

CHAPTER 3

AUSTRALIA'S COASTS RAIDED—HER FLANKS STRENGTHENED

MR CURTIN'S cable of 13th May brought a reply from President Roosevelt a week later in which he said that he and his Government shared Australian concern as to the potentialities of Japanese attack on Australia by way of New Guinea; recognised the threat to Australia's Pacific communications covered in part by New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa; and "cannot lose sight of the fact that neither can Australia be supported nor lines of communications kept open unless Hawaii is securely held". President Roosevelt went on to say:

The air and naval means at the disposal of the United Nations in the Pacific is not yet adequate to hold securely all three of above cited areas simultaneously but Prime Minister and Government of Australia may rest assured that means available will be applied in the critical area in accordance with the most careful and thorough consideration of all the factors of enemy potentialities, his known dispositions and his intentions as they can be deduced or otherwise become known to us.

Such application in a critical area of American means available was soon to be made. Even before Coral Sea, Admiral Nimitz had hints—from various shreds of evidence—of a forthcoming Japanese offensive in the Central Pacific. And, as was learned later, while the Coral Sea Battle was in its early stages—on 5th May—Japanese Imperial Headquarters issued the order for the Combined Fleet, in cooperation with the army, to invade and occupy strategic points in the western Aleutians and Midway Island—the second phase of the eastward-drive plan.

As stated above, the Japanese were not seriously concerned at their setback in the Coral Sea Battle. They had secured Tulagi and considered Moresby would be theirs at will; and they thought they had sunk the two American aircraft carriers. They confidently proceeded with preparations for phases two and three of the plan.

These were, for Admiral Nimitz's staff, the most anxious days of the war. They knew enough of Japanese moves afoot for the declaration of a state of "Fleet Opposed Invasion" in the Hawaiian Sea Frontier on 14th May; on the 15th Admiral King predicted that an expeditionary force for the capture of Midway would leave Guam about 24th May; and on the 20th Nimitz issued an estimate of its strength that "was accurate as far as it went—and even alarming. [The Midway Striking Force was of 4 aircraft carriers, 2 battleships, 2 heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and 16 destroyers; the Occupation Force of 12 transports and screen of 10 destroyers; with a covering group of 2 battleships, 4 heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and 7 destroyers, and a close support group of 4 heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and 2 destroyers; and 16 submarines, and ancillary craft.] What he did not know was that Admiral Yamamoto himself, in the

super-battleship *Yamato*, was to command the main body of the Combined Fleet, comprising three new and four old battleships, three light cruisers, a destroyer squadron and a light carrier, to operate between Midway and the Aleutians and cover both.¹ In addition was a Seaplane Group of two seaplane carriers and ancillaries for the Aleutian Islands, whose supporting force was composed of the four old battleships and two light cruisers detached from Yamamoto's main force.

To oppose these armadas Nimitz could muster no battleships (the nearest, old "Pearl Harbour" ships, were at San Francisco, and the two new ones, *Washington* and *North Carolina*, were in the Atlantic); only three carriers, including *Yorktown*, whose heavy Coral Sea damage was made good in two hectic days at Pearl Harbour, whence she sailed for battle on 31st May (*Saratoga*, repaired after being torpedoed by Japanese submarine *I 6*² on 11th January was training her air group at San Diego, and *Wasp* was crossing the Atlantic from the Mediterranean); 7 heavy cruisers; one light cruiser; 14 destroyers and 19 submarines.³ In this predicament Admiral King sought help from the British in the Indian Ocean, and on 19th May asked the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, "either for a British aircraft carrier to be moved from the Indian Ocean to the South-West Pacific, or for air attacks to be made on Rangoon and the Andaman Islands, or for action to be taken to interrupt Japanese communications between Singapore and Rangoon". Unfortunately, largely because of the time factor, the British were unable to do much towards meeting any of these requests. It was, recorded the British naval historian,

clear from the Admiralty's records that neither the nature nor the quality of the American Navy's intelligence regarding Japanese movements and intentions reached London until the 19th or 20th May. . . . Not until late on the 22nd when, at the First Sea Lord's suggestion, Admiral Little,⁴ the head of the British Admiralty Delegation in Washington, had an interview with Admiral King, did the Admiralty become aware that an attack on Midway Island and the Aleutians appeared from intelligence to be a really strong probability. . . . If any misunderstanding arose on this occasion, it seems that it was brought about partly by American slowness in giving the Admiralty the full intelligence of which they were possessed by the middle of May.⁵

¹ Morison, Vol IV, p. 80. This study of the Battle of Midway has been drawn upon for the references to the battle in this volume.

² *I 6*, Japanese submarine (1935), 1,955 tons, two 4.7-in guns, 24 kts. Sunk west of Saipan, 13 Jul 1944.

³ It was not until 10th June that *Wasp*, *North Carolina*, heavy cruiser *Quincy*, light cruiser *San Juan*, and seven destroyers passed through the Panama Canal from the Atlantic—the first substantial reinforcement the American Pacific Fleet received in 1942.

⁴ Admiral Sir Charles Little, GCB, GBE; RN, Lord Commissioner of Admiralty and Chief of Naval Personnel 1938-41; Head of British Joint Staff Mission, Washington, 1941-42; C-in-C Portsmouth 1942-45. B. Shanghai, 14 Jun 1882.

⁵ Roskill, Vol II, pp. 37-8. The American naval historian recorded of this that "an urgent request to the British Admiralty to lend the Pacific Fleet one of their three carriers then operating in the Indian Ocean, some thousands of miles from the nearest enemy carriers, received the discouraging reply on 19 May that none could be spared, and that their Intelligence reported 'no indication' of an attack on Alaska or the Hawaiian Islands". (Morison, Vol IV, p. 817.) Records disclose no inkling of the American Intelligence regarding Japanese intentions having reached Australia, though Combined Operations Intelligence Centre, Melbourne, recorded on 18th May "from MOST SECRET SOURCES" that "all Intelligence points to a gradual concentration of enemy forces in Home Waters possibly presaging a northward move in the near future. At no time since the outbreak of war has Japan's naval strength in Southern Waters been so reduced."

At this period the British had their hands full in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean. They still—with memories of the events of April—considered a Japanese descent into the Indian Ocean a strong possibility which had to be guarded against with inadequate forces, and the policy was to retain the fleet in being as a deterrent “whilst the Americans permit as much of the Japanese naval force in the Pacific as they mean to allow”.⁶ In the Mediterranean area the Axis threat in Cyrenaica was increasing, and the shortage of supplies in Malta was critical, urgently demanding relief.

At the time, then, when help was sought, and was in part so urgently needed by the Americans because they had kept their two new battleships and *Wasp* on the Atlantic side in order to help their Allies in the Madagascar operation and the nourishment of Malta respectively, the British were able to do but little. The Eastern Fleet's three aircraft carriers—*Indomitable*, *Formidable* and *Hermes*—had been reduced to two by the loss of the last-named in the Bay of Bengal on 9th April. During the first half of May *Indomitable* was temporarily transferred to Admiral Syfret's Force F to reinforce *Illustrious* and his air strength for the assault on Diego Suarez; and the Eastern Fleet itself—with *Formidable*—based on Kilindini, provided cover for the Diego Suarez operation from the vicinity of the Seychelle Islands. French resistance at Diego Suarez ended on 7th May, and the surrender document was signed next day. But Force F afterwards remained there for some days awaiting a decision whether the occupation of Madagascar was to be extended, and it was not until 19th May—the day when Admiral King asked for help—that *Indomitable* and *Illustrious* sailed for Kilindini for refreshment and refit. By that time, even under the most favourable conditions, it would have been impossible for any of the three carriers—*Illustrious*, *Formidable* or *Indomitable*—to have traversed half the world and joined the Pacific Fleet in time to take part in the Battle of Midway. Furthermore, the Eastern Fleet was now about to be denuded of 2 cruisers and 10 destroyers, including the 4 Australian destroyers of the 7th Flotilla, for temporary transfer to the Mediterranean to run a convoy through to Malta from Alexandria. These ships sailed from Kilindini in two groups on 25th and 27th May respectively, Group 1, of H.M. Ships *Birmingham*, *Pakenham*, *Fortune* and H.M.A. Ships *Norman* and *Nizam*; Group 2 of H.M. Ships *Newcastle*⁷ (Flag of CS4, Rear-Admiral William Tennant), *Inconstant*,⁸ *Paladin*,¹ *Hotspur*, *Griffin*, and H.M.A. Ships *Napier* (D7, Captain S. H. T. Arliss), and *Nestor*. They were in Suez by 6th June, and entered the Mediterranean

⁶ “Aide-memoire on Strategy.” Telegram of 28 May 1942 to Australian Prime Minister from Dr Evatt in London.

⁷ HMS's *Birmingham*, *Newcastle*, cruisers (1936-7), 9,100 tons, twelve 6-in guns, six 21-in torpedo tubes, 32 kts.

⁸ HMS *Inconstant*, destroyer (1941), 1,360 tons, four 4.7-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 35½ kts.

¹ HMS's *Pakenham*, *Paladin*, destroyers (1941), 1,540 tons, four 4-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts. *Pakenham* sunk off Sicily, 16 Apr 1943.

on the 7th. However, though unable to reinforce the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Somerville with Force A, the fast section of the Eastern Fleet, sailed from Kilindini at the end of May in a diversionary movement towards Ceylon.

II

While these moves and preparations were in progress among the major naval forces in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, surface raiders in the Indian Ocean and submarines in the Pacific, made their presence known. Since February there had been attacks on merchant ships—with some success—by Japanese submarines in the eastern Indian Ocean, with their operations gradually carried as far west as East African coastal waters by the five boats of Ishizaki's *8th Squadron* in May and June. But it was not until May that submarine attacks were made on merchant ships in eastern Australian waters. The first of these was on 5th May, when the American *John Adams* (7,180 tons) was torpedoed off New Caledonia. She was set on fire and blew up the next day. On 7th May, also off New Caledonia, the Greek *Chloe* (4,641 tons) was sunk by gun fire from a submarine.

These, however, were probably targets of opportunity taken by a boat on reconnaissance patrol. The Japanese were still adhering to their policy of using submarines against naval targets, and it was for this reason that on 11th May, four large boats of the *8th Squadron*, equipped for carrying midget submarines and three of which, *I 22*, *I 24*, and *I 28*, had taken part in the Coral Sea operation while the fourth, *I 27*, had been on reconnaissance patrol, were ordered to proceed to Truk to embark midget submarines to carry out attacks on naval targets at either Suva or Sydney, according to which offered most fruit. At the same time two boats, *I 21* and *I 29*, which were proceeding to reconnoitre Suva and Sydney respectively, were ordered to continue that mission. This was in pursuance of a plan made some time earlier whereby "Advanced Elements" of the Japanese *Eastern Fleet* would attack enemy naval vessels in the important areas in the South Pacific after the attack on Moresby. With that attack postponed, it was decided nevertheless to proceed with the submarine attacks as originally planned. (This apparently was part of an over-all plan of attack on naval forces in which all the boats of *8th Squadron*—both in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific—were to take part. When a wrecked midget submarine was recovered in Sydney Harbour after the attack there, among documents found in her was portion of a covering letter forwarding appendixes to "Advanced Detachment Secret Operational Order", dated 11th April at Kure in the *8th Squadron* flagship *I 10*, and signed by Ishizaki.)

Of the four boats ordered to Truk one, *I 28*, reached the Caroline Islands, but failed to make Truk. On the morning of 17th May, in the Carolines, she was sighted on the surface, "numerals and men on the bridge plainly visible", by the U.S. submarine *Tautog*,² twenty-three days out from Pearl Harbour on her way to Fremantle. An American torpedo

² *Tautog*, US submarine (1940), 1,475 tons, one 3-in gun, ten 21-in torpedo tubes, 20 kts.

disabled *I 28*, who replied with gunfire, but "the duel ended when *Tautog* registered a second hit under the enemy's conning tower".³ By this encounter, the Japanese midget striking power at Sydney Harbour a fortnight later was reduced by one quarter.

The remaining three boats, *I 22* (Commander Kiyoi Ageta), *I 24* (Commander Hiroshi Hanabusa), and *I 27* (Commander Iwao Yoshimura), carrying their midgets clamped to their upper decks, sailed from Truk about 20th May for "the seas south of the Solomon Islands".

In the meantime, on 16th May, came definite evidence to Australian naval authorities of the presence of an enemy submarine nearer home. Previous to this there had been recent sighting reports—three by aircraft at widely spaced points well out in the Coral Sea on 10th May—but at 8.34 p.m. on the 16th an intercepted radio message reported the Russian steamer *Wellen* (5,135 tons) being attacked by gunfire approximately 30 miles east of Newcastle. Merchant sailings from Sydney and Newcastle were at once suspended for 24 hours; the Flag Officer-in-Charge, Sydney, Rear-Admiral G. C. Muirhead-Gould, organised an anti-submarine search with all available A/S craft; and air searches, and surface searches by ships at the time in Sydney—the Dutch cruiser *Tromp*, H.M.A.S. *Arunta*, and U.S.S. *Perkins*—were carried out without finding the enemy. *Wellen* reached Newcastle at 2.30 a.m. on the 17th, having suffered slight damage. Her captain, one officer, and one rating were injured. The submarine had fired seven rounds at 100 yards range, and *Wellen* replied with low angle and machine-gun fire, whereupon the enemy submerged, the flooding of tanks being heard in *Wellen*. The attacker was *I 29*, then in the vicinity for her reconnaissance of Sydney.

Also on 16th May, Navy Office, Melbourne, received a delayed report of enemy activity just without the far western limit of the Australia Station, in the Indian Ocean some 1,400 miles W.N.W. of Fremantle. In the afternoon of 10th May the British s.s. *Nankin* (7,131 tons) which had left Fremantle on the 5th for Colombo, broadcast from that position a raider distress and aircraft attack signal, and that she was being attacked with gunfire and bombs. Sixteen minutes after her initial signal she broadcast "abandoning ship", after which came bleak silence. This wireless intercept was made by the transport *Felix Roussel* in convoy "SU.4" (transports *Holbrook*, *Felix Roussel* and *Duntroun*, with 4,415 troops, escorted by the armed merchant cruiser H.M.S. *Chitral*—15,346 tons) but was not reported until the convoy arrived at Fremantle on 14th May. The next day a Swedish ship which arrived reported having been attacked by a German raider, 1,500 miles west of Fremantle, on 10th May. This raider was presumably *Thor*.⁴ Not until long after was *Nankin's* fate known, but it was subsequently learned that she had become the first Indian Ocean victim of *Thor*, the only German raider to operate in the Indian Ocean in the first half of 1942. *Thor* was on her second raiding voyage. Her first, from

³ Morison, Vol IV, p. 206.

⁴ *Thor* (3,934 tons), six 5.9-in guns, four torpedo tubes, 90 mines, 18 kts.

June 1940 to April 1941, had been distinguished by three engagements with British armed merchant cruisers—*Alcantara* (22,209 tons), *Carnarvon Castle* (20,122 tons) and *Voltaire* (13,245 tons)—the last-named of which she sank on 4th April 1941. She sailed from a Biscay port on her second voyage in February 1942, and sank five ships in the South Atlantic between then and mid-April, when she rounded the Cape into the Indian Ocean. Her entry into this area apparently caused some concern to the Japanese, who regarded it as an incursion into their operational zone, and who tried to have her activities restricted to south of the 40th Parallel. But eventually the Germans were permitted to operate *Thor* in the eastern Indian Ocean as far north as 15 degrees south, but she was limited to the west by the 60th Meridian to avoid clashing with Ishizaki's group. Her tactics followed those of *Pinguin* in that ship's attack on *Maimoa* eighteen months earlier—with an endeavour by her aircraft to break down the victim's wireless aerials and to augment with bombing the raider's gunfire. *Nankin* was captured (with the loss of two Lascar members of her crew) and taken to Japan by a prize crew, where her survivors were interned as prisoners of war. One more distress message, probably relating to *Thor*, was received. That was on 29th May when the British tanker *Anglo Maersk* (7,705 tons) bound from Sydney to Abadan, broadcast "suspicious vessel following", from the area of *Thor*'s operations. When the tanker's cries ceased, *Thor*'s subsequent activities were shrouded in silence, and only the non-arrival of ships at their destinations hinted at her continued lurking in the ocean spaces.

