

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands

October 26, 1942

Originally appeared October 26, 2020

[KEY WORDS: Santa Cruz Gus Widhelm Guadalcanal Hornet Enterprise Shokaku Zuikaku]

*The conduct of the early part of WWII in the Pacific was dictated by a combination of logistics, geography, and initial Japanese advances. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces made rapid gains in the Philippines, at Wake Island, at New Guinea, and at Rabaul. The U.S. struggled to beef up the logistical pipeline between the U.S. and Australia, building bases in places like Bora Bora. When the Japanese moved to consolidate their gains, the threat to the U.S.-Australia connection was obvious, and it spurred as rapid a response as we could muster. Of particular concern was the major base at Rabaul, on the northeastern tip of the island of New Britain. The Japanese had a major naval anchorage and airfield complex there, and moved to build an advanced field to provide cover to Rabaul's south, on an island in the Solomons chain called Guadalcanal.*

While the Japanese made advances on a wide front in the Pacific in the first half of 1942, they began taking serious resistance in several places. The Battle of the Coral Sea, the first ever fought by naval aircraft only, without their launching ships never seeing one another, took place in early May. The U.S. lost more shipping, including the carrier, *Lexington*. The Japanese lost an escort carrier, but the air groups for the two large carriers present took heavy losses. The *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* were fully operational, but they had to be withheld from combat until their air groups could be replenished. This would have a major effect on the next carrier clash to come.

U.S. codebreakers had broken enough of the main Japanese naval code to learn that the next Japanese invasion target would be Midway Island. Admiral Nimitz had come to trust his amazing cryptologists, but Washington did not. Naval brass thought the information from codebreaking was a clever trick, designed to divert our attention from an end run by Japanese task forces for an attack on the U.S. West Coast. Nimitz was ordered to guard against that eventuality, but he lacked the forces to both lay an ambush for the carriers supporting the Midway invasion and go off on Washington's wild goose chase, so to his everlasting credit, he chose to defend Midway. The ambush worked (although not all ships and planes involved were well-led; another story). All four of the attacking Japanese carriers were sunk, and many pilots and skilled maintenance personnel were lost. The U.S. lost the carrier *Yorktown*. Nimitz's boldness at Midway, and his performance later in the War, are why one of our top carriers carries his name (see also Didja Know? section). The bozos in Washington stole the credit the codebreakers deserved, and hid the fact that they were wrong about the Midway attack. They

might have gotten a ship named after them, or not, but it was certainly would have been a much smaller one than the *USS Nimitz* (CVN-68). [Joe Rochefort](#)'s reward for leading the codebreaking effort that resulted in victory? He was [shunted aside](#), and eventually was given command of a floating drydock. [Personal Note: IMHO, the treatment of Rochefort was a greater disgrace for the Navy than the abandonment of the *Hornet* at Santa Cruz.]

The airfield under construction on Guadalcanal posed too large a threat to the US-Australia pipeline to be ignored. An invasion force was assembled and supplied as quickly and efficiently as possible (not as much of either as desired). The Marines went ashore on Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942. The next night, the Japanese surprised the naval ships covering the invasion fleet, sinking four cruisers and a destroyer, with 1077 sailors KIA, while suffering a few minor inconsequential hits in return (minor damage to three cruisers and 58 KIA).

The naval covering forces felt overmatched after the losses at Savo Island, and withdrew before the invasion supply ships had off-loaded the supplies the Marines needed on Guadalcanal. The supply ships had no choice but to withdraw still heavily-laden. The only bright spot for the Allies came after the battle, when four of the cruisers heading back to Rabaul encountered an antiquated, but well-managed, U.S. submarine, the [S-44](#), which sank one of them, [IJN Kako](#).

The next six months would feature some of the heaviest fighting of the Pacific War. The forces were nearly even, in both number and equipment. Later, the U.S. would advance across the Pacific and face a number of tough battles, but by then the overall issue wasn't really in doubt, and the U.S./Allies had significant advantages in manpower and material.

Guadalcanal became the focal point of four major naval engagements, as both sides fought to reinforce their ground forces on Guadalcanal and deny the other side from doing the same. The U.S. planes on Guadalcanal gave the U.S. control of the seas around Guadalcanal – by daylight. But our planes of that era could not operate effectively at night, but the Japanese naval ships could, so the control of the Guadalcanal seas shifted to them at night. Thus began a period of regular supply runs from Rabaul to Guadalcanal, at least when the phase of the Moon was favorable. The Marines called the runs the “Cactus Express,” but the U.S. media couldn't use that phrase (“Cactus” was the code word for Guadalcanal), so some enterprising news guy came up with the “Tokyo Express.”

Two of the four resulting naval battles were fought primarily by ship guns, the Battle of Cape Esperance, fought soon after the Marine landing, and the Naval Battle for Guadalcanal, fought in mid-November.

