The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 382
"Turning Point"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Imperial Army had twice attempted to recapture Henderson Field from the Americans, and twice had been driven back with heavy casualties. The first attempt had been made with a force of a thousand, the second time with a force of six thousand.

Now the Army was prepared to send nearly 17,000 additional soldiers, to win at last the battle for Guadalcanal, the once-obscure island that had become the main battlefront of the Pacific theater.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 382. Turning Point.

When we last looked at the situation in the Pacific Theater, General Hyakutake Harukichi, commander of the Japanese 17th Army, the man responsible for Imperial Army operations in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, had decided he'd had enough of the Navy's timid "Rat Transportation" methods that brought Japanese reinforcements and supplies to Guadalcanal in drips and drabs.

The Army had promised the Emperor it would retake Guadalcanal, and General Hyakutake was going to do it right. No more messing around. A full infantry division, the 2nd Division, and more, would be sent to the island, with equipment and supplies and heavy weapons, including artillery guns and tanks. These are the sorts of things that can only be carried on transport ships. The general would personally lead the reinforcements to the island and direct the battle, bringing 17th Army headquarters with him.

The Navy commander at Rabaul told him this would be impossible. The American Navy and the planes based at Henderson Field made the waters of the eastern Solomon Islands too dangerous. Hyakutake told him that if the Navy refused to escort him and his soldiers to the island, then they would go by themselves, in unarmed, unescorted transport ships.

One of Hyakutake's staff took a plane to Truk and met with the commander of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Yamamoto, in a last-ditch effort to persuade the Navy. His vivid description of the suffering of Japanese soldiers on Guadalcanal moved Yamamoto to tears. Then he relayed the general's threat to proceed without naval escort, if necessary. Yamamoto promised the Navy would provide escort for Hyakutake's convoy. Yamamoto had only one request to make in return: that the general ride to Guadalcanal aboard a Navy destroyer, not a transport. His command skills would be needed on the island, and Yamamoto would lose face if anything happened to him.

Having promised the Army his support, Yamamoto set to work developing a plan for how the Navy would assist the Army, and not only by landing thousands more soldiers on the island. Yamamoto would send a couple big battleships, which would bombard Henderson Field the night before the landing and neutralize the Cactus Air Force.

Yamamoto had other thoughts in mind, beyond the recapture of Guadalcanal. He also viewed this operation as yet another opportunity to set a trap for the US Navy. The Americans had only one operational aircraft carrier, USS *Hornet*, which was lurking somewhere in the waters near the Solomon Islands. As before, the plan would be to tempt the Americans into attacking a smaller force, with a much larger force behind it and ready to ambush.

The staff of the 17th Army also queried the Kwantung Army about the possibility of transferring some of its planes to the Solomons for the Guadalcanal campaign, which would take some of the burden off the Navy's carrier air crews. The proposal was rejected. The Kwantung Army was afraid that if they gave up their air cover, it would tempt the Soviet Union into attacking Manchukuo.

The Japanese believed there were 10,000 Allied soldiers on Guadalcanal. The actual number was 19,000, nearly double that. Following the September Japanese attempt to take Henderson Field, things had gotten quiet. That's because of the 5,000 Japanese soldiers already on the island, fewer than half of them were combat ready. Most were sick from tropical diseases and/or malnutrition.

The US Marines took advantage of the lull to build up their defenses. By late September, they had a complete perimeter defense, bristling with machine gun emplacements and fronted with double lines of barbed wire. This defense perimeter began at the north shore of the island, ran around Henderson Field, and back to the shore again.

After the loss of the carrier USS *Wasp* in August, the US Navy was keeping clear of Guadalcanal waters. The Americans borrowed a leaf from the Japanese strategy manual and began running supplies to the island on fast destroyers, but in daylight, when the Cactus Air Force could cover them. Toward the end of September, the Navy was feeling confident enough to run more cargo convoys.

Their Marine commander on the island, General Vandegrift, felt confident enough to send a couple of probing attacks into Japanese-held jungle, and learned that the Japanese still fought like demons, which led him too to overestimate the size of the enemy force. He called for more reinforcements; the Navy told him, to the contrary, it was time for him to go on the offensive.

Vandegrift bristled at this. In his mind, it was obvious the lull in ground combat merely meant the Japanese were reinforcing. The Americans needed to do the same.

Chester Nimitz came to Guadalcanal personally to meet with Vandegrift and consider his position. Vandegrift told him that the Marines' most important job was to guard that airfield and complained that the Navy was too cautious about bringing its ships in to assist. The meeting with Nimitz must have encouraged him; a few days later, on October 9, the Marines probed inland to the west, then circled north to the beach, surrounding some 700 Japanese defenders, who fought to the last. The Marines lost about 60.