Back in eastern Australian waters there was, after the *Wellen* incident, a lull in apparent submarine activity for some days. On 18th May *Tromp* and *Arunta*, following their unsuccessful search for *Wellen*'s attacker, left Sydney escorting convoy "ZK.8" of four ships—the Dutch *Bantam* (9,312 tons), *Bontekoe* (5,033 tons), *Van Heemskerck* (2,996 tons) and *Van Heutsz* (4,552 tons)—carrying 4,735 troops of the Australian 14th Brigade to reinforce Port Moresby. They reached their destination without incident at the end of the month. According to a post-war Japanese account, this lull in Japanese submarine activity in the Sydney area was only apparent, and on or about 20th May an aircraft from *I 29* carried out a reconnaissance of Sydney and "confirmed the existence of both battleships and cruisers anchored there".⁵ Nothing, however, was known of this reconnaissance in Australia, and the first "post-*Wellen*" indication of any submarine in near Australian waters was a report from the New Zealand Naval Board of indications of an enemy unit, probably a submarine, approximately 460 miles W.N.W. of Auckland (some 700 miles east of Sydney) in the evening of 26th May. Three days later a second New Zealand report indicated the presence of an enemy unit (probably that previously

⁵ Japanese document "Submarine Operations during the Second Phase of Operations (April 1942 to August 1942)", prepared by 2nd Demobilization Bureau Remaining Business Liquidation Division, in November 1947. "Outline of Attack on Sydney by Elements of Advanced Section of Eastern Fleet". A British official source says *I 29*'s reconnaissance of Sydney was on 23rd May.

reported) approximately 40 miles E.S.E. of Sydney at 7.10 p.m., Eastern Australian Time, on 29th May.

It is almost certain that this was *I 21*, which had been reconnoitring Suva, and which, on 23rd May, was ordered to Sydney "to carry out reconnaissance immediately prior to an attack".⁶ This was because, as a result of the reported presence of battleships and cruisers in Sydney Harbour, the commanding officer of this section of the *8th Squadron*, Captain Hankyu Sasaki, had decided to make them the target. The boats of the flotilla were in position approximately 35 miles north-east of Sydney Heads on the night of the 29th. There were five in all, *I 22 (Midget No. 21)*; *I 24 (Midget A⁷)*; *I 27 (Midget No. 14)*; *I 29* (with or without aircraft which, if with, was probably damaged and unusable); *I 21* (with aircraft).

About 4.20 a.m. on 30th May a Curtiss-type biplane single-float aircraft, burning navigation lights, flew over Man-of-War anchorage in Sydney Harbour, twice circled U.S.S. *Chicago* lying at No. 2 Buoy, and departed due east. The aircraft was heard and seen from Garden Island, and a duty officer there, Lieutenant Wilson,⁸ was sent out to *Chicago* to ask if they knew anything about it. He saw *Chicago's* officer of the watch, who replied that it was an American cruiser's aircraft. It was a conclusion that called for reconsideration when it was pointed out that there was no American cruiser other than *Chicago* in the area—and the aircraft was not hers. At the time, however, little significance appears to have attached to the sighting. An air raid warning was issued by Fighter Sector Headquarters at 5.7 a.m., and later reports came in indicating the presence of two unidentified aircraft in the Sydney-Newcastle area, but searches by fighter aircraft failed to bear fruit. The definite Man-of-War anchorage sighting does not appear to have inspired any apprehensions of a submarine—or other sea-delivered—attack on the harbour, or to have initiated any special defence measures.⁹

Within minutes of the Sydney Harbour sighting, away across the Indian Ocean in Diego Suarez Harbour, Madagascar, a similar aircraft circled H.M.S. *Ramillies* lying at anchor. This was at 10.30 p.m. on 29th May but, allowing for the difference in longitude, the two incidents were separated by only 70 minutes in time. The Diego Suarez aircraft was from Ishizaki's flagship *I 10*. At the time it was realised that it must have come from an enemy warship of some sort, the alert was given, and *Ramillies* weighed and steamed around for a while before taking up a different anchor

⁶ Possibly *I 21* was ordered to Sydney because *I 29's* aircraft was damaged in the reconnaissance of 20th May. The Japanese report states that, subsequent to the raid on Sydney Harbour, "as the aircraft on both *I 21* and *I 29* were damaged, no reconnaissance could be made".

⁷ The actual number of "Midget A" is not known owing to her wreckage not being recovered. She is here designated *Midget A* as identification for the purpose of this account of the raid on Sydney.

⁸ Lt-Cdr P. F. Wilson; RANVR. HMAS *Penguin* 1942-43, Navy Office 1943-45, British Pacific Fleet 1945-46. Shipping officer; of Chatswood, NSW; b. Murrumburrah, NSW, 26 Aug 1908.

⁹ In his report on the midget submarine attack (B.S. 1749/201/37 of 16th July 1942) Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould wrote: "The attack was possibly preceded by aerial reconnaissance which may have been carried out on 29th, 30th and 31st May. A reconnaissance of Sydney Harbour, especially the naval anchorage area, was carried out by one biplane single float-plane at approximately 0420K/30 May."

berth. At nightfall on the 30th, under a clear sky bright with a full moon, two midget submarines, from *I 16* and *I 20*, were launched 10 miles from the harbour entrance. At least one—from *I 20*—entered the harbour, and at 8.25 p.m. scored a torpedo hit on *Ramillies* which caused some damage, and an hour later torpedoed and sank the tanker *British Loyalty* (6,993 tons).

As was learned after the war¹ the Sydney aircraft was from *I 21*. Piloted by Lieutenant Susumo Ito, it took off from a choppy sea in a rising wind, from a position 35 miles north-east of Sydney's North Head at around 3 a.m. on the 30th. Cloud ceiling was at 2,000 feet. It flew up the harbour at about 600 feet, saw *Chicago* and "four destroyers" in Man-of-War anchorage, and *Canberra* in adjacent Farm Cove, and flew back to land on the sea alongside *I 21*. In landing on the rough water the aircraft capsized and was sunk, but Ito and his observer reached the submarine with their report of "battleships and cruisers" in the harbour. Sasaki decided to attack with midget submarines on the night of 31st May.

The evening of Sunday, 31st May 1942, was dark and cloudy at Sydney. Outside the Heads the wind was S. by W., of moderate force, the sea rough with a fair swell running. After sunset the coast was dark. The moon was full and rose at 6.13 p.m., but until the middle watch its light was obscured by heavy overcast. Outer South Head and Inner South Head lights were burning, but the main leads were out. There were, however, patches of brightness within the harbour, and floodlights were on at the graving dock site at Garden Island, where work was in progress. Fixed anti-submarine defences consisted of outer and inner indicator loops at the Heads, but the first-mentioned were out of action. At the inner entrance to the harbour there was, in course of construction, an anti-torpedo boom, between George's Head on Middle Head, and Green Point on Inner South Head. The centre portion was completed, but there were gaps at each end, though un-netted piles were in position in the western gap.

The principal naval vessels in the harbour were U.S. Ships *Chicago*, *Perkins*, *Dobbin*,² and H.M.A.S. *Bungaree* (minelayer) at buoys in Man-of-war anchorage; H.M.A.S. *Canberra* at No. 1 Buoy in Farm Cove; the armed merchant cruisers *Kanimbla* and *Westralia* across the harbour off Neutral Bay; *Adelaide* alongside on the west side of Garden Island; and the corvettes *Whyalla* and *Geelong*³ at the oil wharf on the north-west corner of the island; H.M.I.S. *Bombay*⁴ at No. 9 Buoy, Man-of-War anchorage; and the Dutch submarine *K 9*⁵ fast outside the depot ship

¹ Japanese document "Outline of Attack on Sydney by Elements of Advanced Section of Eastern Fleet"; newspaper interviews with Japanese pilot Susumo Ito (Richard Hughes in *Sydney Sun*, 28 March 1949; Tom Farrell in *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1950).

² *Dobbin*, US destroyer tender (1924), 7,938 tons.

³ HMAS *Geelong*, corvette (1941), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts. Lost in collision in north Australian waters, 18 Oct 1944.

⁴ HMIS *Bombay*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts.

⁵ *K 9*, Dutch submarine (1922), 521 tons, one 3.5-in gun, four 17.7-in torpedo tubes, 15 kts.

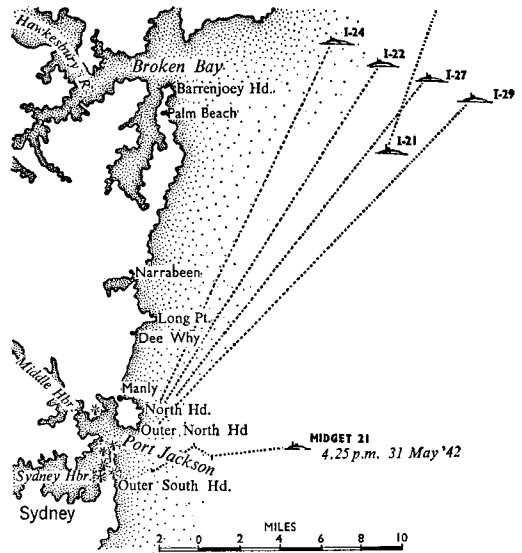
(converted harbour ferry) *Kuttabul*, lying alongside at the south-east corner of Garden Island.

The available harbour defence craft were the anti-submarine vessels *Yandra* (one 4-inch gun and 31 depth-charges) and *Bingera*,⁶ *Yandra* being on duty patrolling within the indicator loop area while *Bingera* was "stand off" ship, lying at No. 7 Buoy in the Naval Anchorage; minesweepers *Goonambee* and *Samuel Benbow* in Watson's Bay; four duty (unarmed) naval auxiliary patrol boats, and six channel patrol boats (each armed with two .303 Vickers guns, depth-charge throwers and four to six depth-charges), *Yarroma* and *Lolita* on duty in the vicinity of the boom gates, and *Steady Hour*, *Sea Mist*, *Marlean* and *Toomaree* "stand off" boats at Farm Cove.

The harbour was open to traffic, which was proceeding normally, the ferries running, and ships departing and arriving. The hospital ship *Oranje* passed out through the Heads at 4.4 p.m., and arrivals were *Cobargo* (860 tons) at 5.17, *Erinna* (6,233 tons) at 5.50, *Mortlake Bank* (1,371 tons) at 6.55, and *Wyangerie* (1,068 tons) at 8.53 p.m.

Sunset was at 4.54 p.m. Dusk was approaching over the greying, heaving sea as, around 4 to 4.30 p.m., *I 22*, *I 24*, and *I 27* released their midget submarines some seven miles east of Sydney

Heads. The land to the west was silhouetted against the waning light, and the early navigational fixes of the approaching midget craft used bearings of unlighted features—Outer North Head, Middle Head, and the forward main lead through the Heads—indicating that these bearings were taken while there was yet daylight. Later and closer in bearings were of Outer South Head and Inner South Head lights. The first and outermost bearings of *Midget No. 21*⁷ placed her in position Outer South Head Light 260 degrees 7.2 miles, and was timed 4.25. Later fixes (untimed) placed her in progressive positions Outer South Head Light 253 degrees 4.1 miles, 247 degrees 3.6 miles, 260 degrees 1.7 miles—this



Sydney Harbour raid. Picking-up positions, May 1942

⁶ HMAS *Bingera* (1935), 922 tons, commissioned 5 Feb 1940.

⁷ Approach positions marked on a working chart recovered from *Midget No. 21*.

last apparently an "after dark" fix. The other two midgets probably made similar approaches, all being unobserved.

As they stole towards their goal in the swiftly deepening twilight of that May Sunday, the Japanese midget submarines traversed a stretch of water whose surface had been furrowed by another keel on another May Sunday 172 years earlier; and their navigators took bearings of points of land on which the gaze of the first white men to look upon them had, those years before, briefly rested. "At day break on Sunday the 6th May 1770," wrote Captain James Cook in his account of his voyage of circumnavigation,⁸ "we set sail from Botany Bay, with a light breeze at N.W. which soon after coming to the southward, we steered along the shore N.N.E., and at noon, our latitude, by observation, was 33 degrees 50 minutes S. At this time we were between two and three miles distant from the land, and abreast of a bay, or harbour, in which there appeared to be good anchorage, and which I called Port Jackson." The third plotted position of *Midget No. 21* on Sunday, 31st May 1942, Outer South Head Light 247 degrees 3.6 miles, placed her in 33 degrees 50 minutes south, between two and three miles distant from the land at North Head—in precisely the position of H.M.S. *Endeavour* at noon on Sunday, 6th May 1770.

The signature of an inward crossing was recorded on an indicator loop at 8 p.m. It was made by *Midget No. 14*, from *I 27*, but at the time, owing to the ferry and other traffic over the loops, its significance was not recognised. Approximately fifteen minutes later Mr J. Cargill, a Maritime Services Board watchman, sighted a suspicious object caught in the anti-torpedo net near the west gate. He and his assistant, Mr W. Nangle, investigated it in a skiff, and reported it to *Yarrroma* (Lieutenant Evers⁹) at about 9.30. Apprehension that the object was a magnetic mine deterred *Yarrroma* from closing it. She reported "suspicious object in net" at 9.52 p.m., and was ordered to close and give full description, and at 10.20 sent a stoker across in the Maritime Services skiff, while *Lolita* (Warrant Officer Anderson¹) closed the scene. The stoker reported that the object was a submarine, and at 10.30—one hour after it was first reported to her by Cargill—*Yarrroma* signalled to Sydney naval headquarters: "Object is submarine. Request permission to open fire." Five minutes later demolition charges in *Midget No. 14* were fired by its crew, Lieutenant Kenshi Chuma and Petty Officer Takeshi Ohmori, thus destroying both themselves and their craft. Meanwhile, at 9.48, another inward crossing, again taken as of no special import, was recorded on the indicator loop. It was that of *Midget A* from *I 24* (Sub-Lieutenant Katsuhisa Ban and Petty Officer Namori Ashibe).

⁸ James Cook, *An Account of a Voyage Round the World*, London, 1773.

⁹ Lt-Cdr H. C. Evers, VRD; RANVR. HMAS *Stuart* 1940-42; comd HMAS *Yarrroma* 1942-43, *ML's 813, 812, 426, 1943-45*. Shipping clerk; of Balwyn, Vic; b. Balwyn, 21 Sep 1920.

¹ WO H. S. Anderson, RANR. Comd *Lolita* 1941-42; *Baralaba, John Oxley*; Boom Laying Officer, Darwin 1944-45. Master mariner (ketches and schooners); of Port Adelaide; b. Port Pirie, SA, 12 Jul 1903.

