

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

THE BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA

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The first six months of the Pacific War did not go well for the Allies. The debacle of Pearl Harbor, and the loss of British and Dutch territory in China, the Indies, and neighboring islands, gave Japan access to a lot of vital wartime/industrial assets. But her naval advances had been stopped, at great cost, at the Coral Sea, and were reversed at Midway, in early 1942. American forces begin a march the other way, starting at Guadalcanal in August, 1942. Success there six months later endangered Japanese positions at Rabaul and northern Papua. Re-enforcements were necessary!

INTRODUCTION

Japanese sea-borne forces soon after Pearl Harbor had captured the Australian base at Rabaul, on the eastern tip of New Britain Island, which lies athwart the north end of the double chain of the Solomon Islands. Its Simpson Harbor was excellent, but ... it was/is the semi-submerged collapse caldera of an explosive, still-active, volcano. The Japanese turned it into a major military and supply base early in WWII, where it would protect the Empire's new southern flank and provide a springboard to areas farther south, toward Australia.

One such southward thrust was of particular concern for the Americans, and the Australians, who even more directly threatened. The Japanese began construction of an airstrip and supporting base at Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the lower Solomons, an unacceptable situation. Hasty plans were made, logistical problems were overcome, and the Marines invaded both islands on August 7, 1942.

The Japanese mis-planned the new base a bit, because it was at the range limit for the Zero fighter planes based at Rabaul that Japan would use to defend it. The Americans quickly got the base the Japanese had been constructing into operation, named it Henderson Field (after a [dive bomber leader](#) lost at Midway), and moved in fighter units. Six months of hard fighting followed, on land, sea, and air. Guadalcanal was finally secured in early 1942.

Meanwhile, American and Australian Army forces were fighting to protect the Australian base at Port Moresby, and were directly threatening attacks on the north side of Papua, at places like Wewak, Madang, Lae, and smaller bases at Buna, Gona, and Sanananda, as well as Rabaul and bases on New Britain. The victory at Guadalcanal would place significant pressure on all those bases as the Americans consolidated and developed their new territory. Troops and supplies at Rabaul were needed to protect them, but first they had to get to the points needed.

A map of the region under discussion might help you visualize the geography of the battlefield. Here's [one](#) from Wikimedia. Some of the places named are post-WWII, but you can see Rabaul, Lae, and the Papuan peninsula clearly. The Vitiaz Strait separates New Britain from the Huon Peninsula of northern New Guinea, and Guadalcanal lies out of the frame on the right. The [Wikipedia article](#) of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea also has a chart showing Japanese ship movements and Allied attack routes ([here](#)).

Guadalcanal lay directly on the map line dividing the responsibilities of Central Pacific command (under Nimitz) from the Southwest Pacific command (under MacArthur). The line was shifted slightly west, making Guadalcanal a Navy/Marine operation, but Rabaul and New Guinea was MacArthur's bailiwick.

THE REINFORCEMENT PLAN

Wewak was an important air base; it and the airstrip at Lae were important links in the northern Papua transportation chain. [FYI: Lae was the airstrip from which Amelia Earhart made her last-ever takeoff!] All of the Japanese holdings in northern Papua had been attacked by air a few times before, but were still in operation. Small aerial attacks were one thing, the Japanese had reason to suspect a visit by U.S. Naval Air and/or the Marines in the near future. Significant numbers of additional troops and weapons were needed at Wewak, Lae, and the surrounding area, pronto.

The first reinforcement attempt was by a convoy of five transports escorted by five destroyers, which departed Rabaul for Lae on January 5, 1942, immediately after the decision to abandon Guadalcanal was made. American codebreakers discovered the plan, and American and Australian aviation attacked the convey not long after it sailed. The weather in this part of the world is often rainy, especially in February/March. Bad weather and stout fighter defense from Rabaul provided partial protection, but two transports were badly damaged and some of the important supplies were lost. The rest of the men and material bound for Lae made it OK, but they were not enough; another supply convoy would be needed, after the convoy being prepared for Wewak was dispatched.