The other two battles were carrier versus carrier affairs, the Battle of the Eastern Solomons in early October, and the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, on October 26. ***This Item of the Week topic was triggered by that anniversary, today.*** An excellent resource on these two carrier battles is [here](#). FYI: Cape Esperance is on Guadalcanal, and the Santa Cruz island group lies to the southeast of the Solomons. NOTE: There is another reason for this Item at this time: the connection between the supercarrier *USS Nimitz* and the namesake of one of its escorts. More on that later, in the Didja Know? segment.

The Japanese were trying to re1nforce their forces on Guadalcanal, and had a large destroyer/transport force under "[Tanaka the Tenacious](#)" covered by the two big carriers that missed Midway, and an escort carrier, *IJN Ryūjō*. They were opposed by the U.S. carriers *Enterprise* and *Saratoga*. The Americans won this one, but it had little long-term effect on the course of the War. The Japanese lost the *Ryūjō*, some transports with troops, and a lot of difficult-to-replace aircrews; the *Big E* was heavily damaged, but was (barely) repaired in time for the next fracas, the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands.

After the battle, *Enterprise* went to Hawaii for major repairs. The *Saratoga* was torpedoed by submarine *I-26* on August 31, and had to go to Bremerton for a three-month repair job. The carrier *Wasp*, out of action at Eastern Solomons because it was sent off for refueling, was escorting a convoy bound for Guadalcanal. She was torpedoed by submarine *I-19*, in arguably the [most successful submarine attack](#) of the War. Three torpedoes hit and sank *Wasp*, but the Japanese "Long Lance" had exceptional range, and the three misses traveled on for several miles before hitting destroyer *O'Brien* and badly damaging the battleship *North Carolina*. The battleship was never in danger of sinking, but it was sidelined for months repairing the 32x18' hole in its side, and had 5 KIA. The *O'Brien* received a patching up at Espiritu Santo, but her keel was more damaged than realized, and she broke up *en route* to more repairs. ASIDE: Years ago, the handyman in the apartment complex where I lived was a veteran of the *North Carolina*. When I found that out, I inquired about the torpedo and he had a number of interesting stories to tell about it, and other actions he was in. Some of them may even have been true....

Santa Cruz differed from Eastern Solomons in that it was not directly linked to troops/material headed to Guadalcanal. Both sides had ships in the vicinity and a desire to mix it up. Getting to the opponent's carriers "firstest with the mostest" relied heavily on carrier air searches. [NOTE: that quote is often, but **erroneously**, attributed to the notorious Klan founder, Nathan Bedford Forrest.] Both sides found each other essentially simultaneously, and launched strikes.

The work of our scouts, both land-based PBY's and carrier-based dive bombers, was outstanding. NOTE: SBD dive bombers at this phase of the War had two explicit functions, scouting and dive-bombing, and their squadron designations reflected that split: VS for scouting and VB for bombing. Their fine work, and that of the *Hornet's* attack group, make Santa Cruz worthy of recognition as Item of the Week.

First off the carriers were *Hornet's* first attack group, seven VS-8 and 9 VB-8 dive bomber, 6 Avenger torpedo planes, and 8 Wildcat escorts, with VS-8's CO, "Gus" Widhelm in overall command. Four Wildcats would stay high with the dive bombers, and four would go low with the Avengers.

The *Enterprise's* launch was not well organized. Their launching was slow, and they made no attempt to coordinate with the *Hornet's* attack. Search duties depleted the number of dive bombers available for the first strike. There were only three of them, along with seven Avengers, and eight Wildcats for escort. *Big E's* torpedo planes, with the escorting Wildcats, were hit by planes from an in-bound strike before the group was ready for combat. The VT

leader was shot down immediately, as were most of his eight planes and several of the escorts. The Japanese pilots involved were criticized for abandoning their escort mission, but they really laid some hurt on the *Enterprise's* attack. As surviving escort pilot Jimmy Flatley later declared, "Eternal vigilance, or eternal rest."

*Enterprise* then launched a second, mop-up strike of 9 dive bombers, 8 Avengers, and seven Wildcats.

Widhelm's team passed by a Japanese attack formation, led by famed dive bomber [Mamoru Seki](#). This time, neither side broke formation; Widhelm reported the inbound strike by radio (figuring correctly that radio silence was no longer necessary). That warning should have alerted the *Enterprise* attack group, but they were surprised anyway. Part of the problem was the different cruising speeds of the planes involved. The dive bombers were slowest, and to stay together, the torpedo planes had to weave to slow their rate of advance, and the fighters had to both weave and slow to the point that accelerating to combat speed would take precious seconds. Flatley's flight was moving away from the *Enterprise's* torpedo planes when the latter were struck; by the time his four had turned to weave back, the torpedo leader was already a flaming mass.

Four Japanese carriers were at Santa Cruz, the large carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, and the escort carriers *Zuiho* and *Junyō*. Widhelm's torpedo planes lost track of Gus far above, and missed the Japanese carriers completely.