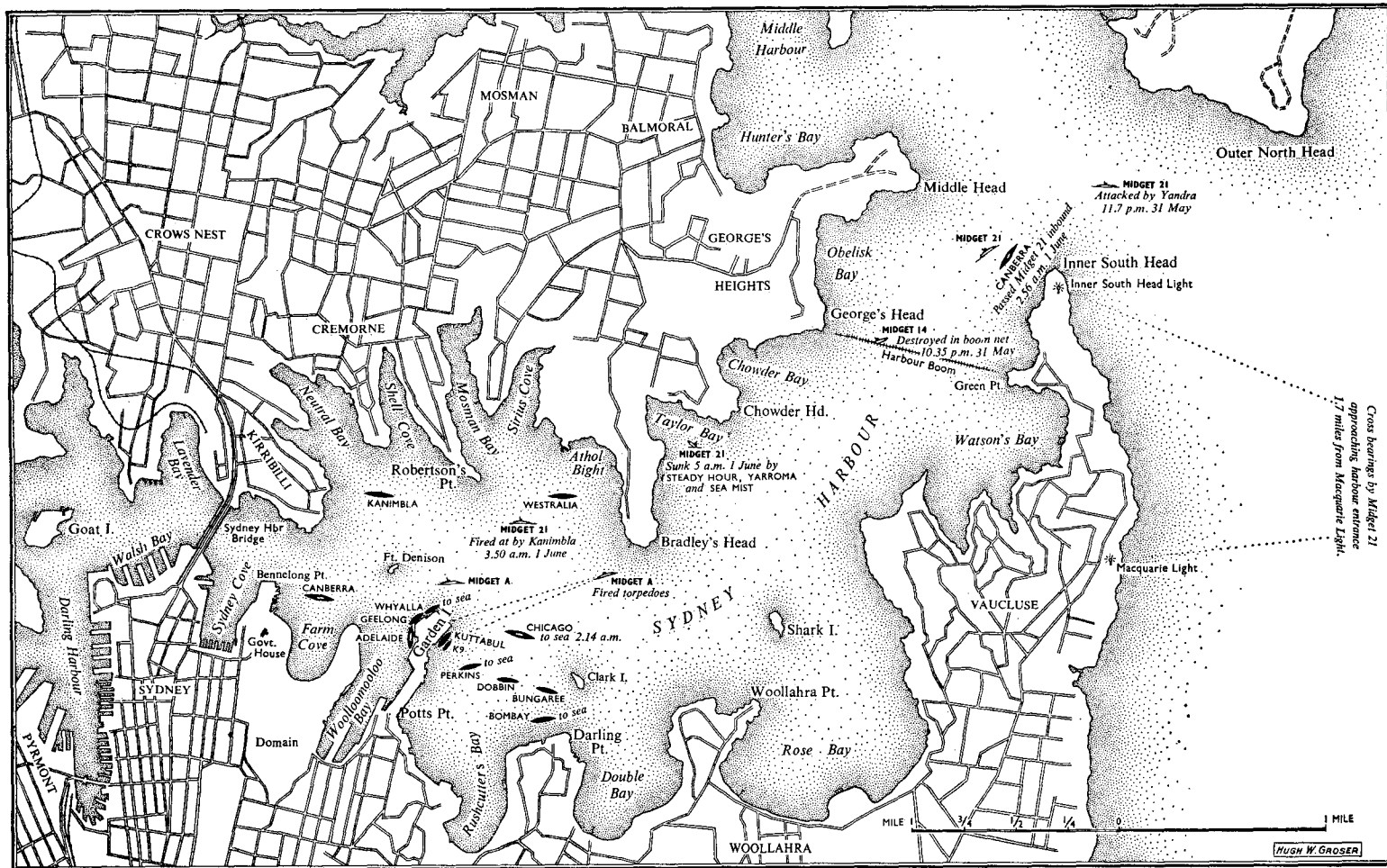
At 10.27 p.m., and again at 10.36, the general alarm was given by the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Sydney, Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould. At 10.20 Captain H. D. Bode, Commanding Officer of *Chicago*, who had been on shore at "Tresco", the official residence of the N.O.I.C., left there for his ships "with the suggestion that he should go to sea with *Perkins*".² The 10.27 warning instructed all ships in Sydney Harbour to take anti-submarine precautions, and the port was closed to outward shipping. At approximately 10.50, *Chicago*, lying at No. 2 Buoy, sighted a submarine's periscope (apparently that of *Midget A*) about 500 yards distant. She illuminated it by searchlight and opened fire with red tracer pom-pom. The submarine, steering towards the Harbour Bridge, passed about 200 yards off Garden Island in the path of the dockyard motor boat *Nestor*, which had to alter course to avoid. An observer on Garden Island ferry wharf saw it in *Chicago's* searchlight with the cruiser's shots "falling all round it".

While *Midget A* was thus creating excitement in the harbour, *Midget No. 21*, from *I 22*, was entering the Heads. She did not at this time reach the effective loop, so no loop indicator signature was then recorded by her, but at 10.52 p.m. the naval auxiliary patrol boat *Lauriana*, on duty in the loop area with *Yandra*, sighted "a flurry on the water" ahead. She illuminated with her searchlight *Midget 21's* conning tower 60 to 80 feet distant, and being unarmed she signalled Port War Signal Station and *Yandra*. At 10.54 *Yandra* sighted the submarine's conning tower at a distance of 400 yards, three cables 28 degrees from Hornby Light. She tried to ram the enemy "which appeared 100 yards astern, damaged, and slowly turning to starboard". Contact was lost, but was regained by sighting at 600 yards five minutes later, and at 11.07 *Yandra* attacked with a pattern of six depth-charges. "Submarine was not seen after explosions."

While all this was going on, the ferries continued to run. This was by Muirhead-Gould's direct order, since he felt that "the more boats that were moving about at high speed the better chance of keeping the submarines down till daylight". Ships continued to show lights, and it was not until 11.14 p.m. that the instruction "All ships to be darkened" was issued, and eleven minutes later before the graving dock floodlights were extinguished.

At 11.10 p.m. *Geelong*, from her berth alongside at Garden Island, fired at a suspicious object in the direction of Bradley's Head. This was probably *Midget A*, which had apparently turned toward the north shore after being fired on by *Chicago*, and was there taking up her torpedo firing position with the cruiser—which was silhouetted against the graving dock floodlights—as target. Both *Geelong* and *Whyalla* alongside her, illuminated the Bradley's Head area by searchlight for some time without again sighting the submarine. At 11.25 the graving dock floodlights blacked

² "Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31st-June 1st 1942." Report by NOCS, Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould (B.S. 1749/201/37, 16th July 1942).



Midget submarine raid on Sydney Harbour, 31st May-1st June 1942

out. Five minutes later an underwater explosion wrecked *Kuttabul*, and caused a number of casualties in her.³ It was subsequently discovered that this was caused by one of two torpedoes which, fired at *Chicago* by *Midget A* from the direction of Bradley's Head, passed under the Dutch submarine *K 9*, and struck the harbour bed beneath *Kuttabul*, where it exploded. The other torpedo ran on shore on Garden Island and failed to explode. Possibly the blacking out of the graving dock floodlights just prior to *Midget A*'s attack was responsible for the cruiser's escape.

The Harbour was now awake (though in the near-by city many people slept soundly through the gunfire and general turmoil, and others thought that naval practice firing was responsible for the disturbance). Ships and craft got moving. *Bingera* slipped, and swept between Bradley's Head and Garden Island; *Perkins* left the Naval Anchorage for sea; the Dutch submarine *K 9* slipped, and proceeded up harbour in tow; *Chicago* made her departure signal from Man-of-War anchorage at 2.14 a.m. on 1st June, and *Whyalla* followed her seawards at 2.30. Also at 2.30 the four "stand off" Channel Patrol Boats in Farm Cove were ordered to proceed on patrol, *Toomaree* to the east boom gate, *Marlean* and *Sea Mist* to the west gate, and *Steady Hour* to join *Lolita* and *Yarroma* at the boom.

At this time it was believed that a third submarine was in the harbour, because an indicator loop crossing was registered at 1.58 a.m., but in the subsequent analysis this was determined as an outward crossing—that of *Midget A*, leaving the harbour after having fired her torpedoes and completed her mission. Almost an hour later than this *Chicago*—whose "proceeding to sea" report from Port War Signal Station at 2.56 a.m. followed *Perkins*' passage through the Heads by sixteen minutes and anticipated that of *Whyalla* by nine—sighted a periscope almost alongside, and signalled "Submarine entering harbour". That was at 3 a.m., and one minute later an inward crossing was registered on an indicator loop. It was presumably *Midget No. 21* making a belated entry after recovering from the depth-charge battering she had received from *Yandra* four hours earlier.

In the sorting out of events in this night of alarms and excursions, considerable difficulty was experienced "in making out any sort of chronological plot. A great many ships and boats and, therefore, people were concerned in these operations, and all were so busy that they had no thought for recording actual time of incidents."⁴ There came almost an hour of comparative quiet after 3 o'clock. *Bingera* carried out an anti-submarine patrol in the vicinity of *Canberra* in Farm Cove, whence the four "stand-off" Channel Patrol Boats proceeded on patrol at 3.35 a.m.

H.M.I.S. *Bombay* put to sea on an anti-submarine search. There was a revival of activity at 3.50 when *Kanimbla*, lying at Birt's Buoy in Neutral Bay, suddenly burned a searchlight and opened fire. *Bingera* made a fruitless search of the area. There was another peaceful interlude, broken after

³ Casualties in *Kuttabul* were: 18 killed, one missing believed killed, 10 wounded.

⁴ "Japanese Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour." Report by NOCS, Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould (B.S. 1518/201/37, 22nd June 1942).

an hour by a report from the auxiliary minesweeper *Doomba*, at 4.50, of a submarine contact off Robertson's Point. Again a fruitless search by *Bingera*. At the same time *Canberra* reported an unconfirmed sighting of a torpedo track from the direction of Bradley's Head.

This was the prelude to some three hours of intense activity by *Sea Mist* (Lieutenant Andrew⁵), *Steady Hour* (Lieutenant Townley⁶), and *Yarroma*, all patrolling in the west gate area. At approximately 5 a.m. *Sea Mist*, at the request of minesweeper *Goonambee* (who at 11 p.m. on the 31st had proceeded from Watson's Bay to patrol from Bradley's Head to the west gate) investigated a suspicious object in Taylor Bay. She illuminated it with an Aldis lamp, identified it as a submarine, and made two depth-charge attacks, simultaneously firing red Very lights. These and the explosions brought *Yarroma* hot-foot to the scene, her crew's anticipations whetted by the sight of more Very lights and the sound of additional explosions as she raced in to find *Sea Mist* attacking what that boat reported as "three submarines". *Yarroma* and *Sea Mist* were shortly joined by *Steady Hour*, and from then on until 8.27 a.m. intermittent depth-charge attacks were delivered on submarine contacts recorded by detection gear and by visual "sightings" in that deceptive period of twilight and shadow-borne illusion of a growing dawn. They were conditions under which were seen more submarines than were actually present. But reality existed in the wreck of *Midget No. 21*. It lay on the harbour bed in Taylor Bay, battered by depth-charge explosions, the torpedoes jammed in their tubes, the two crew members—Lieutenant Keiu Matsuo and Petty Officer Masao Tsuzuku—dead and heedless of the faint hum of the motors which kept the propellers still slowly turning, and of the knocking and scraping sounds made by *Steady Hour's* cable and dragged anchor seeking, finding, and fouling the hull. Chronologically the story of those dawnlight happening runs: 6.40 a.m.—*Steady Hour* dropped two depth-charges and marker buoy. 6.58—*Yarroma* confirmed A/S contact and dropped one charge. 7.18 to 7.25—*Yarroma* and *Steady Hour* attacked A/S contact, oil and air bubbles rose, *Steady Hour* reported her anchor had caught up in the submarine. 8.27 a.m.—*Yarroma* made final depth-charge attack, oil and air bubbles continued to rise.⁷

A diver's investigations that day found *Midget No. 21*, with her engines still running, lying on the harbour floor. Two 30-fathom lengths of 2½-inch wire were shackled to her and, by them, minesweeper *Samuel Benbow* was moored to her for the night. Next day, 2nd June, attempts to drag the submarine inshore by these wires failed, but on 4th June, with the help of sheerlegs and slings, the wreck was warped into shallow water and

⁵ Lt R. T. Andrew; RANVR. Comd *Sea Mist*, *Lolita*. Store manager; of Mosman, NSW; b. Sans Souci, NSW, 23 Sep 1910.

⁶ Cdr Hon A. G. Townley; RANVR. Comd *Steady Hour* 1941-42, *ML 813* 1942-43, *ML 817* 1943. MHR 1949-63; Minister for Social Services 1951-54, for Air and Civil Aviation 1954-56, for Immigration 1956-58, for Defence 1958-63. Of Hobart; b. Hobart, 3 Oct 1907. Died 24 Dec 1963.

⁷ "Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31st-June 1st 1942." Report by Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould, 16th July 1942.

finally brought on shore. Its occupants were found to have died as the result of self-inflicted revolver shots in the head.⁸

From the remains of the two submarines recovered—the components of which were identical—a complete submarine was constructed. This made a final voyage, on wheels over Australian roads, from Sydney via Goulburn, Canberra, and the Hume Highway to Melbourne, thence by the coast road to Adelaide, and back through inland Victoria—Nhill, Ararat, Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton—and north again by the Hume Highway to Canberra. This “voyage”, of some 2,500 miles, was to let as many Australians as possible see a midget submarine, and also to raise money for the Naval Relief Fund. It was successful on both counts. It ended at 4 p.m. on 28th April 1943, when the submarine, flying the White Ensign (which it did throughout the “voyage”) and now flying a paying-off pendant also, arrived at the Australian War Memorial. There it remains.⁹ The bodies of the four Japanese recovered from the two submarines were cremated at Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney. Admiral Muirhead-Gould arranged for the funeral to be carried out with full naval honours, the coffins covered with the Japanese ensign and a volley fired by a naval saluting party, and he himself attended. There was some criticism of this, but the action was typical of the man and his tradition.

So ended the Japanese midget submarine raid on Sydney Harbour. Luck was certainly on the side of the defenders, and was undeserved in the early stages when inactivity and indecision were manifested—the disregard of the aircraft reconnaissance of the harbour on 30th May as possibly presaging an attack from the sea though it was known to be by a ship-borne float-plane, and the failure promptly to react to the discovery of *Midget No. 14* caught in the anti-torpedo net. Nearly two-and-a-quarter hours elapsed from the initial sighting of this midget by Cargill at 8.15 p.m. and the first “general alarm” issued by Muirhead-Gould at 10.27 to all ships to take anti-submarine precautions. By then, *Midget A* had been in the harbour, undetected, for more than half an hour. From the time of the initial sighting of *Midget No. 14* to that when the four “stand off” Channel Patrol Boats were ordered on patrol, six-and-a-quarter hours elapsed, and another hour passed before they actually proceeded—four hours after *Kuttabal* was sunk.

Some years later Lieutenant Wilson who, as mentioned, was duty officer (Intelligence) on Garden Island on the night of the raid, recalled events

⁸ Examination of the wrecks of *Midgets Nos. 14* and *21* and of their contents, led to the conclusion that, in favourable circumstances, it would be possible for one of these craft to operate in a suitable harbour for a period up to one week, and to remain submerged for at least 12 hours. General habitability would be the most serious problem to overcome, and it would have been necessary for the crew to get out of the submarine for periods if the cruise were to be protracted. The midgets contained food rations and bottles of mineral waters, whisky, and wine. A typical meal (1,300 calories) was of soda biscuits, dried bonito, pickled plums, peas, chocolate and caramels. Charts of Sydney and Newcastle harbours were carried, and target photographs including Garden Island and Cockatoo Island Dockyard in Sydney; the Hawkesbury River railway bridge; and the steelworks, floating dock, and Walsh Island shipyard, in Newcastle.

⁹ For a full description of this overland journey see “A Maiden Voyage in Uncharted Waters” by Lt-Cdr J. S. Bovill, *H.M.A.S. Mk. II* (1943), pp. 89-96.

in a letter to the author. Of the air reconnaissance by Ito on 30th May he wrote:

The first sighting was made by the army artillery battery at George's Heights, Middle Head, who were lulled into a sense of false security by the plane's American markings and type. They reported the sighting by telephone to me, adding "there is no cause for alarm as it is an American Curtiss Falcon float plane". . . . I was quite aware that *Chicago's* planes were on its deck and that no other American cruiser was anywhere in the vicinity. . . . With the approval of Lieut-Commander Mills¹ (S.O.I.) I proceeded to *Chicago* and frightened the wits out of the Deck Officer.

Wilson attributed much of the difficulties of the defence to lack of efficient communications.

This factor was the one great hindrance to the efficient working of naval operations. Signals from Channel Patrol Boats patrolling the area of the Heads and net came to us through Port War Signal Station. This was not fast enough. . . . After issuing warnings to all concerned, and doing the many things necessary to get into action, the admiral (Muirhead-Gould) ordered me to get the dockyard lights out. They were on tall masts lighting the whole area. I could not raise the dockyard by telephone so the admiral sent me off on foot. Paul Revere had a more comfortable trip than I did. I ran at full speed across a rough and rocky dockyard road into the dock and through the work sheds. As I went through I shouted to all and sundry, "Get out fast, the port is under attack." Some delay occurred finding the engineer responsible, and with authority to put the lights out. When I found him, he found it hard to believe, and spoke of the difficulty with hundreds of men in the dock, many below sea level. I left him in no doubt of the admiral's requirements, and he sent word to evacuate the dock, and prepared to turn off the main switches. I ran back and it was only a few minutes after I reported that the torpedo exploded under *Kuttabul*. . . . I believe that had the lights not been put out, *Chicago* would have been torpedoed.

Other factors mentioned by Wilson were:

Channel Patrol Boats were anchored in Farm Cove on the other side of Macquarie's Point, and they were unable to see visual signals from Garden Island. Long delay occurred sending messages by launches. . . . Very few C.P.B's carried depth charges. . . . All concerned in the port did as well as communications, craft, and armaments permitted. They should be applauded. . . . Though records show that the four "stand off" C.P.B's in Farm Cove were not ordered to proceed until 2.30 a.m. on 1st June, I am sure they were away and in the vicinity of the Heads before midnight on 31st May.

