

# NIGHT OF THE BATTLESHIPS

**THE SECOND NAVAL BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL WAS A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN A TURNING POINT CAMPAIGN.**

**RICHARD H. WAGNER**

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**A**t the Battle of Midway, the United States Navy stopped the forward advance of the Empire of Japan. However, by that time, the Japanese had conquered a great deal of territory and were poised to resume their march. It was not until the Guadalcanal campaign (August 1942 - February 1943) that the Americans began to retake territory and put the Japanese on the defensive. The bitter fighting on that island is legendary. However, there was also a series of naval actions off Guadalcanal that played a crucial role in the campaign. These were not what is commonly thought of as the typical World War II naval action. Air power only played a supporting part. The actions centered upon fierce night surface actions in confined waters.

The decisive naval actions of the campaign took place during the period 12 November to 15 November 1941. These actions are called by a variety of names but the most common nomenclature is to call the cruiser/destroyer action on the night of 12-13 November, the First Naval Battle of Guadalcanal and the battleship action on the night of 14-15 November, the Second Naval Battle of Guadalcanal. While popular histories have tended to focus on the cruiser/destroyer action, this article will focus on the battleship

action. It was not until the battleship action that Japanese hopes of retaking the island were ended. Moreover, the battleship action was a desperate gamble that involved risking the last heavy surface force in the Pacific in a way that was contrary to established doctrine and in a type of fighting that the Japanese had shown themselves to be masters.



## **USS WASHINGTON (BB 56)**

**DISPLACEMENT:** 41,000 full load tons

**LENGTH:** 729 feet

**BEAM:** 108 feet

**SPEED:** 28 knots

**POWER PLANT:** Steam turbine

**ARMAMENT:** Nine 16 inch 45 caliber:

Twenty 5 inch 38 caliber;

Sixty 40mm;

Thirty-six 20mm

**CREW:** 1,880

**COMMISSIONED:** 15 May 1941

**DECOMMISSIONED:** 27 June 1947

## *The Campaign*

**G**uadalcanal is the largest island in the Solomons chain. It lies south of the equator in the Coral Sea, southeast of New Guinea and northeast of Australia. The Solomons are arranged in a loose column of twos heading northwest from Guadalcanal toward Rabaul. The water lying between the columns was nicknamed "The Slot" by the Americans who fought in the Solomons campaign. At the Guadalcanal end of The Slot is another body of water with an American nickname. It is bounded by Guadalcanal on the south, Savo Island on the west, and Tulagi and Florida islands to the north. The name for it is "Ironbottom Sound."

Prior to 1942, no one took much interest in Guadalcanal. It was discovered by Spanish explorers in the 1560s but nothing came of their plan to colonize the island. The French rediscovered it in the 1700s but the malaria-ridden island was so devoid of natural resources and inhabited by such cantankerous natives that no one wanted it. At the end of the 19th Century, the European powers divided-up the Pacific Islands and Britain agreed to take Guadalcanal. A few missionaries and coconut planters from Australia came to the island. However, with its overpowering smell of rotting vegetation, dense jungle, swamps, meadows with seven foot tall grass that can cut through clothing, and steep mountains, the island went undeveloped.

In July 1942, aerial reconnaissance detected that the Japanese were constructing an airfield on Guadalcanal. This information required immediate action because when

the airfield was completed it would pose a threat to the line of communication between the United States and Australia. Moreover, it could be used to launch a new thrust towards Port Moseby, New Guinea - - the objective the Japanese had been prevented from taking in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Although the bulk of American resources was being sent to the European Theater, an amphibious assault force was quickly scraped together and on 7 August 1942, the First Marine Division was landed on Guadalcanal and Marine Raiders on Tulagi where the Japanese had built a seaplane base. The Marines captured the Guadalcanal airfield the next day, renaming it Henderson Field after a Marine flyer killed at Midway.

Then, things started to go bad. Upon hearing of the invasion, Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, IJN, led a force of cruisers and destroyers from the large Japanese base at Rabaul down The Slot to attack the American ships supporting the invasion. His force entered Ironbottom Sound shortly after midnight achieving complete surprise. Four Allied heavy cruisers and a destroyer were sunk and another heavy cruiser and two destroyers damaged. However, concerned that his force might be attacked by carrier-based aircraft if it was still off Guadalcanal when daylight broke, Mikawa decided to return to base without attacking the defenseless transports unloading at the beachhead. The Battle of Savo Island was thus a humiliating defeat but at least it was not a complete disaster.

