**BATTLE OF SAVO ISLAND August 9, 1942: Worst Defeat in US Navy History**

*“The root cause of the thrashing at Savo and much woe to follow-lay in pre-war strategic and tactical philosophies and their technical prodigy”* Historian Richard Frank

**THE PRE-WAR YEARS – Two Navies, two Histories, two Traditions, two different approaches**

* USN Naval History and Traditions – Last Naval battle in 1898 Spanish American War, US daylight gunfire under Adm Dewey annihilates Spanish fleet at Manila Bay and Admirals Sampson and Schley do the same at Santiago de Cuba – emphasis on daytime gunfire from capital ships (Battleships and Cruisers) – USN heavy cruisers do not have torpedoes.
* IJN Naval History and Traditions – Last naval battle in 1904-6 Russo-Japanese War, Battle of Tsushima Japanese fleet under Adm Togo annihilates Russian fleet by sneak attack at night using torpedoes then gunfire - emphasis on nighttime Torpedoes as main weapon on Cruisers & destroyers using night optical rangefinders & floatplanes for night illumination.
* Decisive Battle – both navies view war in Pacific to be decided by one big battle (Alfred Mahan) – USN war plan Orange calls for fleet to sail across Pacific to besieged Philippines and decisive battle in waters near there – IJN knowing the USN plan has a counter plan Zen-Gen Sakusen “Attrition Decisive Battle” which calls for using submarines, planes, and ship night torpedo attacks to weaken the US ships by attrition as they sail west for the decisive battle.
* Naval Conferences and Treaties Washington 1922 and London 1930 – to stop a naval arms race it creates the famous ratio of 5:5:3 US:Britain:Japan capital ships – this is not popular in Japan but Adm Yamamoto Isoroku argues about the 1930 treaty that aircraft carriers will be the future weapon and US and Britain advantage will be lost by the areas that they need to cover (i.e. Panama Canal, Suez Canal, India, etc.).
* Treaty Cruisers - US builds Heavy Cruisers up to allowed limits of the treaties creating ships that are top heavy from the weight of the guns – *New Orleans* class cruisers had seven ships built from 1931-1937 - three are lost at Savo in one battle - USS *Astoria*, *Quincy* and *Vincennes.*
* IJN Torpedoes *–*Type 93 (24 inch) “Long Lance” torpedo efficient, wakeless, 1090 pound warhead for the unheard of range of 22000 yards (11 nautical miles) at 45 knots – delivered by ship, plane and sub, i.e. Nakajima B5N “Kate” carrier based and Mitsubishi G4M “Betty” land based – The Betty will demonstrate its worth by sinking British HMS *Price of Wales* and *Repulse* in December 1941 – Japanese ships have torpedo reload capability which US do not.
* USN Torpedoes Mark XV (21 inch) had range of only 6000 yards (3 nautical miles) at 45 knots – three serious problems: 1/ the supersecret magnetic influence exploder was designed to detonate the warhead under the hull of the target but frequently failed causing premature explosion, 2/ the faulty depth setting mechanism caused it to run far under target, and worst of all, 3/ the flimsy contact exploder was often crushed on impact resulting in no explosion at all.

**GUADALCANAL – Adm Ernest King draws the line.**

* Germany First – At the Arcadia Conference in December 1941 FDR and Churchill agree to put most resources into defeating Nazis, fighting a “holding” action against Japan – this is difficult for US public because of Pearl Harbor and Japanese advances early in the war.
* May 1942 Japan seizes the Solomon Islands from the British, they build a seaplane base at Tulagi and begin construction of an airfield on Guadalcanal – Adm Ernest King CNO had never agreed with Germany First and saw the airfield as a threat to communication to NZ and Australia.
* Adm King creates Operation Watchtower to take Tulagi and form a perimeter around the airfield using Marines – USN lacks landing craft and plan is nicknamed Operation Shoestring
* Marines land on August 7, complete surprise, form perimeter around airfield and prepare for Japan counterattacks –which began that day with planes attacking US transport ships – the Guadalcanal campaign will go from August 7, 1942, to February 9 1943, consisting of 7 naval battles, 10 land battles and constant air combat – 7100 US and 19200 Japanese will die, USN will lose 28 ships and IJN 38, US will lose 615 planes and Japan will lose 683 – **it is US first offensive**

**Adm Mikawa Plan**

* Vice Adm Gunichi Mikawa flagship heavy cruiser IJN *Chokai* has four more heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers and one destroyer, audacious attack since USN has more ships, guns, and torpedos.
* Battle Plan – 1/ Enter passage south of Savo torpedo US warships there, 2/ then north towards Tulagi to attack US warship there then 3/ regroup and attack transports off landing area.
* Mikawa sends Nelsonian signal to ships: “*In the finest tradition of the Imperial Navy we shall engage the enemy in night battle. Every man is expected to do his utmost*”

**Adm Turner Plan**

* Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner wanted to cover all three passages to landing area, **Southern Screen** (Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley) had three heavy cruisers (HMAS *Australia*, HMAS *Canberra,* and USS *Chicago)* and two destroyers, **Northern Screen** (Capt Frederick Riefkohl) had three heavy cruisers (USS *Vincennes*, *Quincy* & *Astoria*) and two destroyers**, Eastern Screen** (Rear Adm Norman Scott) had two light cruisers and two destroyers.
* Air Cover provided by Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher with three carriers – because of air attacks on first day Adm Fletcher advises Turner his fuel is low, and he is retiring from action (Fletcher has 75% of US carriers and has already lost *Lexington* at Coral Sea and *Yorktown* at Midway) - Turner confident IJN will not attack that night calls Crutchley for a conference to decide what to do about air cover, taking *Australia* 20 miles to the rear and out of battle

**Battle of Savo Island August 8-9, 1942**

* Mikawa slips past two destroyers forming picket line unobserved, IJN night strategy is 1/ Launch long range salvo of half available torpedoes, 2/ floatplanes illuminate US ships, 3/As torpedoes hit, open fire with guns –(0143-0150) fires torpedoes at Southern Screen then has four floatplanes illuminate targets for gunfire after the torpedoes hit – *Canberra* loses power and set on fire & is scuttled in morning, *Chicago* slightly damaged by torpedo hit Captain Bode sails west out of battle in wrong direction,– turning to Northern Screen (0150-0230) *Astoria* is heavily damaged & scuttled next morning, *Quincy* is sunk becoming first ship sunk in iron bottom sound, *Vincennes* is then second sunk– Mikawa then ends battle without attacking transports – **What if** he had, would landing have failed? Adm Yamamoto thought so and was critical of Mikawa.

**Aftermath and Assessment: Loss of Four Heavy Cruisers 1077 KIA 700 wounded**

* Adm Hepburn Investigation found: 1/ An inadequate state of readiness on all ships to meet a sudden night attack, 2/ The failure to recognize the implications of enemy planes, 3/ Communications failures. – Captain Bode of *Chicago* censured for his part commits suicide
* *Canberra* and *Astoria* might have been saved but heavily upholstered wardroom furniture and layers of paint and linoleum flammable burned quickly – paint, linoleum and furniture removed from warships, also improved firefighting using fog nozzles developed.
* Turner could have been demoted, sent stateside in disgrace like Adm Kimmel after Pearl Harbor, but Adm Chester Nimitz had led in Bureau of Navigation (HR) in prewar and knew Turner had spent prewar years as expert in Amphibious warfare – Nimitz would need him to cross Pacific.

“*The Navy was still obsessed with a strong feeling of technical and mental superiority…the net result was a fatal lethargy of mind…which was more important than the element of surprise*” Rear Admiral Turner

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