Events in Sydney contrasted with happenings in Diego Suarez where, though the appearance of the reconnaissance aircraft on 29th May was correctly interpreted as indicating the near presence of an enemy warship, and precautions were taken to safeguard *Ramillies*, that ship was subsequently torpedoed and damaged, and *British Loyalty* torpedoed and sunk. Apparently nothing was known in Australia at the time of the Diego Suarez attack. The Japanese reconnaissance aircraft was over that harbour and *Ramillies* at 10.30 p.m. 29th May, local time (38 hours 45 minutes before *Midget No. 14* was discovered in the net at Sydney), and *Ramillies*

¹ Lt-Cdr C. F. Mills; RAN. SO Int HMAS's *Lonsdale* 1939-41; *Penguin* 1941-42; comd HMAS *Pirie* 1942-43; SO Demob & Planning *Lonsdale* 1944-47. Public servant; b. Roma, Qld, 28 Sep 1903, Died 11 Mar 1947.

was torpedoed at 8.25 p.m. local time on 30th May (16 hours 50 minutes before *Midget No. 14* was first discovered). Had these facts and their relationship been known in Australia, as there was ample time for them to be known, it might have alerted the Australian naval authorities to the likelihood of a midget submarine attack following the aerial reconnaissance of Sydney Harbour. Approximately 18 hours after *Midget No. 14* was first discovered, the Naval Board told the Admiralty by signal of the Sydney attack, and six hours later the Admiralty issued a general warning to British naval authorities throughout the world, mentioning the Sydney attack and admonishing with "Every possible precaution is to be taken." But there is no record of Australian naval authorities having, up to then, been told of the Diego Suarez attack.

Once the defending craft in Sydney got into action, they put up a good performance, and the work of *Yandra* and *Lauriana* in the late hours of 31st May in their attacks on *Midget No. 21*, and the attacks by *Sea Mist*, *Yarroma*, and *Steady Hour* which resulted in that midget's destruction² in the early hours of 1st June, weigh heavily on the credit side of the night's profit and loss account. Perhaps the summing up of an American naval officer³ came near the mark when he wrote: "So, by a combination of good luck and aggressive counter-attack, an extremely well-conceived enemy operation succeeded only in underlining to the embattled Australians their front row seat in the Pacific War." Though it was a particularly heavy underlining to the victims in *Kuttabul*.

III

In the South-West Pacific and the western Indian Ocean the two divisions of the Japanese *8th Submarine Squadron* had, in the few hours between 29th May and 1st June, expended their planned means of attack on Allied war vessels—the midget submarines—and, consistent with Japanese submarine policy, they now embarked on a limited campaign against merchant ships.⁴ The first intimation of this was at 10.18 p.m. on 3rd June when the Australian coastal steamer *Age* (4,734 tons), bound from Melbourne to Newcastle, reported being under gunfire from a submarine in position 35 miles S.E. of Norah Head. An hour and a half later Sydney radio intercepted a signal from the coaster *Iron Chieftain* (4,812 tons), on passage from Newcastle to Whyalla, reporting that she was torpedoed 27 miles east of Sydney, approximately five miles from where *Age* was

² In his report of 22nd June Muirhead-Gould wrote: "From a preliminary examination of the evidence, I reported that I considered *Steady Hour* was responsible for the sinking of No. 4 submarine [it was originally believed, from the first study of the loop crossing signatures, that four midgets took part in the attack] in Taylor Bay. Further investigation shows that *Yarroma* and *Sea Mist* were equally concerned in this attack."

³ Lt-Cdr J. Burke Wilkinson, USNR, in an article "Sneak Craft Attack in the Pacific", in *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, March 1947, p. 281.

⁴ Hashimoto, in *Sunk*, pp. 70-1, suggests that this was intended to be part of a more ambitious plan. "In June 1942 it was planned to try to weaken the resolve of the enemy to fight by carrying out large-scale commerce destruction in the Indian Ocean and Australian areas, and also with the idea of wiping out the effect of defeat of Midway. However, the enemy chose this moment for his counter-attack in the Solomons and most of our submarines had to concentrate in this area to counteract this. Nevertheless small forces continued to operate in the Indian Ocean and Australian areas and the 8th Submarine Squadron proceeded with these operations on completion of the midget attacks at Sydney and Diego Suarez."

attacked. *Age*, unharmed, reached Newcastle shortly before 1 a.m. on the 4th. *Iron Chieftain*, loaded with coke, and with important material for ships building at Whyalla, sank in about five minutes with the loss of twelve of her company, including the master, Captain L. Haddelsey, and the third mate, Mr A. Kennedy, who were on the bridge at the time. *Iron Chieftain* left Newcastle soon after 10 a.m. on the 3rd, to meet a strong south-easterly wind, high sea, and heavy swell which kept her speed down to five or six knots. The weather gradually improved, and at the time of the attack she was making about nine knots. According to survivors' reports the submarine (possibly *I 21*, which was operating in this area⁵) was sighted, on the surface, from the bridge of *Iron Chieftain* some minutes before the attack. A bridge lookout said: "I saw the skipper and the third mate watching the submarine. They watched it for five or six minutes." It was on the port side, and suddenly "the skipper cried 'Hard a'starboard'." Apparently before the ship could swing, the torpedo struck on the port side amidships. Twelve survivors, including the chief officer, were taken from a raft at 3.30 a.m. on 4th June by H.M.A.S. *Bingera*. At 6 a.m. on 5th June the remaining survivors—25 in all—landed on the beach at The Entrance, Tuggerah Lakes, from the ship's starboard lifeboat under the command of the second officer.

In this way the war struck suddenly at the Australian merchant service after eighteen months of immunity in Australian waters since the events at Nauru in December 1940. Officers and men reacted well, and in the fine tradition of their calling; and their behaviour, and that of their colleagues who were to suffer similarly in succeeding months, offset such slur as had attached to the merchant seamen through the actions of individuals who were not typical of the strong heart that ran through the service.⁶

When news of these attacks arrived, the ports of Sydney and Newcastle were closed to outward traffic; ships at sea were warned to zigzag; and surface and air searches were carried out. There was swift evidence that the enemy campaign was geographically extensive. Just before dawn on 4th June, and some 270 miles south of the two earlier attacks, the steamer *Barwon* (4,240 tons) from Melbourne to Port Kembla, was attacked by gunfire and torpedo in position 33 miles S.S.E. of Gabo Island. She suffered no damage or casualties, though fragments of the torpedo, which exploded close alongside, came on board the ship. At 7 a.m. the coastal passenger steamer *Canberra* (7,710 tons) reported sighting a "suspicious object probably submarine" off Cape Moreton, Queensland, about 600 miles north of the scene of the attack on *Barwon*.

⁵ Hashimoto, p. 257, though he does not credit her with any sinkings at this time. Two survivors, the second mate and an able seaman, thought that two submarines were present; but this was possibly a deception of the darkness and rough seas. A British official source says the submarine concerned was *I 24*.

⁶ In a report on the loss of *Iron Chieftain*, made at the time, the Superintendent Engineer of the Newcastle Steel Works wrote: "In my opinion Mr Brady, 2nd officer, made an excellent job in getting those under his care to land. He was most reluctant to surrender his charge to the police who had to threaten him with violence if he did not go to bed and warm up. Altogether these men did well, in great contrast to recent events."

Canberra's sighting could have been of *I 29* which operated, without success, off Brisbane at this period.⁷

At 4.45 p.m. on the 4th, back south again off Gabo Island, a Hudson aircraft of No. 7 Squadron, from Bairnsdale, on reconnaissance and anti-submarine patrol, sighted three merchant ships within a radius of six miles of the position of *Barwon's* encounter. As the aircraft approached, one of these ships was torpedoed and "blew up in front of their eyes".

Shortly afterwards an enemy submarine surfaced some distance from the vessel and the pilot immediately dived to the attack, dropping two anti-submarine bombs across the conning tower. This left only two general-purpose bombs with which to complete the kill and as it would have been courting disaster to release the bombs under 500 feet the captain made an ascent as quickly as possible to prepare for a second attack. In the meantime the submarine, which had been trying vainly to crash-dive (apparently it had been damaged by the A/S bombs) succeeded in getting under water and could not be located.⁸

The torpedoed ship was the *Iron Crown* (3,353 tons) which, with a cargo of manganese ore, left Whyalla for Newcastle on 30th May. Struck on the port side just abaft the bridge the ship, which was not zigzagging, doomed by her heavy deadweight cargo, sank within a minute. There was no time to lower boats, and of the 42 of her complement 37—including the master, Captain A. McLellan, and all officers except the 4th engineer—were lost. The five survivors were picked up two hours and a half later by s.s. *Mulbera* (9,100 tons). The attacker in this instance was probably *I 24*, which is reported to have sunk three ships south of Sydney in this period.⁹ Eight hours after the sinking of *Iron Crown* came another attack farther north when, a few minutes before 1 a.m. on 5th June s.s. *Echunga* (3,362 tons), bound from Whyalla to Port Kembla, was chased by a submarine when 17 miles S.E. of Wollongong. The submarine (possibly *I 24*) bothered the merchant ship for one hour, for part of which it was submerged after *Echunga* fired one round from her gun. Eventually the quarry was joined by H.M.A.S. *Kalgoorlie*, which escorted her safely to Port Kembla.

While these happenings were in progress in eastern Australian waters, other events, premonitory, decisive, or normal in the course of war, were shaping in Australia's near north and on distant eastern and western flanks. On 3rd June a Japanese aircraft several times circled the bay and Government station at Buna, on the north coast of the "tail" of New Guinea, directly opposite Port Moresby across country. On the same date, far away to the mist-laden north-east, Japanese aircraft raided Dutch Harbour in the Aleutian Islands in the opening phase of the Battle of Midway and on the eve of the decisive day of that decisive battle. On 5th June came the first intimation of renewed Japanese activity in the Indian Ocean. The British *Elysia* (6,757 tons) was attacked and sunk by the surface raiders

⁷ Hashimoto, p. 257.

⁸ From R.A.A.F. "Maritime Trade Protection Narrative", Phase Four, The Japanese Submarine Campaign, p. 80.

⁹ Hashimoto, p. 257.

Aikoku Maru and *Hokoku Maru*, 350 miles E.N.E. of Durban. Also on the 5th came evidence of the activity of Ishizaki's 1st Division of the 8th Submarine Squadron. On that date units of the division sank three Allied ships in the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and Portuguese East Africa. The next day two more ships fell victims in the Mozambique Channel; and another three were claimed on the 8th, one of these well to the north off Mombasa and the other in the channel. The submarines were widespread in these encounters, and the two farthest-spaced attacks were approximately 1,000 miles apart.

Swift moves were made to counter the attacks on the Australian coast. Pending the institution of convoys, the Naval Board, on 4th June, suspended merchant ship sailings from all ports between Adelaide and Brisbane, excepting Adelaide-Melbourne and Melbourne-Tasmania traffic. Coastal convoys were instituted on 8th June with the sailing of convoy "CO.1" (Newcastle-Melbourne) of nine ships escorted by H.M.A. Ships *Arunta* and *Kalgoorlie*, and convoy "GP.1" (Sydney-Brisbane) of five ships escorted by U.S.S. *Selfridge*¹ and H.M.A.S. *Rockhampton*.² In brief, the convoy system then instituted was as follows. On the main coastal routes ships of over 1,200 tons and less than 12 knots were sailed in convoys "CO" (Newcastle-Melbourne) and "OC" (Melbourne-Newcastle); "PG" (Brisbane-Sydney) and "GP" (Sydney-Brisbane). With the exception of "OC" convoys, all had a minimum of two anti-submarine escorts, and anti-submarine air cover was provided.³ Ships of less than 1,200 tons sailed independently on inshore routes, and ships faster than 12 knots also sailed independently. All ships sailing independently were instructed to zigzag when within 200 miles of the coast except when navigating inside the Barrier Reef. Ships of less than 12 knots east-bound trans-Tasman from Sydney were escorted in convoy for 200 miles from the New South Wales coast; those over 12 knots sailed independently. Ships under 12 knots east-bound trans-Tasman from Melbourne proceeded in "OC" convoys until north of latitude 36 degrees 30 minutes south, thence on independent routes; those of over 12 knots sailed independently west and south of Tasmania.

On Monday, 8th June, the Japanese submarines varied their attacks on the east coast of Australia by carrying out brief bombardments of Sydney and Newcastle. At 12.15 a.m. the Sydney examination vessel, H.M.A.S. *Adele*, sighted flashes of gunfire about nine miles S.E. by S. of Macquarie

¹ *Selfridge*, US destroyer (1936), 1,850 tons, five 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 37 kts.

² HMAS *Rockhampton*, corvette (1941), 650 tons, one 3-in gun, 15½ kts.

³ Initial escort vessels allocated were: Melbourne—HMAS *Moresby*; Sydney—HMA Ships *Bingera*, *Doomba*, *Rockhampton*, *Yandra*, *Whyalla*, *Kybra*, *Arunta*, *Kalgoorlie*, and HMS *Bombay*; Brisbane—two destroyers nominated by C.T.F. 44.

There were other convoy designations, i.e.: "LQ" Brisbane-Gladstone; "QL" Gladstone-Brisbane; "TD" Thursday Island-Darwin; "DT" Darwin-Thursday Island; "BV" Brisbane-Townsville; "VB" Townsville-Brisbane; "TN" Townsville-New Guinea; "NT" New Guinea-Townsville. The foregoing list does not include various short-term coastal series.

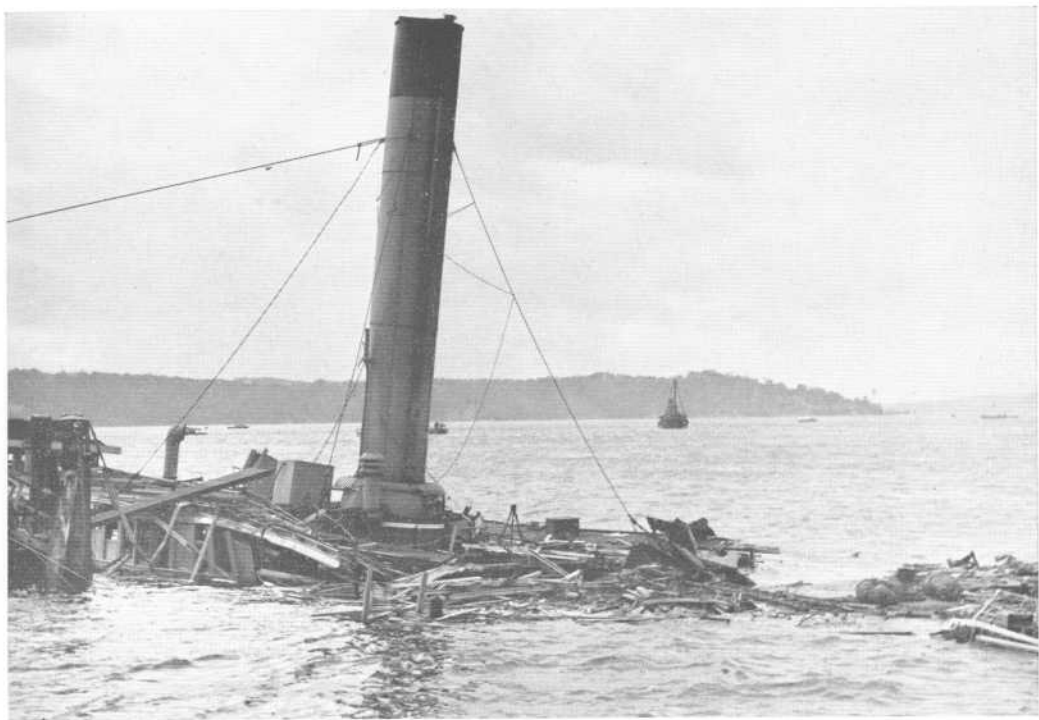
During 1942 a total of 1,672 ships were included in 252 convoys, these being as follows with numbers of convoys and ships respectively following convoy designations: "OC" convoys, 57-533; "CO" convoys, 58-605; "GP" convoys, 29-152; "PG" convoys, 29-99; Queensland coastal, 38-116; mainland-New Guinea, 41-167.