The Allies sent a fighter sweep, equipped with bombs, to Lae to suppress aerial support for the convoy. One P-38 flight leader, [Robert Fautot](#), scored an unusual victory. He flew the length of the Lae runway just as a Zero interceptor was in its takeoff roll, but his bomb overshot and hit in the ocean just off the end of the runway. The briefly-aloft Zero hit water column raised by the explosion and was downed. Fautot was a member of the Army's 39th Pursuit Squadron (soon-to-be-famous Charles King was a squadron-mate), initially equipped with P-39s. After Guadalcanal, the first P-38s entered the SW Pacific Theater, and the 39th got them. General Kenney offered an Air Medal to the first P-38 pilot to shoot down a Zero, and Fautot's "bombing" victory was it. Kenney pinned on the medal personally, but said, "I want you to shoot them down, not splash water on them!"

High-speed transports took the bulk of two Japanese divisions to Wewak successfully in two shifts, arriving on January 19 and on February 12. Wewak was far enough west on the northern

New Guinea coast that Allied air forces couldn't reach them as easily as they could Lae. Wewak would be a key airborne assault victim some months later, but for now, it and its new men/supplies were safe.

Attention now turned to the second Lae convoy. Eight cargo ships of various sizes (some sources say nine) was assembled at Simpson Harbor, along with an escort of eight destroyers. A large number of troops (~6,900) were ready to go, and the transports were heavily-laden with armament, explosives, fuel, and other essential supplies. Five aviation fighter groups, augmented by 18 fighters from carrier *IJN Zuiho*, were assigned to fly cover relays from Rabaul, about 100 fighter planes overall.

Bad weather had helped the first Lae convey, but American forces were expanding rapidly and our reconnaissance assets covered essentially the entire route the convoy would take, so was even more important this time to sail in bad weather. The convoy would get to Lae safely only if it was under clouds all the way; if American patrols could see the convoy, it would be difficult to defend. Japanese planners knew the risks, but the need was great, and the second convoy left Simpson Harbor on February 28, in stormy weather the meteorologists hoped would last three days.

It didn't.

THE BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA

Lt.Gen. George Kenney was the head of all Allied Air Forces in the Southwest Pacific, reporting directly to MacArthur. American codebreakers had detected signs of the Wewak and both Lae convoys. Kenney ordered aerial reconnaissance of Simpson Harbor on a regular basis starting in mid-January. On February 14, there were 79 ships there, 45 of them cargo ships. Hmm...

On February 16, the codebreakers decrypted a message revealing that supply convoys were going to be heading to Wewak, Madang, and Lae; that the Lae convey was expected to arrive there on March 5; and the number of troops involved.

The situation in New Guinea was such that any significant addition in men and resources would make things very difficult for the Army. The convoy and its cargo absolutely could not be allowed to land on New Guinea, especially Papua. NOTE: This part of Papua at the time was essentially roadless, dense jungle, with only a few foot trails connecting points of small interest. Troop movements had to be by ship, although the Japanese did try to attack Port Moresby from bases on the north coast over a 100-mile jungle track over the Owen Stanley Mountains, which form New Guinea's "spine." The toughness level of the Japanese soldier was legendary, but even they couldn't hack the Kokoda Track!

General Kenney had a number of resources at his disposal to stop the convoy. He had a variety of bomber squadrons, comprising A-20s, B-25s, P-40s, P-38s, and Beaufighters, among other types. The total number of planes in the 5th AF available were 54 fighters, 34 light bombers, 41 medium bombers, and 39 heavy bombers.

General Kenney also had another asset, Maj. Paul Gunn, nicknamed "Pappy" because he was slightly older than the other men. He was a brilliant innovator, and modified the B-25 medium

bombers in one of the squadrons by pulling out the bombardier's position from the nose, and replacing it with a quartet of .50 cal. machine guns. He'd had success earlier with making the same change for A-20s, but the B-25 was a trickier modification. This battle would be its acid test. He hung a pod of two .50s on each side of the forward fuselage. Adding in the twin .50s in the top turret, a B-25 so equipped became an absolutely destructive strafing. Their 10 .50s could completely tear apart small ships, sink ships as large as a destroyer, and strafe the topsides of larger ships, all with devastating effectiveness. The modified ships could still carry bombs, since they were going to be released by the pilot at low altitudes and skip to the target. [For more on Gunn and skipping bombs, see [here](#).]

DAY ZERO (SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1943)

The Lae convoy ships left Simpson Harbor just before midnight on February 28. They assembled outside the harbor's mouth, arranged themselves in the convoy formation selected, and got under way just after midnight. I'm reluctant to call this "Day 1." Their cruising speed was a paltry 7 knots. There is considerable difference of opinion of the size of the cargo ships involved; let's just say three were large, three were medium, and one was small. The small one was laden with drums of avgas and other fuels.

