

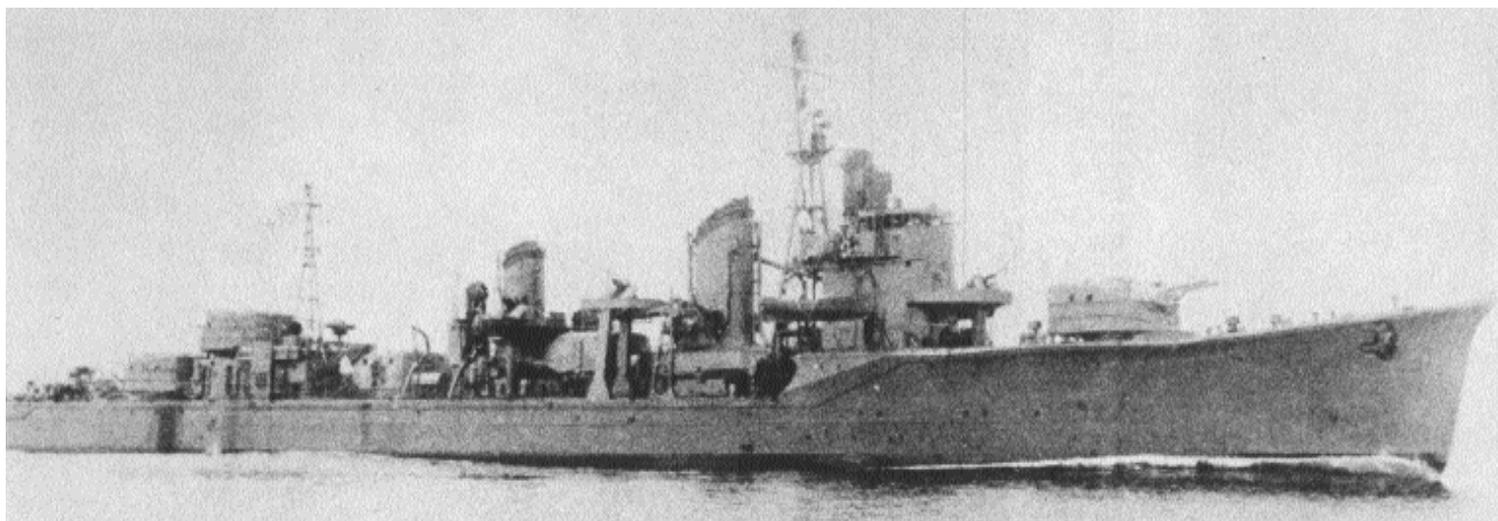
# TAC NEWS

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## Savo Island Revisited



**T**he naval battle of Savo Island, 9 August 1942, was a battle of many "firsts." Foremost among them, it was the U. S. Navy's first surface fight with the Japanese Navy in World War Two. Indeed, it was the U. S. Navy's first major surface action since Santiago Bay in 1898, forty-two years earlier. On that occasion, the blockaded Spanish squadron under Admiral Cervera sortied in a desperate dash for the sea. The other important "first" was that the naval Battle of Savo Island was the first night encounter between the two Pacific titans. If Yamamoto's famous analogy can be used, that America was a "Sleeping Giant," then the night action of 9 August was a wake up call only slightly less violent than that sounded at Pearl Harbor.