Light, and approximately four miles east of Cape Banks. Between then and 12.20 a.m., ten shells, only four of which exploded, one harmlessly, fell in the Rose Bay and Bellevue Hill areas. They were from *I 24*. Little beyond a token gesture was achieved. Five minutes afterwards an air raid warning was sounded when an unidentified aircraft was reported over the city, and coastal navigation lights were temporarily extinguished. A submarine, sighted off North Head at 12.45 a.m., headed north, but a subsequent air search was fruitless. At 1 a.m., an air alert was sounded at Newcastle when an unidentified aircraft was reported there, the "All Clear" being given 25 minutes later. At 2.15 a.m. shells were fired from position 7,000 yards N.E. by E. of Fort Scratchley, and during the next 20 minutes some 24 fell in the vicinity of the power station and Customs House. A number failed to explode. Some damage was caused, though there were no casualties. The bombardment ceased when Fort Scratchley fired four rounds in reply. The bombarding vessel in this instance was *I 21*.⁴

I 24 was presumably responsible for a gunfire attack on the steamer *Orestes* (7,748 tons), bound from Sydney to Melbourne, which reported being shelled just before 1 a.m. on 9th June about 90 miles south of Sydney. She suffered some hits and was set on fire, but reached Melbourne safely on the 10th. She was one of those, over 12 knots, sailing independently. Convoy did not necessarily bring immunity from attack, however, and a straggling ship was in danger of falling a victim, as was illustrated on 12th June. Convoy "CO.2", Newcastle to Melbourne, of eight ships escorted by U.S.S. *Perkins* and H.M.A.S. *Whyalla*, left Newcastle on 11th June, and at 1 a.m. on the 12th was approximately 40 miles N.E. of Sydney, speed of advance eight knots. The atmosphere was clear and visibility good, there was a gentle wind, smooth sea, and slight S.S.E. swell. The Panamanian steamer *Guatemala* (5,967 tons) was straggling behind the rest of the convoy, and at 1.15 a.m. *Perkins* saw the flash of an explosion from her direction. *Guatemala* was making about seven knots at the time. About 1 a.m. the Norwegian master, Captain A. G. Bang, and the Chinese second officer, heard two gunshots to starboard, but saw nothing. At 1.15 the second officer saw the track of a torpedo close to, to starboard. "Hard a'port" was ordered, but too late to evade the torpedo, which struck on the starboard side abreast No. 1 hatch. The crew took to the boats and stood by for an hour, when contact with the ship was lost. She sank about 2.30 a.m. on the 12th. There were no casualties, and the whole complement of 51 were picked up by H.M.A.S. *Doomba* and landed at Sydney.

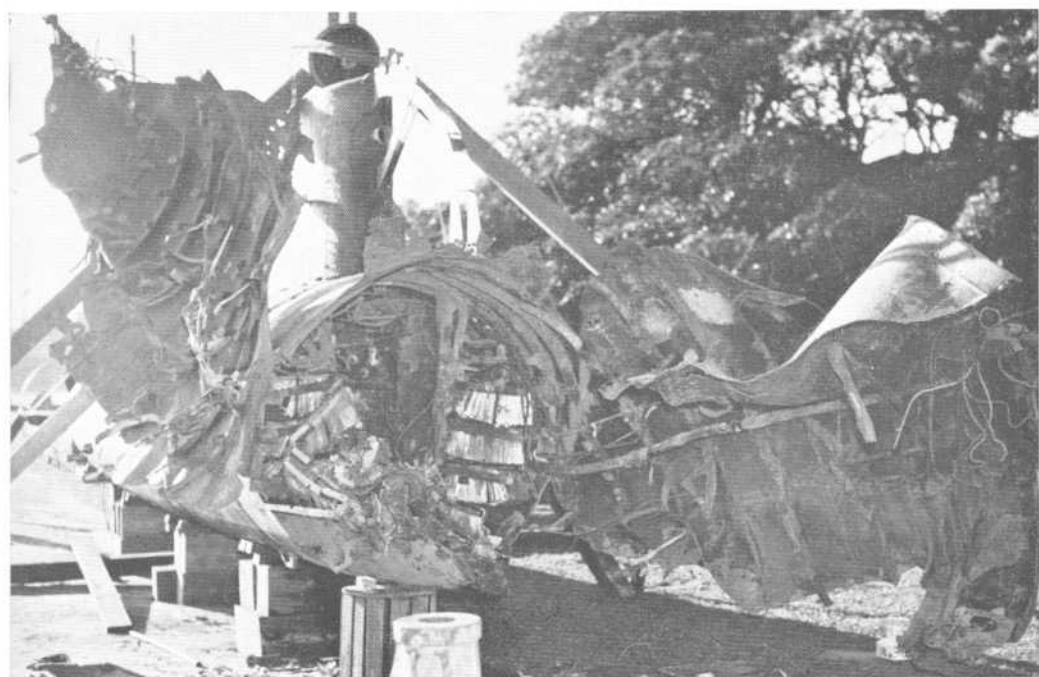
The attack on *Guatemala* was the last on the Australian coast during June 1942. The following lull in Japanese submarine activities there corresponded with a similar lull in the western Indian Ocean. On 11th June Ishizaki's submarines sank two ships in the Mozambique Channel, and repeated that performance on the 12th. After this there was a lull

⁴ Hashimoto, pp. 58-9.



(R.A.N. Historical Section)

Wreck of *Kuttabul* after the Japanese midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour, night 31st May-1st June 1942.



(R.A.N. Historical Section)

Wreck of Japanese midget submarine *No. 14*, looking aft and showing effects of demolition charge.



(U.S. Navy)

The Japanese cruiser *Mogami*, damaged by American aircraft attacks at Midway, 6th June 1942.



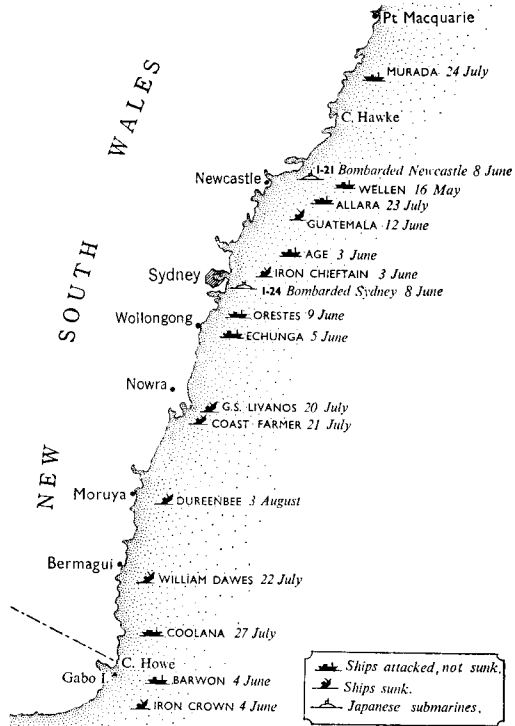
(R.A.N. Historical Section)

H.M.A.S. *Nestor* sinking after explosion of demolition charges, 16th June 1942.

there until 28th June. On that date one ship was sunk, and another on the 29th, both in the Mozambique Channel.

During June, the boats of the 8th Squadron operating in Australian waters, and Ishizaki's submarines and the two surface raiders in the western Indian Ocean, sank a total of 19 merchant ships aggregating 90,255 tons—three ships of 14,132 tons in Australian waters, and 16 of 76,123 tons in the western Indian Ocean. As in the midget submarine operations, Ishizaki's boats had more success than those on the Australian coast. They operated in an area of dense traffic, most of which, because of shortage of escorts, was of ships sailing independently. At this time Admiral Somerville and the fast section of the Eastern Fleet, including *Warspite*, *Illustrious* and *Formidable*, were in the central Indian Ocean, where they had sailed on the diversionary move to help the Americans in the Battle of Midway; and the fleet had, meanwhile, been denuded of valuable anti-submarine forces in the two cruisers and ten destroyers detached for temporary service in the Mediterranean. Rear-Admiral Danckwerts, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet, at Kilindini, who was responsible for the protection of ships in the Mozambique Channel, had little to call on for trade protection—five cruisers, and two armed merchant cruisers, with only three corvettes and five destroyers—some with engine defects—for anti-submarine work.

Also during June came another whisper from mid-ocean of German raider activities. On the 10th the cargo liner *Coptic* (8,533 tons) reported being followed by two suspicious ships about 1,400 miles due south of Colombo. Nightfall's cloak of darkness enabled her to lose them. They were probably the raider *Thor*, and either the captured *Nankin* or the supply ship *Regensburg*, with both of which *Thor* was in company about this time and place. Another hint of *Thor's* activity came at the end of



Japanese submarines on the Australian coast, 1942

June when, on the 27th, two ships were reported overdue at Fremantle. Both were tankers—*Olivia* (6,240 tons), which sailed from Abadan on 27th May, and *Herborg* (7,892 tons) which had left the oil port on 29th May. No word was received from either, but later it was learned that *Olivia* was set on fire and destroyed by *Thor* on 14th June, four days after *Coptic's* encounter and 230 miles S.S.W. therefrom; and that the raider captured *Herborg* on 19th June, 130 miles south of where she destroyed *Olivia*.⁵

IV

In the last days of May 1942 there originated widely dispersed naval movements which, though directed towards differing objectives, had something in common. On the 25th of the month, with his departure from the northern Japanese port of Ominato, Rear-Admiral Kakuta, commanding the *Second Mobile Force* (light carriers *Ryujo* and *Junyo*, two heavy cruisers, and destroyers), the force to strike at the Aleutians, made the gambit in the Japanese operation for the occupation of Midway, and the western chain of those northern islands. Also on the 25th, Group 1 Mediterranean Reinforcements (H.M. Ships *Birmingham*, *Pakenham*, and *Fortune*, and H.M.A. Ships *Norman* and *Nizam*) sailed from the East African port of Kilindini. Their objective was to be Malta, with a convoy for the relief of that island.

Lying in the Pacific Ocean, 1,135 miles W.N.W. of Pearl Harbour, Midway—excepting the small, unoccupied Kure Atoll 60 miles to its westward—is the farthest west of the Hawaiian chain of islands. An atoll, only six miles in diameter, and with but a few acres of dry land on two islets, it held during the war an importance bestowed by its geographical position and its ability to accommodate an airfield. Aptly described by Admiral Nagumo in his subsequent report on the battle for its possession as “a sentry for Hawaii”, it was also a valuable forward fuelling base for U.S. submarines in their campaign against enemy shipping in near-Japanese waters. Its possession was thus of consequence to the Americans, and was ardently desired by the Japanese not for reasons of denial alone, but because in Japanese hands it would be a key-point in their extended eastern perimeter. And, as stated above, outweighing other considerations in his mind, Admiral Yamamoto saw a Japanese threat to it as the bait which would lure the U.S. Pacific Fleet into his hands.

Lying in the Mediterranean 850 miles W.N.W. of Alexandria, Malta's position and relationship to the opponents in that sea were analogous to those of Midway in the Pacific. It was, for the British, a sentry for North Africa, and an invaluable base for submarines and aircraft in attacks on Axis shipping. For the Axis forces it would have provided the bridge across the Mediterranean narrows leading to North African victory and

⁵ *Olivia* was shelled and set on fire after dark. One DEMS gunner who escaped from the blazing tanker was taken on board the raider. Four Europeans and eight Chinese escaped in a boat. Four of them, three Europeans and one Chinese, survived and reached Madagascar—over 1,500 miles distant—on 14th July. *Herborg's* crew was taken on board the raider, and the ship sent to Japan in prize.

the unlocking of the gate to the East. Its retention by the British was thus as of great moment to them as that of Midway was to the Americans, and to the European members of the Axis it offered as desirable a prize as did that atoll to their Pacific partners.

Both British and Americans were aware of the threats to these key islands, the British by hard practical experience, and the Americans by the forewarning of Intelligence. Both were therefore able to take preparatory counter-measures. The British moves from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean were towards an attempt to run nourishing convoys through to Malta. American moves were in response to those it was anticipated the Japanese would make—and, as stated above, anticipation ran close to realisation.

The day after the Japanese *Second Mobile Force* left Ominato, Admiral Nagumo's *First Mobile Force* (4 carriers, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, *Soryu*; 2 battleships; 2 heavy cruisers, and destroyers) sortied from the Inland Sea. They were followed on the 27th from Saipan by the Midway Occupation Force under the command of Vice-Admiral Kondo, comprising Kondo's covering group of 2 battleships, 4 heavy cruisers and destroyers; Rear-Admiral Tanaka's transport group of 12 transports carrying about 5,000 naval landing forces and army detachments; and (from Guam) Rear-Admiral Kurita's close support group of 4 heavy cruisers, and destroyers. Also on the 27th, American Rear-Admiral Robert A. Theobald's main force of 5 heavy cruisers and 4 destroyers arrived at Kodiak, Alaska, while a Japanese occupation force it was intended to counter sailed from Ominato for Kiska, in the western Aleutians. Simultaneously, far away in the western Indian Ocean, Group 2 Mediterranean Reinforcements (H.M. Ships *Newcastle*, *Inconstant*, *Paladin*, *Hotspur*, and *Griffin*, and H.M.A. Ships *Napier* and *Nestor*) sailed from Kilindini; and Admiral Somerville's fast division of the Eastern Fleet set out eastwards towards Ceylon in its diversionary move to help the American Pacific Fleet in its coming encounter. On 28th May Admiral Yamamoto, with the main Japanese force of 7 battleships (with the mighty *Yamato* as flag), light carrier *Hosho*, 2 seaplane carriers, light cruisers, and destroyers, steered eastwards from the Inland Sea, and occupation forces intended for Attu and Adak Islands in the Aleutians, sailed from Ominato. On that day, too, the American main force to dispute the enemy's Midway aspirations sailed from Pearl Harbour—Rear-Admiral Raymond A. Spruance's Task Force 16—the carriers *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, 6 heavy cruisers, and destroyers. On the 30th, Rear-Admiral Fletcher's Task Force 17, the hurriedly repaired *Yorktown*, with 2 heavy cruisers, and destroyers, followed Spruance from the American base. The Battle of Midway's opening moves were made. Admiral Yamamoto exercised over-all command of the Japanese forces from *Yamato*. Overall command of the American forces was by Admiral Nimitz at Pearl Harbour; Rear-Admiral Fletcher, as senior of the two operational flag officers, was O.T.C. (Officer in Tactical Command) of the two carrier groups.