Ironically, Mikawa need not have worried. Rear Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, USN, had withdrawn the three aircraft carriers that had covered the landings on the grounds that his fighter strength had

been greatly reduced as a result of operations and that his ships were starting to run low on fuel. Since after the Savo debacle there was practically nothing left to defend the transports, they were withdrawn on 9 August after unloading only half their cargoes. Consequently, the Marines were left holding a small area around the airfield with very little supplies.

Using captured Japanese construction equipment, the Marines finished the airfield in early September and an assortment of Marine, Army, and Navy aircraft were flown in. "The Cactus Air Force," named for the code name for Guadalcanal, gave the Americans air superiority. However, the campaign stalemated. Each side funneled in reinforcements, the Americans by freighter during daylight, the Japanese by the "Tokyo Express" - - primarily destroyers that would speed down The Slot at night bringing supplies and reinforcements. Still, despite heavy fighting, the Americans (including Army troops landed in October) could not advance and the Japanese could not retake the airfield.

Meanwhile, offshore, the fighting was similarly intense. On 24 August, a force built around USS SARATOGA (CV 3), USS ENTERPRISE (CV 6), and USS NORTH CAROLINA (BB 55) engaged a force centered around three Japanese carriers and sank the carrier RYUJO. Shortly after the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, SARATOGA was torpedoed by a submarine and rendered out of action for three months. USS WASP (CV 7) was not as lucky. She was torpedoed and sunk while escorting a group of transports to Guadalcanal. NORTH CAROLINA was also put out

of action by a torpedo in the same engagement.

On the night of 11 October, a force of cruisers and destroyers under the command of RADM Norman Scott, USN, intercepted two Japanese cruisers and two destroyers, which were on the way to bombard Henderson Field. In the Battle of Cape Esperance, one Japanese cruiser was sunk and the other badly damaged at the cost of one destroyer sunk, and a light cruiser and a destroyer damaged.

Two nights later, however, the battleships KONGO and HARUNA appeared in Ironbottom Sound and bombarded Henderson Field destroying 48 aircraft. Although determined attacks by PT boats made the battleships so nervous that they went away, cruisers carried on the bombardment the next two nights.

Another carrier engagement took place on 26-27 October, when ENTERPRISE and USS HORNET (CV 8) encountered four carriers sent to cover a major land offensive directed at retaking Henderson Field. Two Japanese carriers were knocked out of commission but HORNET was sunk in the Battle of Santa Cruz Islands. This left the damaged ENTERPRISE as the only operational carrier in the Pacific.

### *The Barroom Brawl*

**B**y early November, the Japanese realized that two conditions had to be met in order to win on Guadalcanal. First, the Japanese had to significantly outnumber the Americans on the ground. This would require a large-scale reinforcement of the garrison. Second, Henderson Field had to be neutralized so as to give the

Japanese control of the air and the seas. The Cactus Air Force was shooting down Japanese planes at a ratio of 10 to one. Accordingly, between 2 November and 10 November, 65 destroyer loads of troops landed on the island tipping the scale so that the Japanese outnumbered the Americans for the first time. Furthermore, on 11 November, the Japanese assembled eleven transports loaded with 13,500 troops and supplies. This convoy would be supported by a battle group centered upon the battleships HIEI and KIRISHIMA. In addition to escorting the convoy, this force was to bombard Henderson Field into rubble.

American intelligence got wind of the Japanese plan and Vice Admiral William Halsey, USN, who had replaced Vice Admiral R. Ghormley, USN, as South Pacific Commander, dispatched ENTERPRISE screened by USS WASHINGTON (BB 56) and USS SOUTH DAKOTA (BB 57) as well as by two cruisers and eight destroyers to counter the Japanese attack. Since ENTERPRISE was still under repair in Nouema, Halsey ordered that the two battleships and half the destroyers to proceed ahead if the carrier could not make the battle zone in time.

Meanwhile, two American convoys reached Guadalcanal. The first was escorted by the anti-aircraft cruiser ATLANTA (CL 51) and four destroyers under Admiral Scott while the second was escorted by the heavy cruiser SAN FRANCISCO (CA 38), three other cruisers, and five destroyers under Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan, USN. When coastwatchers and aircraft reported a large force of two battleships, a light cruiser, and 14 destroyers moving down The Slot, the Americans realized that the

relief force would not arrive in time and that defending the island was up to the convoy escort ships.

After thwarting an attack on the transports by Japanese bombers on the afternoon of 12 November, Callaghan took the transports to sea. After dark, the escort ships broke away from the transports and formed into a line of battle to wait for the Japanese in Ironbottom Sound. Unfortunately, Callaghan had little experience with radar and put the ships with the best radar, USS FLETCHER (DD 455) at the end of the column. Compounding this error, he kept his flag on SAN FRANCISCO, which had a relatively poor communications suite. Nor did he inform the other ships of his battle plan.