DAY ONE (MONDAY, MARCH 1)

Every sailor in the Lae convoy knew that they were quite vulnerable to air attack, but the continued heavy cloud cover and the lack of attack in the wee hours of the morning this day gave many in the convoy a more positive outlook on their impending fate than they had at departure.

The January convoy had stayed very close to shore, which made it easier to provide air cover, but that route was slower and allowed simultaneous aerial attacks on both the convoy and the Japanese fields supplying cover. This time, the convoy stayed well away from the north coast of New Britain, heading for the northern end of the Vitiav Strait and their turn. Mission planners also thought that the outer route might be somewhat of distraction to potential reconnaissance aircraft because it would be the route a convoy going to Madang, farther up the New Guinea coast, would use.

The weather was really helping the convoy at first. But the Allies knew that the convoy would be coming soon, and patrolled vigorously. Everything was fine until about 3 PM local time. The cloud cover had thinned out considerably, and the convoy was spotted by a patrolling B-24.

Eight B-17s were immediately sent to the area of the sighting, but the spotty clouds were now too heavy again. The ships were safe for another night, but the Allies knew the location at 3 PM, knew their route, and knew their rate of advance. The math for interception on the morrow was elementary. And both sides knew it.

DAY TWO (TUESDAY, MARCH 2)

General Kenney had planned the attack plan on the convoy well. At dawn, he sent six A-20 attack aircraft to Lae to damage the strip and shoot up any planes assembling there to support the convoy. He also sent out a series of patrol bombers to confirm the convoy's exact location, which was discovered by 10 AM. Twenty-eight B-17s were dispatched and attacked the convoy. They claimed three ships were sunk. The leader's group of three B-17s laid a pattern of bombs on one cargo ship that blasted its hull and detonated its cargo of 2000 cubic-meters of munitions. A series of bomber attacks followed the rest of the day. The final tally: one large freighter sunk and two cargo ships damaged. Two of the escorting destroyers manage to salvage two mountain guns from the sinking cargo ship (quite a feat under the circumstances) and rescue ~950 soldiers and crew (other reports vary, including [one](#) claiming 820). The two destroyers raced ahead to Lae at flank speed, dropped off the soldiers, and managed to return to the convoy by dawn. Those soldiers might be wet, and few would survive more than a few more months, but they were the lucky ones in the convoy.

An attack over the convoy developed in the evening, with 11 B-17s, but only minor damage was done to one of the transports. PBY flying boats spent the night tracking the convoy as it crawled toward Lae. We'd know exactly where they were on the next morning, and a lot of Allied fighters were chomping at the bit to get at them as soon as possible on Day 3.

DAY THREE (WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3)

Wednesday dawned rainy and sullen. A group of Beaufighters went out anyway at first light from the Australian base at Milne Bay, but only two could find the convoy through the clouds. Once the convoy rounded the Huon peninsula, exiting the Vitiaz Strait, the weather conditions improved dramatically.

The follow-up convoy strike comprised 90 aircraft of all types, launched from Port Moresby, and another 22 A-20s was sent from there to attack the base at Lae again, in order to suppress any convoy support they might be able to muster. Additional small suppressive attacks would continue throughout the day.

The Allied planes began arriving at the convoy mid-morning. First to attack were a group of B-17s, bombing from medium altitude. They didn't hit any ships, but they did force the convoy formation to shatter, making attacks on individual ships easier and safer. Covering Zero fighters attacked them, but were largely driven off by P-38s flying escort. One B-17 was lost, and some of our pilots were enraged to see some of the Zero pilots strafing our guys in their parachutes. Three P-38s, led by the redoubtable water-splasher Bob Faurot, saw that had happened and aggressively went after the strafing Zeros and likely managed to down them, but all three P-38s were shot down by other Zeros.

Next to attack were the conventional B-25s, also bombing from medium altitude. They attracted the ship AA gunners' attention, leaving the low-level skip bomber/strafer aircraft relatively unmolested. Big Mistake!

