Tassafaronga area before 11 p.m. on the 30th. The Japanese force was, in fact, of eight destroyers under Rear-Admiral Tanaka, carrying a few troop reinforcements, and 1,100 drums of supplies. These drums were to be jettisoned off Tassafaronga, and there recovered by small craft operating from the beach, and the operation was to be one of a series every four days for the next fortnight. Japanese and Americans met in the velvet darkness of a still, calm night, with the surface of the Sound like a black mirror; it was just after 11 p.m. on the 30th. The Japanese, preparing to jettison their supply drums, were steering north-easterly at 12 knots some two miles off shore at Tassafaronga. The Americans, steaming in column at 20 knots and steering north-westerly, were some four to five miles to seaward of the Japanese. Action opened at 11.21, when the American destroyers fired torpedoes, followed almost immediately by gunfire from the cruisers. The Japanese destroyers replied with the weapon with which they were superior to the Americans—the torpedo; and within minutes the blackness was dispersed by the yellow glare of starshells, the vivid lightning of gunfire, and the towering torches of burning ships. The four American heavy cruisers, sorely smitten by torpedoes, were put out of action. One—*Northampton*—was sunk. The other three were under repair for nearly a year. The Japanese lost the destroyer *Takanami*.<sup>1</sup> Some of the drums of supplies were jettisoned, but whether they reached their intended destination is not known. By 1.30 a.m. on 1st December Tanaka and his surviving destroyers were clear of the Sound, and were back in Shortland Harbour before noon.

Tassafaronga was a tactical victory for the Japanese, but their strategical defeat in the southern Solomons was complete, and a similar situation was developing for them in New Guinea. For a while they continued their attempts to reinforce Guadalcanal, and the “Tokyo Express” adhered to its four-day schedule and made a successful run on 3rd December. But by now the Americans were building up light forces. A motor torpedo boat (P.T. boat) base was established at Tulagi, whence light forces swooped to supplement the efforts of air attack against the “Tokyo Express”. (In December, four P.T. boats were also based on Milne Bay. The noise of their engines as they manoeuvred in the bay on arrival on the night of 12th December brought the shore anti-aircraft batteries into action under the impression that there were low-flying aircraft in the vicinity, and for a few minutes the night was noisy and vivid with the thud and flash of gunfire. Later in the month they based farther forward at Tufi.) On 7th December Tanaka’s attempted supply run with eleven destroyers was thwarted and abandoned after air and P.T. boat attacks; and another attempt on the 11th was also defeated, with the Japanese loss of the destroyer *Teruzuki*.<sup>2</sup> It was the last surface engagement of the year in the Solomons. Meanwhile the Japanese were developing a submarine supply

<sup>1</sup> *Takanami*, Japanese destroyer (1941), 1,900 tons. Sunk in battle of Tassafaronga, 30 Nov 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *Teruzuki*, Japanese destroyer, 2,450 tons. Sunk in Solomons, 12 Dec 1942.



system, both in the southern Solomons and in New Guinea. A scheme was worked out whereby drums of supplies, released from a submerged submarine, rose to the surface and were retrieved by shore parties. Also "freight tubes", carrying two tons of supplies and with a range of 4,000 yards, piloted by one man, were released from submerged submarines. From November 1942 to February 1943 this scheme operated in the southern Solomons, with a submarine sailing daily from Buin, on Bougainville, to Kamimbo on the north-west tip of Guadalcanal. A similar submarine supply line was instituted to Buna. In January 1943 about 20 submarines, including most of the latest type, were engaged on supply duties.

It was against this Buna supply line that *Ballarat* and *Katoomba* operated in Holnicote Bay on 28th November. They then encountered no submarines, but there were other occasions more fortunate for the Allies. On the night of 9th December a P.T. boat sank a 2,000-ton blockade running submarine, *I 3*,<sup>3</sup> near Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal; and on 24th December one of the Tufi-based boats—*PT 122*—sank *I 22* off Gona.

The end of 1942 saw the tide beginning to flow for the Allies. The battle of communications—for control of the seas—was yet to be won, but the turning point in the all-important war against the submarine had been reached with improved Allied anti-submarine equipment, including ASV (aircraft to surface vessel radar) and with the rapidly growing output of merchant tonnage from Allied shipyards. In 1942 submarines sank approximately 6,250,000 tons of Allied shipping; in the same period British (1,843,000 tons) and American (5,339,000 tons) building was short of losses by nearly 1,000,000 tons. The monthly total of tonnage sunk by submarines reached the highest figure of the war in November 1942—119 ships of 729,160 tons. But thereafter it fell, and the Allies were shown that "the foundation of all our hopes and schemes . . . the immense ship-building programme of the United States"<sup>4</sup> was a firm foundation. During 1943 the curve of new tonnage rose sharply. It outgrew losses by submarine in the first few weeks of the new year, and the second quarter of the year saw, for the first time, U-boat losses exceed their rate of replacement.

The Russian victory at Stalingrad in February 1943 was the end of Hitler's hopes of a military conquest of Russia. The surge of Allied victories in North Africa was soon to carry them across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Europe, and open the Canal route again to save the long haul round the Cape of Good Hope. Everywhere the Allies were on the march. The road stretched a long way ahead, but clouds were lifting, and sunshine made more clearly discernible the distant goal.

<sup>3</sup> *I 3*, Japanese submarine (1926), 1,955 tons, two 4.7-in guns, 24 kts. Sunk off Guadalcanal, 9 Dec 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Churchill, Vol V (1951), p. 4.