But the Japanese CAP found Gus and company. A few Zeros moved in, and escorting ships used their AAA to signal Gus' location to other CAP aircraft. Widhelm tightened his formation to increase the effectiveness of their defensive fire, and led the formation in a series of jinks and weaves that kept the Japanese fighters at bay. But they were still a long way from attack position. Gus shot down one fighter, but his engine was hit, and began leaking oil badly. His plane was trailing smoke, and his engine would no doubt seize up soon, but Gus, undaunted, kept going at the front of his men.

The Japanese bravely pressed their attacks vigorously, so much so that one of the Zeros lost a wing during a high-g pull-up. Three dive bombers went down, then Gus' engine finally failed. He jettisoned his bomb and signaled his wingman to take over. Stupidly, a Zero trailed him all the way to the water, trying to shoot down an already-gone dive bomber instead of fighting off the attacking wave. And it did no good, anyway; Gus' gunner kept the Zero at bay until Gus could ditch safely. He and his gunner, George Stokely, would later be rescued – three days later.

When the dust finally settled, the *Hornet* had been sunk and the *Shokaku* had been heavily damaged, and the valiant Seki had been killed, along with the second wave leader, famed torpedo pilot [Shigeharu Murata](#). Several Japanese escorting vessels had also suffered significant damage, and plane and aircrew losses were severe. But we caused some damage to ourselves, too. One of the crippled *Hornet* torpedo planes ditched near destroyer *Porter*, which was then hit by a torpedo first thought to have come from a Japanese sub. However, it was actually from the downed plane. The impact of ditching dislodged the plane's torpedo, which

then hit the *Porter*. And wonder of wonder, given the atrocious performance of U.S. torpedoes at that time, it actually exploded, sinking the destroyer.

The *Hornet* took a real beating. Three big bombs pierced her flight deck, killing many. Another dive bomber, set afire by *Hornet's* guns, crash-dived her stack, killing seven and causing great damage (the sequence of its final dive was caught on camera). This was not a kamikaze attack; the pilot knew his plane was badly damaged and could not make it back, so he chose to crash on the *Hornet* rather than waste what little life he had left by crashing in the ocean. He wasn't the first to do this, from either side, and he certainly would not be the last. Another Japanese torpedo plane, *in extremis*, crashed into the destroyer *Smith* (DD-378), causing a major fire and 57 KIA. The plane's torpedo then exploded, causing more damage and fire. Her intrepid skipper was undaunted, and steered his burning destroyer directly into the huge wake of battleship *South Dakota*, quenching the flames. *Smith* then returned to her spot in the formation, providing AAA fire from her remaining guns.

The *Hornet* was out of action, and the *Enterprise* was badly damaged (her forward elevator was disabled, fortunately stuck in the "up" position), so Admiral Kinkaid decided to withdraw *Enterprise* lest she be lost, too. *Enterprise* recovered 57 of the 73 U.S. airplanes still aloft as she withdrew. Her flight deck quickly filled, but her LSO kept the planes coming in, until the last one snagged the first cable and was chocked in place. The rest had to ditch, with most crews being picked up by escorting ships.

The *Big E* had been hurt again. But her crew really turned to when the chips were down, all the way for Captain to Cook 3<sup>rd</sup>. In fact, Navy Cook Third Class William Pinckney would earn a Navy Cross, a very rare feat for an enlisted man, for his brave action in rescuing a crewmate during the battle (see the Didja Know? segment).

The damage was too great for the *Hornet* to be saved. The Japanese supporting forces were advancing on her position, so the order was given to sink her. The two destroyers assigned the task hit her with shells and (dud) torpedoes, then left her to the advancing Japanese. To the old-school sailors, the abandonment of the *Hornet* to the enemy was a blacker eye than the one the Navy suffered at either Pearl Harbor or Savo Island. [Remember Rochefort!]

For a detailed account of the loss of the *Hornet*, see:

<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/WarDamageReports/WarDamageReportCV8/WarDamageReportCV8.html>

There was one final indignity for the U.S. Navy. During the withdrawal, a submarine sighting caused ships to take evasive tactics, and in the process, hapless battleship *South Dakota* ran over escorting destroyer *Mahan*, causing heavy damage. *South Dakota* would be similarly anti-effective in the next big battle in Guadalcanal waters, the Naval Battle for Guadalcanal in November, but that's a story for another Item.

[Gus Widhelm](#) was awarded a [Gold Star](#) in lieu of a second [Navy Cross](#) for his actions at Santa Cruz. He was awarded his first Navy Cross for his action at Midway, as XO of Scouting Squadron 8. Like so many heroic pilots of WWII, Gus would [die in an airplane crash](#) after

surviving WWII aerial combat. Aerial gunners like George Stokely seldom get much credit, but if you are interested in more of their story, see: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2013/may/rear-seat-gunners-midway>.

Few people know much about the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands or the other battles associated with Guadalcanal. But if you are looking for an inspirational story or image, think of Gus Widhelm keeping his dying plane steady under heavy fire, trailing smoke across the sky....

Other resources for the topics in this Item include:

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Lundstrom, John B., 1994, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, ISBN1-55750-526-8

Last Edited on 28 October 2020