The first low-level attack was made by a group of 13 Beaufighters. The Japanese had seen Beaufighters carry torpedoes, so they turned toward/away to comb any tracks. The Beaufighters strafed them from stem to stern (the were armed with four 20 mm cannons and

six wing-mounted .303 machine guns). Two groups of B-25 strafers came in immediately thereafter. The attacks were at different altitudes from different directions against wildly-maneuvering ships, so who sank what has never been determined with full accuracy. Regardless, ships began sinking after this blistering attack. A cargo ship and a defending destroyer were sunk early on. Another Japanese destroyer collided with a cargo ship during their attempts to evade the bombing and strafing; both would later be sunk. The little avgas carrier took a few bullets and blew up, shooting a dramatic smoke ring into the air as its pyre. One of the attacking Beaufighters was piloted by a colorful guy named “Torchy” Uren. Famed combat photographer [Damien Parer](#) was aboard, standing behind the pilot seats with a movie camera. His film of the attack confirmed how badly the convoy was damaged (see link in References). Brave Parer would be killed later in the War while filming the combat action on Peleliu.

By afternoon, all seven of the remaining transports had been bombed and strafed, and were either sunk or were afire, sinking. Three of the eight defending destroyers had sunk outright or were so damaged that they would sink soon. Four destroyers rescued as many downed sailors as possible (~2,700 of 6,900 embarked) and raced them back to Rabaul (taking them on to Lae under the circumstances would have been suicide). The final destroyer would be bombed and sunk on the morning of Day 4 as it attempted to rescue the survivors of its fellow unit mate. Every cargo ship in the convoy was sunk or sinking. Of the eight destroyers dispatched with the convoy, four were sunk and four survived. Only the fabulously-lucky destroyer, *IJN Yukikaze*, survived the battle unscathed (see more about *Yukikaze* in the Didja Know? section below).

Rabaul was also a submarine base, and two subs were sent out to rescue survivors, too. They were able to pick up ~224 soldiers and sailors, and return them to Rabaul. [WWII submarines, especially those of Japan, were notoriously-crowded under routine conditions; it boggles the mind to think of conditions prevailing with over 100 rescued sailors aboard!] A number of other survivors managed to reach the coast of New Guinea via life boats, but most of them were out of further action, and many were killed by the natives.

NIGHT TIME

A lot of Japanese soldiers remained in the water or in lifeboats of various sizes on the night of March 3-4. They were close enough to friendly territory to be rescued and returned to combat status. The whole point of attacking the convoy in the first place was to prevent soldiers and material from reenforcing the Japanese forces in northern New Guinea.

Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, the bombing and strafing of Darwin, the banzai charges on Guadalcanal, and the witnessing of Americans being gunned down in their parachutes had set a gruesome tone to the conflict so far, and now the whirlwind was coming. There was no way anyone from lowest seaman to General Kenney was going to let any survivors reach shore. A number of PT boats were sent out at night to shoot as many survivors in the water as possible. They were quite effective at their task. They even delivered the *coup de gras* against the hulk of the *Oigawa Maru*, one of the cargo ships of the convoy.

Torchy Uren led a flight of Beaufighters on a survivor mop-up mission on March 4, one of many such. When returning to base, an observer on his plane saw a person in a small yellow life raft, likely Bob Faurot or one of his flight. The plane's internal intercom was out, and by the time the observer could get to the pilot, they were too far from the life raft to accurately report its position. The pilot in the raft, if that who it was, was never recovered.

Australian patrols on nearby Goodenough Island, where many convoy survivors reached, killed 72 and captured 42 survivors. One patrol surprised the crew of a lifeboat as it landed. In it they found a document containing a complete roster of all Japanese naval units and their officers, an amazing intelligence coup.

The boundary between Allied and Japanese forces soon moved up the coast of New Guinea and beyond. Guadalcanal, the rest of the Solomon Islands soon became the rear area, either by-passed or serving as support bases for other advances. Rabaul was by-passed, to "wither on the vine." Its large number of supplies, soldiers, sailors, and skilled military support specialists remained impotently in place until War's end.

SUMMARY

The Allies dropped a total of 261 500-pound bombs and 53 1,000-pound bombs on the Bismarck Sea convoy. Three fighters were lost in combat, along with one B-17; an additional fighter and bomber were operational losses. The Allies had a total of 13 KIA, 10 of those in combat, and a total of 8 WIA.

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea cost the Japanese heavily: Eight cargo ships of various sizes and almost all their cargo were sunk, four destroyers sunk and three heavily damaged, and a lot of planes and pilots were shot down. Only ~1,200 soldiers of the 6,900 dispatched made it to Lae, without most of their equipment, and another ~2,700 were saved and returned to Rabaul, also without most of their equipment. About 3,000 soldiers were lost, along with many of the crewmen of the sunken ships.