That same night, Japanese transports brought General Hyakutake and the 17th Army headquarters to Guadalcanal, along with reinforcements and supplies. They were astonished at the condition of the Japanese already on the island: torn, dirty clothing barely recognizable as Japanese Army uniforms covered bodies bereft of flesh. Only skin and bone remained. They volunteered to unload the bags of rice; by dawn, most of them had disappeared, and so had the rice. Hyakutake was so moved by their desperation that he declined to take any disciplinary action. He signaled Rabaul that the situation on Guadalcanal was worse than thought; more soldiers and supplies were needed at once.

The Marine raid convinced the Japanese commanders that a direct offensive, east along the shore toward the Allied positions, would be dangerous. Once again, they developed a plan to move their units inland and circle around to the south of Henderson Field and attack from there. The heavy artillery of the 17th Army would fire on the Americans from their position to the west as a diversion.

Japanese engineers facilitated this plan by building a road through the jungle, using only hand tools, that circled around the airfield to the south. They called it the Maruyama Trail, after the commander of the 2nd Division.

The night of October 11, the heavy artillery arrived, along with more soldiers and supplies and a separate force of three heavy cruisers and two destroyers assigned to bombard Henderson Field.

Coincidentally, Admiral Robert Ghormley had sent out his own convoy, bound for Guadalcanal, carrying a regiment of the Americal Division, stationed in New Caledonia. The name is a shortened form of American New Caledonian Division. The convoy was scheduled to unload at Guadalcanal on the 13th. Its escort force, consisting of four cruisers and five destroyers reached the waters off Guadalcanal at midnight and picked up the approaching Japanese cruisers on radar.

The Japanese cruisers were just approaching the island and preparing to begin their bombardment, and were caught by surprise. The Japanese had become accustomed to Admiral Ghormley's policy of keeping American ships at a safe distance.

The situation gave the American commander the opportunity to circle in front of the approaching line of Japanese ships and cross the T, which you'll recall gives the attacker a great advantage. They can fire all their guns at the enemy, while the enemy can only fire their forward guns in reply.

The Americans sank one Japanese heavy cruiser and badly damaged another, and sank a destroyer. The Japanese force abandoned the attack on Henderson Field and retreated. After daylight the following morning, bombers from Henderson Field sank two more Japanese destroyers. The American side lost one destroyer sunk and two cruisers and a destroyer damaged.

History knows this encounter as the Battle of Cape Esperance. The Americans had been able to force the Japanese to withdraw, which was good for morale, especially since it was a nighttime engagement, the first time the US Navy had won a battle with the Japanese at night. On the other hand, the Japanese transports had been able to unload their soldiers and cargo on Guadalcanal, and despite this setback, they forged ahead with their plan to resupply and reinforce their soldiers on the island and then begin a third, much larger, offensive to take the airfield.

The next day, the American convoy arrived, bringing 2800 soldiers of the Americal division, twelve light artillery guns, trucks, 16 Bren Carriers, British-built light armored vehicles armed with machine guns, and tons of ammunition and supplies. The Americans now had 23,000 defending Henderson Field and were swimming in supplies, at least by Japanese standards.

But not all was well. That day two waves of Japanese bombers from Rabaul pounded Henderson Field, and afterward Hyakutake's heavy artillery began shelling the runway. And the Japanese were just getting started. That night, another Imperial Navy bombardment force arrived; this time the Japanese weren't messing around. The bombardment force included two full battleships, *Kongo* and *Haruna*.

Now, longtime listeners know I've been talking up the importance of the battleship since the early days of the podcast. They were dreaded weapons. I told you that in the early decades of the twentieth century, the number of battleships a nation had in its navy could serve as a proxy for the total military strength of that nation. With the Second World War, this is beginning to change. But don't count the battleship out just yet. Pay attention, because you are about to see what these ships are capable of and why they were so feared.

Kongo and *Haruna* were armed with 36cm guns. They began firing on Henderson Field from a range of 17,000 yards. That's about 15 kilometers or eleven miles. They first shots were incendiary shells, fired just after midnight. Soon the flames from Henderson Field were visible from the decks of the battleships. Then they switched to fragmentation shells, which are meant

for targets on land. For the next hour, the helpless Marines on the island hid in foxholes or took shelter wherever they could find it as the Japanese shells pounded the airfield, shaking the very earth, their blasts echoed in the explosions of stockpiled ammunition. Fuel tanks burst into flame.

After half an hour, the bombardment stopped. The Marines had just enough time to stand up, dust themselves off, and leave their shelter when it started again. The two Japanese battleships had turned about and were now firing port. It was only after *Kongo* and *Haruna* ran out of shells that the mighty ships ran their engines up to full speed and headed back to Truk.