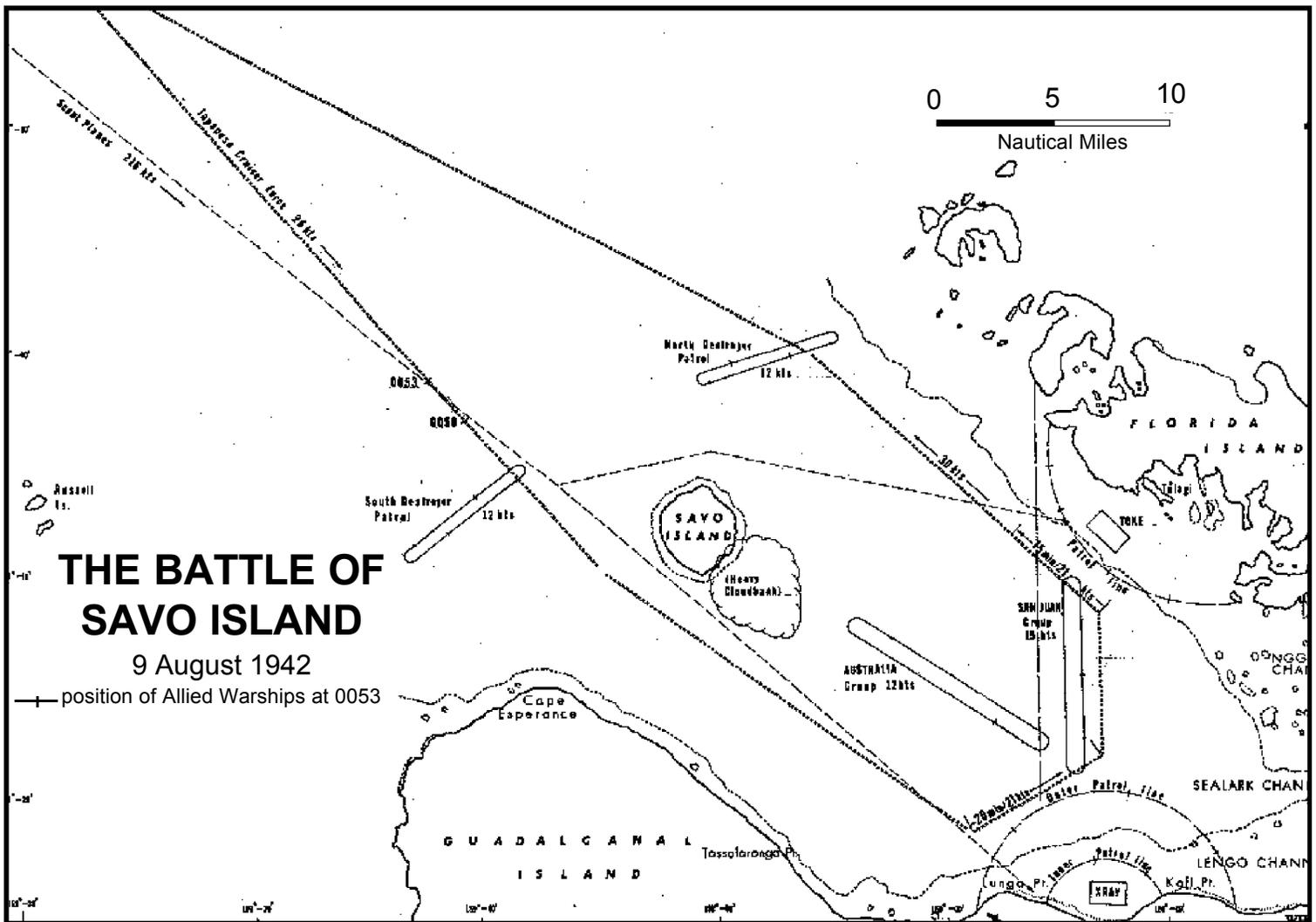
### Strategic Background

During 1942, in executing their planned strategy, the Japanese wanted to isolate Australia by capturing islands to the north and northeast. Part of this plan called for the capture of Port Moresby in New Guinea as a base to defend their new territory. The airstrip there was also to launch air attacks on Australia. The plan was upset, however, when the invasion was thwarted by the Japanese failure to win the Battle of Coral Sea on 8 May 1942. Though certainly not a clear Allied victory, the strategic initiative, controlled by Tokyo from their commencement of hostilities, was ceded from the aggressors.

The Japanese had captured Tulagi, a small island near Guadalcanal in the

Solomons, on 3 May for use as a seaplane base. This move was preparatory to the Port Moresby offensive. Following that operations cancellation, the strategic import of Guadalcanal became apparent. Construction of an air base on Guadalcanal commenced during July, to be completed by 15 August.

After the battle of Midway, 4-6 June, the Allies went on the offensive and planned an attack on the Solomons, in addition to other objectives. Landings on Guadalcanal and Tulagi, code named Operation Watchtower, took place on 7 August. The Japanese did not detect the Allied Expeditionary Force because poor weather had grounded their reconnaissance planes.



# THE BATTLE OF SAVO ISLAND

9 August 1942

— position of Allied Warships at 0053

CA Kako (IJN32)

Japanese reaction to the Allied invasion was immediate. On the night of 8 August, a hastily gathered group of Japanese warships approached Savo Island, which divides the entrance to Savo Sound off Guadalcanal Island. The objective of the Japanese Cruiser Force was to destroy the U.S. transports anchored at Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

## The Battle

The Japanese Cruiser Force had avoided positive identification during their daylight approach to Guadalcanal. They therefore had the

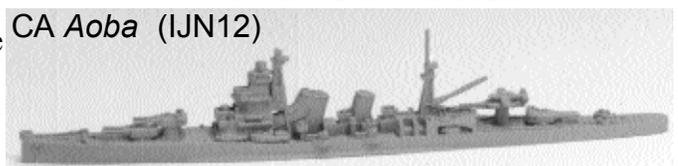
advantage of surprise and initiative. The seven cruisers and one old destroyer commanded by Vice Admiral Mikawa were opposed by sixteen major Allied warships patrolling Savo Sound. Additionally, there were a number of destroyers and similar ships screening the transports in their anchorages.

The Allied ships at Guadalcanal were disposed to meet a possible enemy attack but due to faulty air reconnaissance and communications procedures, they

received no specific warning of an impending attack. To patrol as many approach lanes as possible, the Allied command had divided the cruisers into three groups. In the darkness, each lost track of the exact positions of one another. The Japanese attack was undetected.