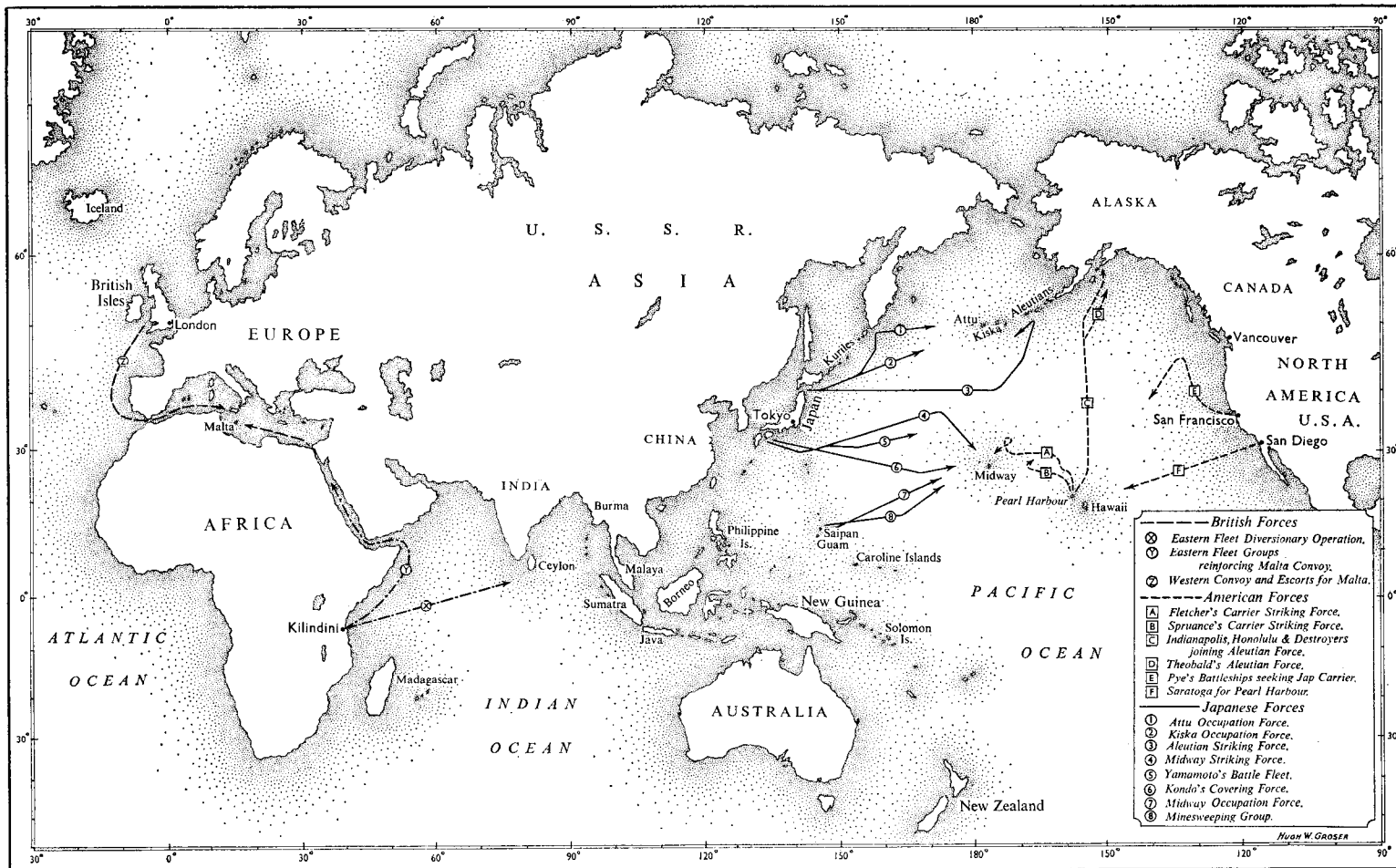
The Battle of Midway presents a classic example of, on the Japanese side, sound strategy nullified by a faulty operational plan; and, on the American side, discriminating appreciation of Intelligence, and wise application thereof in operations, which offset inferiority in numbers and hitting power. Japanese objectives were the occupation of Midway and the western Aleutians, and a big fleet action. But in trying to achieve these, Admiral Yamamoto disposed his fleet in widely separated groups exposed to defeat in detail. The Japanese over-valued surprise; underestimated the extent and appreciation of American Intelligence; and also, through accepting reports that their enemy had lost two carriers at Coral Sea, depreciated American carrier strength, and placed undue reliance on their opponents conforming to Japanese plans. Thus they expected no opposition to the Midway invasion save from Midway itself; anticipated that the attack on the Aleutians would entice substantial American forces away from the main battle area into the northern mists; and looked forward to disposing overwhelmingly powerful forces—including the fixed aircraft carrier Midway—against an enemy lacking a battlefleet, and in every other way numerically inferior. The vital defect in this sort of plan was that it depended “on the enemy’s doing exactly what is expected. If he is smart enough to do something different—in this case to have fast carriers on the spot—the operation is thrown into confusion.”⁶

At 6 a.m. on 3rd June the Japanese struck at Dutch Harbour, Unalaska Island, the main American base in the Aleutians. Kakuta’s carriers reached their launching position 165 miles south of the island at 2.50 a.m. Fourteen bombers got through thick weather to their target, and for 20 minutes from 6 a.m. inflicted considerable damage to installations, and killed about 25 of the defenders—for the loss of two aircraft.

Some three hours later, and 1,900 miles to the south-west, a Midway-based Catalina amphibious aircraft sighted the transport group of the Midway Occupation Force, then about 700 miles W. by S. of its objective. At 4.24 that afternoon, when the group had lessened the distance to 570 miles, it was attacked, without effect, by bomber aircraft from Midway. A torpedo hit by a Catalina in a moonlight attack early on the morning of the 4th, temporarily slowed an oiler in the group; but no other damage was done to the approaching Japanese.

At 6 p.m. on 3rd June, the two American carrier groups were some 300 miles N.N.E. of Midway. Four hundred miles west of them Nagumo’s striking force was steaming south-east at 25 knots for its launching position, 240 miles north-west of Midway. The sighting of the Japanese transport group had been reported to Rear-Admiral Fletcher as that of the main body of the Japanese fleet. But he correctly relied on his original Intelligence that the enemy carrier force would approach Midway from the north-west to launch an air attack on the island at dawn, 4th June. He accordingly altered course to S.W. by S. at 7.50 p.m., so as to be about

⁶ Morison, Vol IV, p. 79.



The Battles of Midway and Malta, June 1942

200 miles north of Midway, in a position to attack the Japanese carriers while they were themselves striking at Midway.

At 4.30 a.m. on 4th June 1942 the respective forces were widely spread over the central and north Pacific. About 240 miles north-west of Midway, Nagumo was busy launching aircraft from all four carriers—108 aircraft in all, 36 bombers, 36 dive bombers, and 36 “Zero” (“Zeke”) fighters—for the first strike on the island. His force, in addition to the 4 carriers, included battleships *Haruna* and *Kirishima*, cruisers *Tone* and *Chikuma*, and 12 destroyers. Nagumo’s nearest support was Yamamoto’s powerful main battle fleet, 400 miles or so to his north-west; and, next to that, Kondo’s Midway Occupation Force covering group and close support group—2 battleships and 8 heavy cruisers—450 miles W.S.W. of him.

Some 210 miles E.N.E. of Nagumo were the two American striking forces. Their nearest support was the striking force of Marine aircraft on Midway Island; and, next to that, Rear-Admiral Fitch’s Task Force 11, the aircraft carrier *Saratoga*, light cruiser *San Diego*,⁷ and three destroyers 1,750 miles to the eastward, making for Pearl Harbour from the west coast of America. Almost as far away to the north, Kakuta’s carriers of the Japanese *Second Mobile Force* were preparing for another strike against Dutch Harbour, while the Aleutian Occupation Force waited in a stand-by area south of the western islands of the chain and, away to the eastward, Rear-Admiral Theobald’s main force manoeuvred south of Kodiak Island off the Alaska Peninsula, in position to react against an expected Japanese attempt to occupy Dutch Harbour.

Thursday, 4th June, was a fine day in the central Pacific. In the early forenoon a gentle trade wind died to light airs; visibility, with embarrassing clarity in the region of the American carriers, varied to only 15 miles under the low cloud cover that helped the Japanese; the sea was smooth and, from the air, “looked like a dish of wrinkled blue Persian porcelain”;⁸ the air temperature at 68 degrees to 70 degrees Fahrenheit, was pleasantly cool.

It was 5.34 a.m. when a Midway-based reconnaissance aircraft sighted the Japanese carriers and the aircraft speeding thence towards Midway, and broadcast a warning which was picked up by the American carriers. *Yorktown* had a search mission in the air, and Fletcher instructed Spruance, with his two carriers, to “proceed south-westerly and attack enemy carriers when definitely located”. That was just ten minutes before the Japanese struck Midway. The first bomb fell on the island about 6.30 a.m. Twenty minutes later the attack was over. It did heavy damage to installations and to the defending aircraft, and caused many casualties. But aerodrome runways remained usable. American estimates were that “at least one third of the attack group never returned”.⁹ But the Japanese official combat

⁷ *San Diego*, US light cruiser (1942), 6,000 tons, twelve 5-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 32 kts.

⁸ Morison, Vol IV, p. 115.

⁹ Morison, p. 105.

report gave their losses as five aircraft.¹ Seventeen American aircraft were shot down—and, at the time, the Japanese believed that they had accounted for 42.

At this time Nagumo had no intimation of the near-presence of American aircraft carriers. At 7 a.m. he received a message from the commander of the Midway attacking aircraft saying that a second strike was needed—and in confirmation of that there followed immediately an attack on the carriers by Midway-based aircraft. It was a failure. Ten torpedo aircraft failed to secure a hit, and seven were shot down by the Japanese. But the attack, confirming the need of a second strike on Midway, and the lack of any report of American carriers in the vicinity, caused Nagumo to take a fateful decision. He had, in his four carriers, 93 aircraft standing by for instant launching against surface forces. He ordered them struck below to clear his flight decks for the recovery of the returning aircraft of the first Midway striking force—and for the torpedo aircrafts' armament to be changed to bombs for a second attack on the atoll.

The first news of enemy surface forces reached Nagumo at 7.28 a.m., when a reconnaissance aircraft from the cruiser *Tone* reported ten ships, a report elaborated at 8.9 a.m. to "five cruisers and five destroyers", and given point at 8.20 a.m. with the amendment "the enemy is accompanied by what appears to be a carrier". By then Spruance had launched 116 aircraft—29 torpedo bombers, 67 dive bombers, and 20 fighters—from *Hornet* and *Enterprise*, which were steaming S.W. by W. at 25 knots in their wake towards the Japanese forces.

Meanwhile Nagumo's force, which had successfully withstood more attacks by Midway-based aircraft and inflicted heavy losses while suffering no damage, had recovered its returning Midway attack aircraft, and at 9.17 Nagumo turned his ships towards the Americans—to E.N.E.—his carriers scenes of lively activity as aircraft were refuelled and rearmed. They were in this condition when, soon after 9.30, the first American carrier aircraft delivered their attack. It was by 15 torpedo bombers from *Hornet*. With no fighter cover, they were all shot down by Japanese fighters or ships' anti-aircraft fire, without any torpedoes reaching their targets. A few minutes later a second attack was delivered by 14 torpedo bombers from *Enterprise*. They never made a hit, and ten were shot down. At 10 a.m. twelve torpedo bombers from *Yorktown* attacked. Again no hits were scored, and ten of the aircraft were shot down.

Out of 41 torpedo aircraft from the three carriers, only six returned, and not a single torpedo reached the enemy ships. Yet

it was the stark courage and relentless drive of these young pilots of the obsolete torpedo planes that made possible the victory that followed. The radical manoeuvring that they imposed on the Japanese carriers prevented them from launching more planes. And the TBDs, by acting as magnets for the enemy's combat air patrol and pulling "Zekes" down to near water level, enabled the dive-bombing squadrons

¹ M. Okumiya and J. Horikoshi, with M. Caidin, *Zero! The Story of the Japanese Navy Air Force 1937-1945* (English edn. 1957), p. 123.

that followed a few minutes later to attack virtually unopposed by fighter planes, and to drop bombs on full deckloads in the process of being refuelled.²

Slow-ripening fruits of the torpedo bombers' attacks were now to be gathered. At 10.26 a.m., only two minutes after *Akagi* had evaded the last of the torpedo bombers, she was attacked by dive bombers from *Enterprise* and received three direct and fatal hits. The ship was quickly ablaze, and twenty minutes after the first hit Nagumo left her, and transferred his flag to light cruiser *Nagara*. *Akagi* was abandoned in the early evening, and the still-floating wreck was torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer before sunrise on 5th June. As *Akagi's* people abandoned ship in the evening of the 4th, their ship's near-sister *Kaga* blew up with a tremendous explosion at 7.25 p.m. She, too, had been a blazing wreck for some hours, having received four direct hits from the *Enterprise* dive bombers within two or three minutes of the attack on *Akagi*. *Kaga's* death plunge was anticipated by five minutes by that of a third member of Nagumo's carrier force—*Soryu*. At the same time that *Akagi* received her death blows, *Soryu*, at 10.26 a.m., received three direct hits, burst into flames, and was abandoned. Three and a half hours later, when a damage control party had returned on board, got her fires under control and the ship moving at about two knots, she was torpedoed by the U.S. submarine *Nautilus*.³ She took her final plunge about 7.20 p.m.

The fourth of Nagumo's carriers, *Hiryu*, had a few hours to live—and, during that time her aircraft, in two attacks, dive-bombing and torpedo, reduced *Yorktown* to a wreck. She remained afloat for some hours, but sank at 6 a.m. on 7th June, after having been torpedoed by the Japanese submarine *I 168*⁴ (which at the same time sank the destroyer *Hammann*) at 1.30 p.m. on the 6th. Meanwhile *Hiryu* had gone the way of her three companions. She was attacked by *Enterprise* dive bombers at 5 p.m. on the 4th, received four direct hits, and finally sank (after she had been torpedoed by Japanese destroyers) at 9 a.m. on 5th June.

The Japanese suffered one more loss as an aftermath of the battle, the cruiser *Mikuma*. With the loss of his carrier striking force, Admiral Yamamoto—after considering but rejecting the idea of a bombardment of Midway by the heavy cruisers of Rear-Admiral Kurita's close support group prior to a landing—at 2.55 a.m. on the 5th ordered a general retirement of his forces to the north-west. Soon after it altered course in conforming, Kurita's force made an emergency turn at 3.42 a.m. to avoid attack by the U.S. submarine *Tambor*,⁵ and *Mogami* and *Mikuma* collided and crippled each other, lagging far behind in the withdrawal as a result. As lone, lame ducks, they suffered air attacks, first by Midway-based aircraft in the early forenoon of the 5th, and then, during the morning of the 6th,

² Morison, p. 121.

³ *Nautilus*, US submarine (1930), 2,730 tons, two 6-in guns, ten 21-in torpedo tubes, 17 kts.

⁴ *I 168*, Japanese submarine (1933), 1,400 tons, one 4-in gun, 23 kts. Sunk off New Hebrides, 3 Sep 1943.

⁵ *Tambor*, US submarine (1940), 1,475 tons, one 3-in gun, ten 21-in torpedo tubes, 20 kts.

by aircraft from *Enterprise* and *Hornet*. *Mogami*, reduced to a battered hulk, managed to make Truk. *Mikuma* sank during the night of the 6th.

In the far north, the Japanese carried out a second air raid on Dutch Harbour on 4th June, and occupied Kiska and Attu Islands in the western Aleutians, the only part of their over-all plan which was realised. Yet it was in the north that they suffered a loss which was to cost them dear in the months ahead. In the first air attack on Dutch Harbour on 3rd June, a Japanese "Zero" fighter crash-landed on a small island. The pilot was killed, but the aircraft was only slightly damaged. Recovered by the Americans, and removed to the United States, it was repaired, subjected to exhaustive flight tests, and became the model from which was produced the U.S. Navy's Grumman F6F Hellcat. "With a 2,000-horsepower engine, the new Hellcat had a higher maximum speed than the [Zero], could out-climb and outdive and outgun it, and the desired benefits of high structural strength, armour plating, and self-sealing fuel tanks. . . . Later, we were to feel strongly that the unnoticed capture of the aircraft, assisting the enemy so greatly in producing a fighter intended specifically to overcome the [Zero's] advantages, did much to hasten our final defeat."⁶

The results of Midway forced two immediate changes in Japanese policy. One was the abandonment of offensive operations—the cancellation of plans for the conquest of Fiji, New Caledonia, and Samoa—and the return to a more westerly defence line "to be held at virtually all costs before an enemy who was now expected to commence his own assault operations". The other was the reorganisation of the Combined Fleet, concentrating on maximum development of naval land-based air forces, and the rebuilding of the surface fleet around a core of aircraft carriers. This last was a drastic change. Until Midway, the Japanese Navy had still regarded the heavy, fast battleship as the priority naval weapon. It had *Yamato* and *Musashi*, largest and most powerful battleships ever built, laid down in 1937; and two additional ships of the class were under construction, together with two new-type battleships. Within the month embraced by the Coral Sea and Midway actions—in neither of which battleships took an active part—Japan lost five aircraft carriers. She had eight remaining.⁷ After Midway, to build up carrier strength on this remaining foundation, work was started on the conversion of the third *Yamato*-class ship—*Shinano*—to an aircraft carrier; and the building of the fourth battleship of the class, then in its initial stages, was abandoned, together with that of all other battleship construction. Fifteen new *Hiryu*-class carriers (20,000 tons) and five *Taiho*-class (34,000 tons) were ordered. But in the event only four of the *Hiryu*'s were launched, and only one of the *Taiho*'s was completed.

A month after Midway, on 14th July, the Japanese Navy received its reorganisation orders. The main carrier strength was in the two divisions

⁶ Okumiya and Horikoshi, *Zero!*, pp. 127-8.

⁷ Lost: *Shoho*; *Akagi*; *Kaga*; *Soryu*; *Hiryu*. Remaining: *Shokaku* (29,800 tons); *Zuikaku* (29,800 tons); *Junyo* (27,500 tons); *Taiyo* (20,000 tons); *Unyo* (20,000 tons); *Zuiho* (13,950 tons); *Ryujo* (11,700 tons); *Hosho* (9,500 tons).

of the *Third Fleet*; *1st Carrier Division*, *Shokaku*, *Zuikaku*, *Zuiho*; *2nd Carrier Division*, *Junyo*, *Hiyo*,⁸ *Ryujo*. These ships carried a total of 310 aircraft (torpedo bombers, dive bombers, fighters) nearly half the carrier-based aircraft then available. About half of the total first-line naval aircraft available for combat were land-based. The weakness of the Japanese position at this time, with the stocktaking after Midway, was made painfully apparent by the fact that, after six months of almost unbroken successes, first-line naval aircraft totalled 1,498—an increase of only 117 over the number at the outbreak of war. The production outlook was poor, and the overall air situation was even more depressing in that, with all its shortcomings, that of the navy was infinitely better than that of the army.