General MacArthur was ecstatic and the results of the battle, but true to form, he insisted on taking the combat reports at face value, in spite of the being a lot of confusion and double-counting in the melee. He ballyhooed the exaggerated numbers widely, insisting that 12 cargo ships, three cruisers, and seven destroyers were sunk, and that almost 13,000 soldiers had been killed. His intelligence officers knew better; their codebreaking had pretty much revealed the Japanese order of battle, including the fact that only 16 ships were in the convoy and only 6,900 soldiers had been embarked. Their protestations to him about the overestimates not only fell on deaf ears, MacArthur threatened to court martial any deviation from his party line.

WHY THE BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA WAS IMPORTANT

The actual numbers were amazingly good without embellishment, and the damage to Allied forces was extremely low. The Japanese reinforcement convoy was shattered; their losses in this battle were grossly disproportionate to those of the Americans.

Aircraft used tactically was still a relatively new concept at this time. There had been a lot of debate over the value of aircraft in attacking defended ships prior to the War, and proof-in-combat of the effectiveness of the airplane against ships had been building since Pearl Harbor. But hitting ships at anchor was one thing, stopping an escorted convoy was another. Of course, the great carrier battles at Coral Sea and Midway demonstrated the value of the airplane against ships, since both were fought entirely by air – the ships involved never got close enough to see each other in either battle (except perhaps in mopping up, like the sub attack that sank the damaged *Yorktown*).

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea demonstrated once and for all how tactical air could be used to support ground operations most effectively!

CODA

A number of different Navies around the world have a naming scheme for warships. The “kaze” (“Wind”) class of Japanese destroyers were an example. In the American Navy, destroyers were usually named after famous naval personnel, cruisers were named after larger cities, and battleships were named after States. When the aircraft carrier came into service, the U.S. started naming them after famous past military victories (*e.g. Lexington* and *Yorktown*), then started using names like “Ranger,” “Hornet,” and “Wasp.” As the Navy expanded and created a class of smaller “escort” carriers whose mission was to provide support for a larger fleet effort and/or attacks ashore, they began getting the names of smaller battles (*e.g. Cowpens*).

Fifty escort carriers of the [Casablanca class](#) were built during the War, so it should come as no surprise that one of them was named [USS Bismarck Sea](#) (CVE-95), commissioned on May 20, 1944 (pictures [here](#)). The *Bismarck Sea* supported the Philippines campaign and the landings off Iwo Jima.

The Japanese gained a measure of revenge for the Bismarck Sea convoy debacle on February 21, 1945, when two bomb-laden kamikaze aircraft hit and sank CVE-95, killing 318 crewmen. The [USS Bismarck Sea](#) was the last American aircraft carrier sunk in WWII.

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Famed Australian combat photographer Damien Parer was aboard a Beaufighter piloted by "Torchy" Uren, and made a movie of the attack. The Australian Department of information turned it into a newsreel-type movie they named, "Bismarck Convoy Smashed." It's now on YouTube, at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBpmflvJkfk&ab_channel=FutureofTomorrow.

Pictures and info about the *USS Bismarck Sea* (CVE-95):

<http://www.navsource.org/archives/03/095.htm>

DIDJA KNOW?

The Japanese destroyer, *IJN Yukikaze* (the name means "Snowy Wind") had to be the luckiest ship in WWII. It was the only one of the large "Wind" class of destroyers (end in "kaze") to survive the War, and was completely intact at War's end.

Yukikaze survived the battles of Midway, Santa Cruz, Leyte Gulf, and the Philippine Sea. It also made numerous "Tokyo Express" runs in the Solomons, all without damage. It was also one of the four escorting destroyers of the super-carrier *IJN Shinano* when it was sunk by the submarine *USS Archer-Fish*, and it also survived escorting the super-battleship *IJN Yamato* when it was chased down and sunk. Some Japanese considered *Yukikaze* miraculously-lucky, others opined *Yukikaze* was incredibly-unlucky, because so many ship it had escorted had been sunk with major casualties.

After the War, the *Yukikaze* was given to the Republic of China as a war reparation, and, after a major re-fit, it served in the ROC Navy, with the name *Tan Yang*. In the final stages of the Chinese Civil War, it was the *Tan Yang* that carried Chaing Kai-shek to Taiwan. Its fate was sealed by a typhoon in 1970, which so badly damaged it that it was finally scrapped.

The *Yukikaze's* fame was so great in Japan that a number of items were salvaged from her wreck for museum display, including its rudder and one of its anchors.

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