The Japanese bombardment group was not expecting a naval battle as it entered Ironbottom Sound in the moonless early hours of 13 November, assuming that the American warships had departed the area at sunset. As a result, the two forces virtually crashed into each other. At almost point blank range, the ships began firing shells and torpedoes. Japanese searchlights illuminated American ships. Tracers and star shells lit the night. A series of confusing orders emanated from the American flagship including directions to cease fire, fire at the "big ones," and that odd numbered ships should fire to port and even numbered ships fire to starboard - - failing to take into account the actual position of the various ships in relation to the enemy. Friendly fire smashed into nearby ships in the general confusion. A destroyer came so close to a battleship that the battlewagon was unable to depress its main battery to fire. However, the destroyer's torpedoes were unable to arm before hitting the

battleship. Machine gunners raked the battleship's bridge but a 14 inch shell caused the destroyer to disappear as she attempted to escape.

In a half hour it was all over. Callaghan and Scott were dead. All of the American cruisers were heavily damaged and incapable of further fighting. ATLANTA would sink the next day. Four destroyers had sunk and a fifth was heavily damaged. However, HIEI was badly damaged and was limping slowly home. Two Japanese destroyers were sunk and two others badly damaged. Most importantly, the bombardment group had turned back without destroying Henderson Field. However, the Americans knew that the Japanese would return.

In daylight, aircraft from Henderson Field, found HIEI crawling up The Slot and finished her. But the Japanese struck back. A submarine sank USS JUNEAU (CL 52) and two heavy cruisers bombarded Henderson Field just after midnight destroying 18 planes and damaging 32 others. Still, the field was operational.

On the following morning (14 November), airmen from Henderson Field and ENTERPRISE, now some 200 miles from Guadalcanal, and B-17s from Espiritu Santo, found the transport convoy and managed to sink six transports. But even this was not enough to stop the attack. The Japanese loaded the survivors from the sinking transports onto destroyers. The remaining transports eventually were able to beach themselves on Guadalcanal and disembark their troops.

Meanwhile, at Rabaul, a new heavy bombardment group, including KIRISHIMA, two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and eight destroyers, was

placed under the command of Vice Admiral Nouburke Kondo, IJN, and given the task of neutralizing Henderson Field. The raid was planned for late on the night of 14 November.

### *The Big Guns' Turn*

Concern that the only operational carrier in the Pacific was in a vulnerable position led Halsey to order the ENTERPRISE task force to return to Nouema. Most of the aircraft had already flown off to operate out of Henderson Field. Most importantly, Halsey recognized that the cruiser/destroyer action had only delayed the Japanese, not stopped them. Accordingly, on 13 November, WASHINGTON, SOUTH DAKOTA, and four destroyers were detached under the command of Rear Admiral Willis "Ching" Lee Jr., USN, and ordered to proceed at "best speed" to Guadalcanal. However, even at top speed, they would not arrive until the morning of 14 November.

Lee's assignment was contrary to established doctrine. Battleships were not supposed to be used in confined waters such as Ironbottom Sound. Moreover, the force had never operated together as a group. The four destroyers were of different classes and different divisions and were selected because they were the ones in the ENTERPRISE Task Force with the most fuel. Neither had WASHINGTON and SOUTH DAKOTA operated together except as parts of the ENTERPRISE screen.

WASHINGTON had only entered the Pacific for the first time in late August. She was the second of the NORTH CAROLINA class, the first

class of fast battleships. WASHINGTON had been commissioned in May 1941. Her first assignment when the war began was to escort the supply convoys from Britain to Murmansk, Russia, in case the German battleship TIRPITZ should emerge from her lair in the Norwegian fjords. Since arriving in the South Pacific, she had largely been assigned missions independent of the carrier task forces and had not seen much action. Admiral Lee, who was a gunnery expert, however, required his flagship to maintain a rigorous schedule of gunnery practice.

SOUTH DAKOTA was the name-ship of the second class of fast battleships. Designed in the late 1930s when the United States was still trying to live within the requirements of the London Naval Treaty, she attempted to remedy the perceived shortcomings of the NORTH CAROLINAS in a shorter and more compact hull. Commissioned in March 1942, she had run aground shortly after entering the Pacific in August. This was a blessing in disguise since when she went to Pearl Harbor for repairs, her anti-aircraft battery was improved with new 40mm and 20mm guns. These showed their worth during the Battle of Santa Cruz Islands when she shot down 26 enemy aircraft that were attacking ENTERPRISE, thus saving that carrier from the same fate as HORNET. However, after a collision with a destroyer, sailors were saying SOUTH DAKOTA was jinxed.