The new Japanese defence line in its outermost reaches extended west of the Aleutian Islands in the north, to the Marshall Islands in the east; from Rabaul to the north-east coast of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in the south; to the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, and Burma in the west. To strengthen and safeguard the south-eastern “anchor” of this line, the Japanese desired control of the Coral Sea, exercised mainly through air power at Port Moresby and the southern Solomons. Their first effort to secure these air bases received a partial setback at the Coral Sea Battle, then they were forced to postpone their intended capture of Port Moresby, but succeeded in securing a foothold in the southern Solomons at Tulagi. Now they were about to resume their attempts to secure Port Moresby, this time by an attack overland from the north coast of New Guinea. As a preliminary to this, Rear-Admiral Sadayoshi Yamada, commanding the *25th Air Flotilla* with headquarters at Rabaul, maintained heavy and frequent air attack against Port Moresby.

Air attacks against Darwin were also resumed by aircraft of the *23rd Air Flotilla*, based on Timor. The northern Australian port had its sixteenth air raid—the first since 27th April—on 13th June, when Nos. 1 and 2 stores in the Naval Victualling Yard received direct hits and a quantity of stores was destroyed. Darwin was visited on each of the next three nights, by forces of up to 27 bombers with strong fighter escort. Port Moresby had its 61st raid, by 18 bombers and nine fighters, on 17th June. The Australian ship *Macdhui* (4,561 tons) was hit, the midships section gutted, and three crew members and one member of a military working party were killed, and a number wounded. In another raid next day, also by 18 bombers, *Macdhui* again suffered direct hits, burned fiercely, and became a total loss. There were other portents: Japanese interest in Buna—shown by the prolonged aerial reconnaissance of 3rd June—and activities in the southern Solomons. On 20th June fires were seen to be burning over the whole of the grass plains on Guadalcanal's northern hinterland, suggesting the preparation of airfields. Destroyers lay off Lunga. And, on the north coast at Kikum and Tenaru, tents were reported. These wrote the preface to a new chapter in the war in the western Pacific.

⁸ *Hiyo* (28,000 tons) had been commissioned only in July.

V

As stated above, the initial Japanese move towards the Battle of Midway was simultaneous with the departure from the western Indian Ocean of Group I Mediterranean Reinforcements from the Eastern Fleet. The next day there started military movements on land which were to affect and be affected by the operation in which these ships were to take part. On the evening of 26th May General Rommel launched an attack upon the British in Cyrenaica, with the capture of Tobruk as his immediate objective, leading on towards the conquest of Egypt. The almost complete neutralisation of Malta by heavy and continuous air attack, and the Mediterranean Fleet's lack of a battle fleet and aircraft carriers, had enabled Rommel to build up his strength for this attempt. The Italian naval historian records that Axis ships supplying North Africa sailed in greater safety during April and the first half of May than at any other time during the war, and convoys had been routed within 50 miles of Malta, escorted by only one or two torpedo aircraft.⁹ In addition to this, the strategic change in the situation as regards sea control meant that Rommel now had the invaluable help of sea communications on his flank. "German U-boats, E-boats, R-boats, and landing craft operated on the sea flank of the army and by his transport and security measures the German naval commander safeguarded supplies by coastal traffic eastward from Benghazi with his escort forces."¹⁰

Vice-Admiral Weichold, German Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, recorded that in May 7,500 tons of German army supplies were unloaded in the harbour of Derna, close behind the front. This covered about 60 per cent of the normal requirements of the *Africa Corps*. During June Derna's unloading capacity rose to almost 11,000 tons, while also in the latter half of that month Tobruk became an Axis unloading port, when 4,000 tons of supplies were discharged there. "This meant that in the vital month of June, decisive for the Cyrenaican campaign, almost 15,000 tons of supplies had been transported to the Panzer army directly to the rear of their own front. These figures show the far-reaching support of the land operations by the coastal supplies of the German naval command, which for the first and only time freed the Panzer army from the bleak prospect of constant shortages."¹¹

By contrast, the British were hard put to it to succour Malta. As mentioned earlier, after the heavy losses of the "Battle of Sirte" convoy in March, consideration was given to sending *Warspite* and the carriers from the Eastern Fleet through the Canal to fight a convoy through from Alexandria to Malta; but some relief had then come to the island with the fighters flown in from U.S.S. *Wasp* and H.M.S. *Eagle*, and events in the Indian Ocean in April (the Japanese descent into the Bay of Bengal) and May (the Diego Suarez operation) demanded the reinforcement rather

⁹ M. A. Bragadin, *Che ha fatto la Marina?* (1956).

¹⁰ Weichold, post-war Essay.

¹¹ Post-war Essay.

than the weakening of the Eastern Fleet. Now that the need arose to strengthen the Mediterranean Fleet with capital ships and aircraft carriers in order to fight vital supplies through to Malta, those of the Eastern Fleet could not be transferred because they were employed on the diversionary movement to help the Americans in the Battle of Midway.

The plan for the June attempt to succour Malta was similar to those of the successful 1941 convoys—to run convoys through the Mediterranean to Malta simultaneously from Gibraltar and Alexandria. The Admiralty had to draw upon several stations to collect the escorts for the western convoy, including the battleship *Malaya* and the two old, slow, and small carriers *Eagle* and *Argus*, while the eastern convoy had nothing heavier than 6-inch gun cruisers with which to counter probable opposition by an Italian battle fleet. To redress the balance slightly, the British planned to use submarines and aircraft. The nine boats of the 1st and 10th Submarine Flotillas would be disposed to the north of the convoy, moving westward with it, to cover the enemy's most probable movements. Some 40 aircraft, from Malta and from Egypt, would also attack the enemy forces. The weakness in this plan was the lack of adequate reconnaissance, but in the event some results were achieved, and no doubt had some influence on the Italian actions. It was also planned to give the escorting and covering forces increased striking power with motor torpedo boats, to be towed until contact was made with the surface enemy; but the weather defeated this.

Rommel's attack on 26th May was only partially successful. He had hoped to capture Tobruk on the second day, but after three or four days of heavy fighting he had to seek refuge in a bridgehead established in the British minefields. There he rested and replenished. An attempt to break in on him on 4th June was a failure, with heavy British losses in what General Auchinleck later described as "the turning point of the whole battle". The French defenders had to be withdrawn from Bir Hacheim, enabling Rommel to turn the British flank and attack towards Tobruk from the south. This he did on 12th June, the day on which the respective convoy movements got under way in the Mediterranean.

In the west, six merchant ships with supplies for Malta totalling some 43,000 tons, were escorted by the battleship *Malaya*; carriers *Eagle* and *Argus*; 3 cruisers; one anti-aircraft cruiser; and 17 destroyers. Command of the western operation was vested in Vice-Admiral Curteis,² flying his flag in the cruiser *Kenya*.³ By the morning of the 12th they were well within the Mediterranean, steering east. That morning the eleven merchant ships of the eastern convoy were proceeding from their loading ports (Haifa and Port Said) to rendezvous with the escorting and covering forces, totalling seven 6-inch gun cruisers, one anti-aircraft cruiser, and 24 destroyers. This force included the ships from the Eastern Fleet, among

² Admiral Sir Alban Curteis, KCB; RN. (Served 1914-18 War.) Rear-Adm Cdg 2nd Cruiser Sqn 1940-41; Vice-Adm Cdg 2nd Battle Sqn and Second-in-Comd Home Fleet 1941-42; Senior British Naval Officer Western Atlantic 1942-44. B. 13 Jan 1887. Died 27 Nov 1961.

³ HMS *Kenya*, cruiser (1940), 8,000 tons, twelve 6-in. guns, 33 kts.

them the four ships of the 7th Flotilla, H.M.A. Ships *Napier* (Captain (D), Captain Arliss, R.N.), *Nestor*, *Nizam* and *Norman*. The old target ship *Centurion*⁴ masqueraded, virtually unarmed, as a battleship. The eastern operation was under the over-all command of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Henry Harwood,⁵ in Alexandria. The operational command was with Rear-Admiral Vian, flying his flag as CS15, in *Cleopatra*.

In the east, both on sea and on land, events ran against the British on the 12th and 13th June. At this early stage two merchant ships had to be dropped out of the convoy because they could not maintain maximum speed—*City of Calcutta* (8,063 tons), damaged in an air attack, and *Elizabeth Bakke* (5,450 tons), with a foul bottom. On the 13th the motor torpedo boats in tow had to be slipped and sent back to Alexandria, as they were suffering weather damage. On the 14th the merchant ships in the convoy were reduced to eight when *Aagtekerk* (6,811 tons) had to be detached to Tobruk because she could not maintain speed. She was sunk in an air attack before she reached port.

On the 14th, both western and eastern convoys came under fire from the air, and suffered accordingly. In the morning of that day the western group came within range of enemy air attack from Sardinia, whence heavy strikes which the fighters from *Eagle* and *Argus* were too few adequately to counter were delivered by high-level and torpedo bombers from 10.30 a.m. The cruiser *Liverpool* was hit in the engine-room and was fortunate to reach Gibraltar, mostly in tow, and the merchant ship *Tanimbar* (8,169 tons) was sunk. That evening the convoy reached "The Narrows"—between Sicily and North Africa—and the heavy ships hauled round to the westward to await the return from Malta of light escort forces—five Fleet destroyers and four escort "Hunts"—under the command of Captain C. C. Hardy, R.N., in the anti-aircraft cruiser *Cairo*,⁶ which were to fight the convoy through the rest of the way to their destination. Air attacks were successfully survived. That evening enemy surface forces also prepared to take a hand when two Italian 6-inch gun cruisers and five destroyers sailed from Palermo.

In the east, Vian's convoy, by the evening of the 14th, reached the limit of distance to which fighter cover from Cyrenaica could give protection. It came under heavy air attack, and the merchant ship *Bhutan* (6,104 tons) was sunk. The threat of surface attack on this convoy now loomed also. At dusk German E-boats (motor torpedo boats) from Derna were sighted, and kept contact with the convoy, though they were held off; and at 6.45 p.m. British reconnaissance aircraft reported Italian heavy forces leaving the Gulf of Taranto. These comprised two battleships,

⁴ HMS *Centurion* (1911), 25,500 tons, 16 kts.

⁵ At the end of March 1942 Admiral Cunningham relinquished command of the Mediterranean Station to head the Admiralty delegation in Washington. He was succeeded pro tem by Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell until Admiral Harwood assumed command and hoisted his flag in *Queen Elizabeth* on 20th May.

⁶ HMS *Cairo*, anti-aircraft cruiser (1919; rearmed for AA duties 1939), eight 4-in AA, one multiple pom-pom, 26 kts.

Vittorio Veneto and *Littorio*, two heavy and two light cruisers, and about 12 destroyers. Since it was evident that this force could intercept early on the 15th, Vian signalled Harwood asking if he was to continue westward. He was told to reverse course at 2 a.m. on the 15th. Shortly after this turn was made, the cruiser *Newcastle* was torpedoed by an E-boat, but was able to continue. Just before dawn on the 15th the destroyer *Hasty* was also torpedoed by an E-boat, and was sunk by *Hotspur* after that ship had removed her crew.

It was on the 14th that an Australian, R. G. Casey, who on 18th March 1942 was appointed United Kingdom Minister of State in Cairo, said in a telegram to Mr Churchill regarding the Western Desert battle: "The outcome of the two convoys to Malta rests on today and tomorrow. The Western Desert will undoubtedly help the west-bound convoy from the air point of view. The greater danger to the west-bound convoy tomorrow will be from surface vessels of the Italian Fleet."⁷ Unfortunately, the estimate of help that the Western Desert would give to Vian's convoy was over-optimistic. Affairs were developing badly for the British on land. Rommel was forcing his way northwards and eastwards towards Tobruk and the Egyptian frontier, depriving the Royal Air Force of advanced airfields from which fighter protection could be given to the convoy. By the 14th Rommel had won a tank battle which left him in possession of the ridges south of Tobruk, threatening to cut off the 1st South African and 50th Divisions to the west of Tobruk—they were saved only by immediate withdrawal—and menacing Acroma and El Adem, due west and south respectively of the fortress. In this advantageous position he rested momentarily in preparation for his next thrust. Thus, as it turned out, air attack remained a greater menace to the success of the operation than did the Italian surface forces. By 5.25 a.m. the now east-bound convoy was approaching an area where the risks of enemy air attack appeared to Admiral Harwood to outweigh those of interception by enemy surface forces, and he instructed Vian to turn north-westward, which he did at 6.55 a.m., when the Italians were about 240 miles N.W. by W of him, steering S.S.W.

Shortly before this the Italians were attacked by torpedo-bomber aircraft from Malta, and by submarines. The cruiser *Trento*⁸ was damaged in the air attack, and was sunk later in the morning by the submarine *Umbra*.⁹ At 8 a.m. the Italians altered to south-east. Between 9 and 10 o'clock they were attacked by bombers and torpedo-bombers from Egypt, but the only hit was a bomb on *Littorio*'s forward turret which did no major damage. The Italians held on, and at 9.40, when they were some 150 miles W.N.W. of the convoy and closing fast, Harwood instructed Vian to turn east again.

⁷ Churchill, Vol IV, p. 329.

⁸ *Trento*, Italian cruiser (1929), 10,000 tons, eight 8-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 35 kts. Sunk 15 Jun 1942.

⁹ HMS *Umbra*, submarine (1941), 540 tons, one 3-in gun, six 21-in torpedo tubes, 11½ kts.

Meanwhile the western convoy had also been menaced by surface forces, with which its escorts were in action. At 6.50 a.m., when the convoy was about 30 miles south of Pantellaria, the Italians were sighted to the north. *Cairo* and the "Hunts" laid a smoke screen while the five Fleet destroyers attacked. Two, *Bedouin*¹ and *Partridge*,² were hit and disabled. When the convoy was screened by smoke, *Cairo* and the four "Hunts" joined in the surface action and drove the enemy off. But simultaneously an enemy dive-bombing attack was delivered on the convoy. One ship, *Chant* (5,601 tons) was sunk, and the tanker *Kentucky* (5,446 tons) hit but taken in tow; and in another air attack about 11.20 a.m. the merchant ship *Burdwan* (6,069 tons) was hit and disabled. Captain Hardy decided to sacrifice her and *Kentucky* as the best chance of saving the rest of the convoy, and their crews were removed and the two ships were eventually sunk by Italian torpedo aircraft.

There followed a morning of successive but fruitless attempts by the Italian squadron to get at the convoy; and of air attacks, in one of which *Bedouin*, then in tow by *Partridge*, was sunk. *Partridge*, in a crippled state, managed to make Gibraltar two days later. The remaining two merchant ships, *Orari* (10,350 tons) and *Troilus* (7,422 tons), and their escorts, survived more air attacks during the afternoon, but suffered additional losses in their final approach to Malta, when *Orari* and four of the escort vessels struck mines. All of the damaged ships made harbour safely except the Polish destroyer *Kujawiak*, which sank.

Some time before the survivors of the western convoy reached Malta, the decision was made to abandon the attempt to reach the island from the east. Just before noon optimistic reports from the attacking British aircraft claiming hits on both Italian battleships moved Admiral Harwood to instruct Vian to turn west again, but this was later amended to an instruction to use his discretion whether to hold on or to retire. The convoy was under almost continuous heavy air attacks. In the early afternoon the cruiser *Birmingham* was damaged, and the destroyer *Airedale*³ so severely crippled that she had to be sunk. At 4.15 the Italian surface forces were reported to be retiring to Taranto, but by then the scale of air attack and the resultant heavy drain on ammunition left the escort ships with insufficient remaining to make a westward turn and fighting passage to Malta practicable, and at 8.53 p.m. Harwood instructed Vian to return to Alexandria with the whole force.