The lead ship, closest to the enemy, was CA34, the *Astoria*. In the forward gun director, the officer at the sights peered forward into the inky darkness. He spotted ships, counted them, and reported to the bridge. Permission to open fire was denied. The bridge was sure that the ships were one of the other Allied

CA Aoba (IJN12)





squadrons. Back at the sights, the officer could now more clearly see the oncoming ships, and they were clearly Japanese. They were so close that the outlines of the pagoda bridges was clearly visible. He again requested permission to fire the 8" main battery, and again it was denied. Finally, with tears streaming down his face, the young officer jerked back the two levers, firing the forward battery of six 8" guns. All hell broke loose. The bridge screamed "Cease Fire...Cease Fire" through the intercom. And every gun on every Japanese ship that could bear, fired in unison. When the salvo struck, it not only pierced the *Astoria* in several places, but hit a

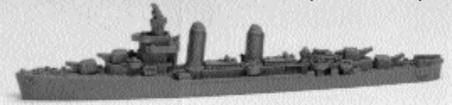
much more explosive target. Amidships, on each of the cruisers two catapults, sat a fully loaded sea-plane. Both went up instantly, engulfing the waist of the cruiser in burning aviation petrol.

This account was, with only minor variations, repeated on the other ships in the Allied fleet. The Japanese had overwhelming superiority, due primarily to surprise and the initiative that came with it. The Japanese had specifically trained in night operations, the Allies were not so well prepared. In the ensuing battle, the Allies suffered dearly at the hands of the Japanese. Four cruisers, including the *Astoria* were lost and several ships damaged. Personnel casualties for the U. S. Navy totaled more than 1,700 killed and wounded.

### Wargaming Savo Island

At Savo Island, the Allied warships were divided into three widely separated groups, each possessing less

DD *Buchanan* (USN16)



fighting strength than Mikawa's force. This scenario suggests that a different arrangement of the Allied warships in Savo Sound on the evening of 8 August 1942 might have saved the Allies such a galling defeat. The Allied warships are concentrated in one column of six heavy cruisers and four destroyers, This formation, suggested by the Naval War College analysis, gives the Allies these strength factors:

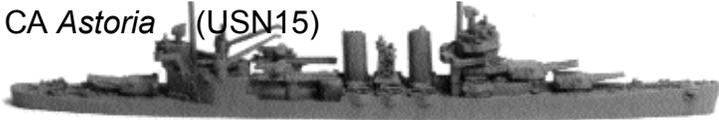
- \* A gunfire advantage with possible crossing of the "T".
- \* A possibility of avoiding enemy torpedoes by turns of approximately ninety degrees left or right to comb torpedo tracks.
- \* A reduction of confusion by creating a less complex formation for the American and Australian ships, which were maneuvering together for the first time
- \* A maximum concentration in mini-

## Japanese Fleet

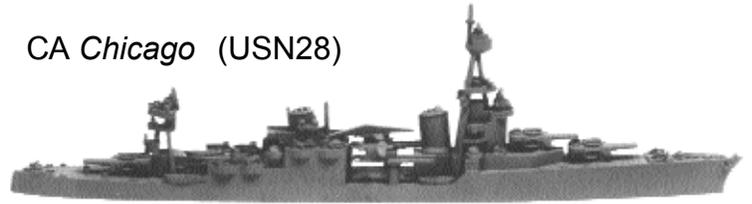
(VAdm Mikawa)

CHOKAI (IJN11)  
 AOBA (IJN12)  
 KAKO (IJN32)  
 KINUGASA (IJN12)  
 FURUTAKA (IJN32)  
 TENRYU (IJN23)  
 YUBARI  
 YUNAGI (IJN21).

CA Astoria (USN15)



CA Chicago (USN28)



## Allied Fleet

(RAdm Crutchley)

### AUSTRALIA Group:

Van - BUCHANAN (USN16)  
 MONSSEN (USN16)  
 Center - AUSTRALIA (UKN33)  
 CANBERRA (UKN33)  
 VINCENNES (USN15)  
 QUINCY (USN15)  
 CHICAGO (USN28)  
 ASTORIA (USN15)  
 Rear - HULL (USN50)  
 WILSON (USN10)

### SAN JUAN Group:

Van - SELFRIDGE (USN22)  
 HELM (USN10)  
 DEWEY (USN50)  
 Center - SAN JUAN (USN6)  
 HOBART (UKN7)  
 Rear - HENLEY (USN10)  
 MUGFORD (USN10)

### Radar Pickets:

North Destroyer Patrol -  
 RALPH TALBOT (USN10)  
 PATTERSON (USN10)  
 South Destroyer Patrol -  
 BLUE (USN10)  
 BAGLEY (USN10).

CL San Juan (USN6)



DD Bagley (USN10)



...mum time could be brought against enemy surface forces.

*by William H. Croft*

Morison, Samuel E. The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942 February 1943. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989.

Warner, Denis and Peggy, with Sadao Seno. Disaster In The Pacific: New Light On The Battle Of Savo Island. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992.

*The editor wishes to thank a close friend, who wishes to remain anonymous, for his personal recollections of the events in the forward gun director of the Astoria. He was there.*

## Recommended Reading

Bates, Richard W. and Walter D. Innis. The Battle of Savo Island, August 9th, 1942-Strategical and Tactical Analysis. Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1950.

Loxton, Bruce and Chris Coulthard-Clark. The Shame of Savo: Anatomy of a naval disaster. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994.