Informed by radio of the air battle against the transports, Lee decided not to risk his ships in confined water during daylight. As a result, it was not until 2100 on 14 November that the WASHINGTON task force entered

Ironbottom Sound. Lee had arranged the ships in a column with the destroyers USS WALKER (DD 416), USS BENHAM (DD 397), USS PRESTON (DD 377), and USS GWIN (DD 433), in the lead, followed 5,000 yards later by WASHINGTON and then another 1,000 yards by SOUTH DAKOTA. While Lee knew that the Japanese were more experienced than his force, "we entered the action confident that we could outshoot the enemy."

At the same time, Kondo was approaching down The Slot. His force was divided into two groups: the main body consisting of KIRISHIMA, and the heavy cruisers ATAGO and TAKAO; a screening group composed of the light cruiser NAGURA, and six destroyers; and the sweeping group, light cruiser SENDAI and three destroyers, which was to comb the waters for American ships.

WASHINGTON picked up radio traffic from American PT boats indicating that they had two "big ones" in sight and were about to attack. Lee took the microphone and tried to convince Guadalcanal that the PT boats were about to attack American ships. When they refused to believe him because he did not know the proper code, Lee bet that Maj. Gen Alexander Vandergrift, USMC, commanding general on Guadalcanal, might remember his nick name at the Naval Academy and told the skeptical radio operator: "This is Ching Chong China Lee! Chinese catchee? Refer your boss about Ching Lee. Call off your boys!" The PT boats, which had been listening to this exchange, responded: "Identity established. We are not after you."

Near midnight, WASHINGTON detected targets on her radar. A few

minutes later, the main battery was firing at SENDAI while the secondary battery targeted destroyer AYANAMI. Joined by fire from SOUTH DAKOTA, the fire from the secondary battery sank the Japanese destroyer.

Japanese lookouts reported four American destroyers and two battleships. Kondo dismissed these reports. The Americans had no battleships. The large ships must be cruisers. He was not going to let such a force distract him from his main mission of neutralizing Henderson Field. The screening force would engage the Americans.

Meanwhile, the American destroyers raced forward to attack the Japanese screening force. However, searchlights illuminated PRESTON and within minutes the crew was abandoning the burning wreck. WALKE was hit by a torpedo and exploded. Another torpedo blew off a portion of BENHAM's bow but she continued to shoot. GWIN was hit by a shell in the engine room that caused a series of explosions. Within minutes, all four American destroyers were effectively out of the action. But, the destroyers had broken up the Japanese formation and absorbed torpedoes which otherwise would have been fired at the battleships. "It was beyond admiration," Lee wrote later, "and it probably saved our bacon."

SOUTH DAKOTA had a history of electrical problems and to avoid such a problem now, the chief engineer tied down the circuit breakers. Unfortunately, this put the system into series and the ship lost all electrical power. Guns, radar, communications, turret motors were all gone. Attempts to restore power were only temporarily

effective as the battleship continued to have power failures throughout the engagement.

Ahead of the battleships were the burning remains of WALKE and PRESTON. In order not to be silhouetted by the fires, the officer of the deck Lt. Ray Hunter, USN, ordered WASHINGTON to turn to the left so that the burning destroyers would be between the battleships and the enemy.

SOUTH DAKOTA, however, did not follow. Instead, either because of her electrical problems or to avoid a collision with BENHAM, she continued on the original course.

WASHINGTON proceeded into the darkness. Since GWIN and BENHAM were badly damaged, Lee ordered them to retire. Passing the survivors of the sunken destroyers, WASHINGTON jettisoned her life rafts into the water. The destroyer sailors cheered and called out "Get after them WASHINGTON!"

The flagship upon her SG radar to maneuver and locate enemy ships in the darkness. However, a problem emerged when SOUTH DAKOTA failed to follow WASHINGTON's course change. When the radar had been installed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard earlier in the year, there had been a heated argument about where the radar antenna should be placed. The ship's gunnery officers had argued for placing it on top of the mast so as to give a full 360 degree view. The designers argued that a more secure location would be slightly lower. Although that location left an 80 degree blind spot to aft, the designers won out. Now, the radar gave a good reading on a large target. It was probably one of the heavy cruisers or KIRISHIMA. However, Lee refused to

give permission to open fire. He had heard nothing from SOUTH DAKOTA. The large target could be Japanese or it might be SOUTH DAKOTA. With the blind spot in the radar, Lee did not have a full view of the battlefield.