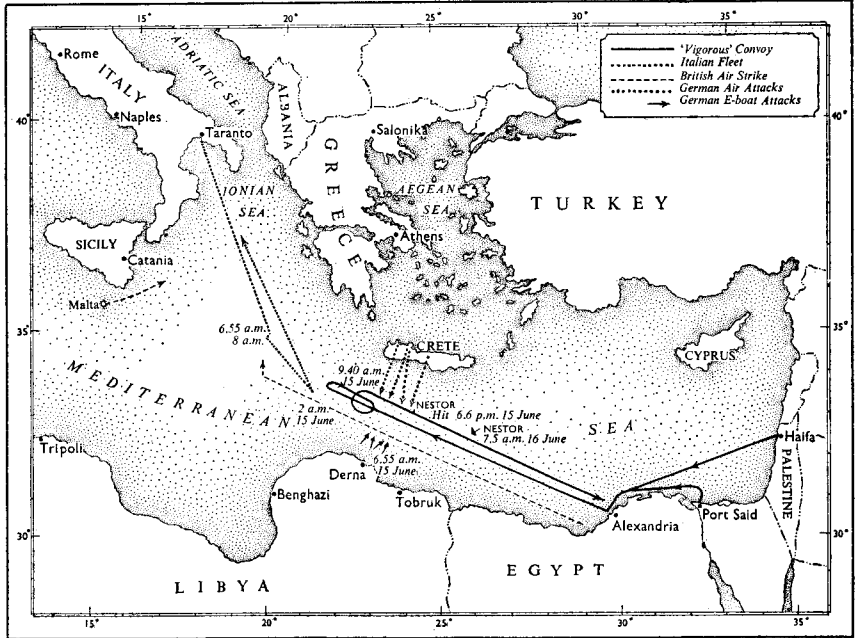
Some time before this the force suffered another casualty when H.M.A.S. *Nestor* (Commander A. S. Rosenthal, R.A.N.) was straddled by two heavy bombs in a high-level attack, and completely crippled. The convoy was about 100 miles due north of Tobruk, steering E.S.E., with *Nestor*

¹ HMS *Bedouin*, destroyer (1939), 1,870 tons, eight 4.7-in guns, four 21-in torpedo tubes, 36½ kts. Sunk in Mediterranean, 15 Jun 1942.

² HMS *Partridge*, destroyer (1941), 1,540 tons, four 4.7-in guns, four 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts. Sunk in Mediterranean, 18 Dec 1942.

³ HMS *Airedale*, destroyer (1940), 904 tons, four 4-in AA guns, 27½ kts. Sunk in Mediterranean, 15 Jun 1942.

one of the close anti-submarine screen when, at 6.6 p.m., one bomb fell some 50 feet from the ship's starboard side and another within two or three feet of the port side amidships, causing her to flex violently in the bridge, mast, and funnel area, damaging fittings and throwing everyone in the vicinity to the deck. *Napier* (D.7) was next ship but one, and Captain Arliss, realising by the way *Nestor's* upper deck was hogged and from the amount of steam coming from air intakes, that she was badly



"Vigorous" convoy and loss of *Nestor*, June 1942

damaged and probably without any power, signalled to *Javelin*⁴ (Lieut-Commander J. M. Alliston, R.N., who later commanded H.M.A.S. *Warramunga*⁵), to take her in tow, but to remove the crew and sink her if conditions were too difficult. *Vian* made a similar signal to *Javelin*.

The main damage was to the hull, which was extensively distorted and holed on the port side, causing the immediate flooding of No. 1 Boiler Room (all of whose occupants were killed⁶) and total loss of steam and all electric power. No. 2 Boiler Room subsequently flooded also, precluding the possibility of raising steam.

⁴ HMS *Javelin*, destroyer (1939), 1,690 tons, six 4.7-in guns, five 21-in torpedo tubes, 36 kts.

⁵ HMAS *Warramunga*, destroyer (1942), 1,870 tons, six 4.7-in guns, four 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts.

⁶ Stoker PO J. B. Bulmer, 19982, RAN; Ldg Stoker C. B. Hill, 21751, RAN; Ldg Stoker M. Burns, C/KX 94897, RN; Stoker L. J. Blight, F.3546, RAN.

The bodies of the four ratings in No. 1 Boiler Room were recovered by the ship's medical officer, Lieutenant Watson,⁷ who "displayed outstanding bravery in immediately entering No. 1 Boiler Room in order to rescue the crew who he knew must either be killed or seriously injured. Of the conditions in the boiler room he had no idea; when he entered it he found it in darkness and flooded. In spite of this he dived repeatedly until all the men were recovered. Unfortunately they had all been killed."⁸

As a result of the damage and water intake, *Nestor* settled by the head, and listed to port so that "the scuttles in the lower after messdeck were lapping the water as the ship rolled".⁹ Below decks, bulkheads were shored and leaks plugged, and on deck torpedoes, paravanes, and depth charges were jettisoned, and stores were moved to the upper deck starboard side to reduce the list. By 2 a.m. on the 16th the list was stabilised at about five degrees to port, and all leaks were under control, and by 4 a.m. the ship, trimming by the bow by about two or three feet, "was completely seaworthy regarding damage control for it to have been towed for an indefinite period".¹

Potentially most dangerous, however, was a fire which was discovered half an hour or so after the bombing, when it was noticed that, in spite of the flooded boiler rooms, the funnel was starting to smoke and its base was rapidly getting hot. The fire was found to be at the back of No. 1 Boiler Room, of oil from fractured fuel tanks floating on the water. It was attacked by various means and eventually subdued—about midnight—through the adoption of a suggestion of Rosenthal's to use hammocks to blanket the base of the funnel. Using bearing-off spars, some hundred or so hammocks, soaked in sea water, were poked into the base of the funnel uptake through a small door in the funnel's starboard side. A chain bucket party, and later a portable hand pump, kept them wetted. Once a wall of hammocks had been built across the funnel, open hammocks and blankets were laid on top to make an effective seal. In about half an hour the funnel was cool enough for the siren ladders to be used and the funnel cover to be secured—and the fire was effectively smothered.

Meanwhile *Javelin* had taken *Nestor* in tow. She went alongside the helpless destroyer once that ship had dropped clear of the convoy. One of *Nestor*'s ratings later recorded the incident: "A British destroyer, *Javelin*, came alongside to pass a tow line while the German bombers continued their assault. Commander Rosenthal called out to the British ship's commanding officer that the risk to *Javelin* was too great, and advised him to get clear of the area. 'Don't be so bloody stupid,' came the reply, and *Javelin* took *Nestor* in tow." This first tow was with *Nestor*'s

⁷ Surg Lt-Cdr S. A. C. Watson, DSC, VRD; RANR. HMAS's *Nestor*, *Manoora* and *Arunta*. Medical practitioner; of Sydney; b. Ulster, Ireland, 27 Jul 1915.

⁸ Captain Rosenthal's report of 17 June 1942 to Captain (D) 7.

⁹ Rosenthal's report.

¹ Report of Engineer Officer, Lt-Cdr (E) R. G. Parker, RAN, to Captain Rosenthal, 17 June 1942. Capt R. G. Parker, OBE; RAN. HMAS's *Nestor* 1941-42, *Hobart* 1942-43; Engr Offr Garden Island Dockyard 1943-50. Of Neutral Bay, NSW; b. Mosman, NSW, 24 Feb 1906.

4½-inch wire with one shackle of cable outboard, and *Javelin* went ahead at 6.50 p.m. and gradually worked up to 14½ knots. The two ships, and three "Hunts" sent to screen them, were under air attack for some time around 7 p.m., but survived both high-level and torpedo-bomber strikes and shot down two of the attackers. But *Nestor*, due to her trim by the bow, yawed excessively, and at 10.59 p.m. the tow parted at *Javelin*'s end. Being without power, *Nestor* was unable to handle the weight of cable and wire suspended from her bull ring, and had to slip it. A second tow was prepared, using *Javelin*'s 4½-inch wire shackled to two-and-a-half shackles of cable at *Nestor*'s end, and towing was resumed at 12.36 a.m. on the 16th. But four hours later the tow again parted through *Nestor*'s excessive yawing. The only towing gear now remaining was the 3½-inch towing wires of the "Hunts", and the hurricane hawsers and manillas carried by *Nestor* and *Javelin*. The ships had covered only 80 miles in 10 hours under ideal weather conditions—though towing conditions were far from ideal owing to *Nestor*'s trim by the head—and were still 230 miles from Alexandria, and the remaining towing gear was such that had towing been resumed it would not have been possible to have proceeded faster than dead slow, making both ships an easy target for submarines and aircraft. Dawn was just breaking, and in the growing light three German E-boats were sighted, driving home the knowledge that the gauntlet of enemy attacks extended over the whole distance to be covered, and would be relentless and unremitting. It was felt that continued attempts to tow invited the loss of *Javelin* in addition to that of *Nestor*, and at 7.5 a.m. on the 16th, in position 115 miles north-east of Tobruk, *Nestor*'s company were removed and the ship sunk by *Javelin*.

Meanwhile the main force, moving on ahead of *Javelin*, *Nestor*, and the three "Hunts", paid another forfeit. At 1.26 a.m. on the 16th the cruiser *Hermione*, torpedoed by the German submarine *U 205*, heeled over and sank very quickly. It was the final payment in this attempt to nourish Malta. In the evening of the 16th the remaining merchant ships and escorts of the eastern convoy reached Alexandria.

In a balance sheet of material debits and credits the advantage lay with the enemy. In the two convoys six merchant ships, one cruiser, and five destroyers were lost. The Italians lost one cruiser. But two merchant ships of the western convoy got through to Malta with their supplies, a fact of which the German Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, later wrote:

The attack of the force from Alexandria was repulsed with losses to the enemy; the repulse of the enemy operation from the west was not so successful. British units succeeded in fighting their way through the Straits of Sicily and reaching Malta. In spite of the losses sustained this operation must be counted as a British operational success having particular regard to the Malta operation [the invasion] projected by the Axis. Every ton less of war material in the island could be of decisive significance for the success of the German operation.²

² Weichold, post-war Essay.

In the event the "operation projected by the Axis" never materialised. On the day Vian's force returned to Alexandria, Rommel renewed his attacks in the Desert, and rapidly took Acroma, El Adem, and Belhamed, some sixteen miles south-east of Tobruk, which was itself isolated and surrounded by 19th June. At dawn next day he opened his assault on the south-eastern perimeter of the fortress. By 6 p.m. his advance forces were in the outskirts of the town. Twelve hours later Major-General H. B. Klopper, commanding the 2nd South African Division and the fortress, sent out an offer to capitulate, and the Germans accepted his surrender at his headquarters at 7.45 a.m. on 21st June. Thus, after 514 days in British possession since 22nd January 1941—233 days of which it was beleaguered, and the especial interest of Australia both in its resolute defenders and its gauntlet-running suppliers of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla and their companions—Tobruk passed temporarily into Axis hands. Yet the sacrifices that had been made in its holding were not thrown away, and the Australian losses within its perimeter and in its adjacent sea were not in vain. For it was in this present capture of Tobruk that lay the seeds of Rommel's forthcoming defeat, and the expulsion of the Axis from North Africa.

On 21st June Admiral Harwood sent a signal to the Admiralty:

Tobruk has fallen, and situation deteriorated so much that there is a possibility of heavy air attack on Alexandria in near future, and in view of approaching full moon period I am sending all Eastern Fleet units south of the Canal to await events. I hope to get H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* out of dock towards end of this week.

The battleship undocked and sailed for Port Sudan on 27th June. Some other ships were moved south of the Canal (the Eastern Fleet units returned to the Indian Ocean) and the rest of the Mediterranean Fleet was divided between the rearward bases of Haifa, Port Said, and Beirut. Preparations were made to destroy stores and facilities at Alexandria, and to block the harbour.

Throughout the rest of the month the threat to Alexandria grew. The British left Salum on 24th June, and that day the Axis forces crossed the frontier into Egypt. Next day they were only 40 miles from Mersa Matruh, to where the British had retired. On the evening of the 26th the enemy broke through the Matruh defences and nearly trapped the defending divisions of the X Corps, and the New Zealand Division to the south. The New Zealanders fought their way out in the night of the 27th-28th and, as did the others, successfully moved back to El Alamein, where the main defensive position was being prepared. There, only 60 miles west of Alexandria, the Eighth Army was established by the last day of the month.

Meanwhile the enemy command had reached a fateful decision. As stated earlier, their plans had called for the reconquest of Cyrenaica, including the capture of Tobruk, as the prerequisite to the invasion of Malta. This was reiterated as late as 21st June by Mussolini. But the ease with which Tobruk was captured prompted Rommel to envisage the

immediate destruction of the Eighth Army and his penetration "into the heart of Egypt" without worrying about Malta. He sought, and received, the approval of Hitler, and the ready acquiescence of Mussolini. The Duce was carried away by the prospect of the conquest of Egypt. And Hitler was not enthusiastic about the projected Malta operation, for the fatal Russian adventure was again exercising its dire influence, and exigency mothered fallacious argument:

The Fuehrer recognises how important it is to capture Malta. However, he does not believe that this can be done while the offensive on the eastern front is in progress, and especially not with Italian troops. During that time the air force cannot spare any transport planes. Once Tobruk is taken, most shipments will be routed to Tobruk via Crete. On the other hand, the British efforts to get convoys through to Malta from the east and from the west testify to the plight of the island.³

The German Naval Staff shared "the Fuehrer's doubts and misgivings particularly in regard to the Italians' ability to carry out the operation", but considered that, if German leadership had "the decisive word in its execution and if strong German forces are employed", the Malta operation could be carried out successfully without the help "of the air transport units so badly needed on the Eastern Front". The Naval Staff deprecated the Italian plaint of shortage of fuel oil, and considered "the request for an additional 40,000 tons exaggerated and ascribes it to the desire of the Italians to play absolutely safe". The Staff had reason "to believe that it will be possible to supply sufficient quantities of everything the army requires by means of escorted convoys and Italian transport submarines once the bridgehead has been established." Finally:

The operation is difficult and risky. However, in the long run the Naval Staff consider it still more risky not to carry out the operation. From the standpoint of strategy, the Naval Staff considers the occupation of Malta an absolute necessity and therefore mandatory for us if we want to continue shipping supplies to Africa, to protect our position in North Africa, and later hope to launch an attack against Suez. And we must keep in mind that conditions for taking Malta will in all probability never again be as favourable as they are this summer.⁴

But this counsel was disregarded. The assault on Malta was postponed, and Rommel was authorised to occupy the El Alamein gateway to the Nile Delta as a starting point for operations against the Suez Canal. As Admiral Weichold later wrote:

In this situation the Supreme German Command in agreement with the Italian Command decided to postpone the execution of the Malta operation. This far-reaching decision was made under the impression of the Panzer Army's success in the area of the Egyptian frontier. The commanders of the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine in the Mediterranean were not party to this alteration in the plans, whilst the influence of Rommel turned the scales.

Field Marshal Kesselring, German Air Commander in the Mediterranean, and Weichold, pointed out to Rommel the supply difficulties he

³ *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs*; conference between Raeder and Hitler at the Berghof, 15 June 1942.

⁴ *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs*. Conference between Raeder and Hitler at the Berghof, 15 June 1942, Annex 4.

would encounter in an advance "from the tactically favourable position on the Libyan-Egyptian frontier", and quoted the lessons of 1941 when "it had been learned at the cost of blood that the planning of a front without near-by harbours and without a secured sea supply route would not result in safe positions and would lead to a heavy defeat". But

Rommel considered the military situation on land so favourable and promising that he believed himself able to advance right into the Nile Delta in spite of all these difficulties. There the supply difficulties could be met from British supplies. The new plan of campaign was a terrific gamble, everything was staked on one card. Everything depended upon the lightning execution of the land operation. If this expectation was not fulfilled, heavy defeat would ensue. . . . Thus the die was cast in favour of the further development of the war in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Apparently the decision had been influenced by the tying down of German forces in the Russian war . . . and a desire of economising in German forces set aside for the Malta operation. After all the bitter lessons which the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean had taught, and after our solitary attempt to attain a naval point of view, the continental outlook was resumed and with it resultant decisions . . . the Great Plan for fighting the Mediterranean war in 1942, which had been part of a world wide or maritime total war of the Axis Powers, was finally given up. . . . The situation had become serious. It was necessary to prepare for the British counter-attack, which was certain to come.⁵

As in the Pacific so did events in the Mediterranean in June 1942 write the preface to a new chapter in the war in the European and Middle East Theatres.

⁵ Weichold, Essay.