On board SOUTH DAKOTA, everything was going wrong. She was now between the burning destroyers and the Japanese and thus silhouetted against the flames. As a result, searchlights first from the screening force and then from the main body found her and she was took hit after hit. Her superstructure was heavily damaged, her radar plot, radio communications, and five of six fire control radars were out of action, and she was leaking oil. When she attempted to reply, a salvo from her number three main battery set fire to one of the float planes on her stern catapults. Luckily, a second salvo blew the plane overboard and the crew put out the flames.

It took some time to convince him but Kondo eventually realized that he was not fighting a cruiser. Rather, this was one of America's latest class of battleships, embodying the best of American technology. It would be an honor to sink such an adversary. But, in the excitement, did he remember that the lookouts had reported that there were two large American ships?

Suddenly, KIRISHIMA shook as shells from WASHINGTON's main battery tore into her. In the moonless darkness, WASHINGTON had come up on KIRISHIMA's other side. When the Japanese battleship illuminated SOUTH DAKOTA, Lee knew who was where. "Their searchlights provided excellent illumination of SOUTH DAKOTA, but attracted our fire and provided a point of aim." With WASHINGTON's 16 inch

guns depressed to minimum elevation, she fired some 75 16 inch shells and 107 five inch shells at the enemy battleship. "Salvos were walked back and forth across the target."

A false report that the target was sunk, caused WASHINGTON to cease fire. This gave KIRISHIMA time to turn her guns on WASHINGTON. The two ships then traded salvos but the Japanese were unable to find their mark. In a few minutes, KIRISHIMA, glowing cherry red, was out of commission and had to be abandoned.

WASHINGTON's appearance diverted the Japanese fleet from their pummeling of SOUTH DAKOTA. According to Washington's Action Report: "From 0100 to 0107, fired 120 rounds 5", at ranges from 7,400 to 9,500 yards, in succession at three enemy cruisers illuminating and engaging SOUTH DAKOTA and also under fire by her; they were silenced." As the enemy searchlights swung round to locate the ship that was firing out of the darkness, SOUTH DAKOTA decided it was time to make an exit. With her electricity partially restored, SOUTH DAKOTA limped into the darkness.

SOUTH DAKOTA's departure left WASHINGTON engaging six ships single-handed. (Three destroyers had been assigned to rescue survivors from KIRISHIMA). As WASHINGTON headed north along the coast of Savo, the remaining Japanese ships gave chase. However, discouraged by WASHINGTON's heavy fire, the Japanese withdrew under cover of a smoke screen. As they did, they fired a series of torpedoes. WASHINGTON maneuvered and the torpedoes exploded in her wake.

Kondo had lost his largest ship and his cruisers were damaged. It was impossible to proceed further and attack Henderson Field. Accordingly, he signaled his disorganized force to retreat back up The Slot.

The next morning, WASHINGTON met SOUTH DAKOTA at a prearranged rendezvous. Having sustained 42 hits, SOUTH DAKOTA was badly damaged and would have to return to the U.S. for repairs. WASHINGTON, amazingly, had sustained no casualties and the only damage was a hole in one of the radar antennas. BENHAM had had to be abandoned and was sunk by gunfire from GWIN. With the survivors from BENHAM, GWIN proceeded to Espiritu Santo. PT boats and a destroyer rescued 266 survivors from WALKE and PRESTON.

The battleship action of 14-15 November put an end to Japanese hopes of driving the Americans from Guadalcanal. They had been thwarted in their attempts to neutralize Henderson Field and although some reinforcements were able to land, they did so without supplies and, in some cases, without their rifles. There would be other surface engagements in the waters off Guadalcanal but they would be in connection with Japanese attempts to evacuate the island. The Marines and the Army would encounter fierce resistance until February 1943 but that fighting would be in connection with taking the remainder of the island rather than defending the small area around Henderson Field that the Marines had held since August.

If the battleships had failed, it is difficult to see how the United States could have won the Guadalcanal

campaign. With Henderson Field destroyed and the waters around Guadalcanal swept of all Allied combatants larger than a PT boat, the Japanese would have had control of the air and the sea. No supplies or reinforcements could reach the beleaguered soldiers and Marines on the island. In contrast, the Japanese would have been able to supply and reinforce at will. Moreover, there was nothing left in the Pacific to stop them. Thus, the pivotal nature of the battleship action is clear. Admiral Chester Nimitz, USN, wrote: "The success or failure in recapturing Guadalcanal, and the vital naval battle related to it, is the fork in the road that leads to victory."

*This article is dedicated to the late William R. Wagner, whose first-hand account of the battleship action was the genesis of this article.*