Dawn broke over a ravaged airfield. The runways were pockmarked; pieces of cloth and equipment were scattered everywhere. Forty-one Americans were killed, including six pilots, and more than half of the Cactus Air Force planes had been destroyed, as was most of the stockpiled aviation fuel.

The Americans knew that a large Japanese convoy was on the way. They didn't know it carried 4,500 Japanese soldiers, twelve heavy artillery guns, and fourteen light tanks.

At Henderson Field, they managed to clear a runway in a matter of hours and collect enough fuel from the tanks of the damaged planes to get what was left of the Cactus Air Force fueled and airborne. Replacement aircraft and tanks of aviation fuel were flown in from the New Hebrides. A few planes were able to attack the approaching Japanese convoy, but did no significant damage.

That night, as the Japanese transports unloaded, two heavy cruisers bombarded Henderson Field again. At dawn, three of the transports were empty and already on their way back to Rabaul. The other three were still unloading when the Cactus Air Force attacked at first daylight. The three ships were set on fire and their crews forced to run them aground. Most of the fuel and ammunition aboard was consumed by the flames, but the soldiers and equipment reached the beach safely.

The Japanese now had more than 20,000 soldiers on Guadalcanal, though only about 15,000 were combat ready, and they had that heavy artillery. The Americans had about 23,000 soldiers on the island, but General Vandegrift estimated that only about 11,000 of them were healthy enough to fight.

Vandergrift radioed his superiors and pleaded for two things: first, that the US Navy assume control over the waters around Guadalcanal and keep the Japanese Navy at bay, and second, at least one division's worth of reinforcements. Only then, he said, could he consider offensive action against the Japanese on the island.

Admiral Nimitz decided that Admiral Ghormley had been too timid in his approach and replaced him with Admiral Halsey. When Halsey got his orders, he exclaimed, "This is the hottest potato they ever handed me." He began by ordering General Vandergrift to meet with him on New

Caledonia to discuss the situation. When they met, Vandegrift told him the Marines were worn out after two months of combat, bombings, bombardments, disease, and inadequate rations.

Halsey asked Vandegrift, “Are we going to evacuate or hold?”

Vandegrift told him his Marines could hold their position, but they were going to need more support than they’d been getting. More supplies, more reinforcements, and more air support. Naval officers protested to Halsey that they were doing all they could, given the aggressiveness of the Japanese and the lack of safe harbor in the Solomons.

On the Japanese side, they were preparing their third, and largest, assault on Henderson Field. As before, they would not advance along the coast, where American defenses were too strong. When the time came, the 17th Army’s units on the coast would attack the Americans at their strongest point, but this attack would be a diversion. The 2nd Division would take the Maruyama Trail and circle around to the south and east. Once the diversionary attack in the west sufficiently distracted the enemy, the 2nd Division would attack the American position at multiple points along their southern and eastern defenses. General Hyakutake set the date of October 21 for the attack.

General Maruyama led units of his division along the Trail named for him. The passage was easy enough on the first day, but then the rains began. The Trail narrowed, so that the Japanese had to advance single file, Maruyama in the lead. The trail led them into steep mountains, where they had to scramble up cliff faces.

In addition to their own packs, each soldier carried a load of ammunition or equipment, such as a piece of a machine gun or an artillery piece. As the demands of the Trail exhausted the soldiers, one by one they were forced to abandon the equipment they’d been assigned to carry in the jungle.

The difficulty in traversing the rugged terrain of Guadalcanal made it clear to Maruyama that his soldiers could not be in position by the scheduled beginning of the attack, so he radioed 17th Army headquarters and requested the assault be postponed to the 22nd. They next day, he asked for the 23rd. On the 23rd, he asked for the 24th.

General Hyakutake agreed to each of the three postponements. What else could he do? The attack was now to set to begin after sunset on the 24th, but unfortunately for the Japanese, someone neglected to pass news of the most recent postponement to the 17th Army units on the coast, and after dark on the 23rd, a day early, their howitzers opened up on the American positions. Two infantry battalions and nine tanks advanced along the beach.

The Americans had their own artillery, and anti-tank guns, and they laid down a devastating counter-barrage. All nine tanks were destroyed and the Japanese lost more than a thousand soldiers to the Americans’ sixty.

The premature attack accomplished nothing except to alert the enemy that something was up. The next day, Marine scouts spotted the Japanese to the south. By nightfall, they were ready for what was to come.

The Japanese assaulted the American line fiercely and repeatedly on the nights of October 24 and 25. During lulls in the combat, Japanese soldiers called out to the Americans, "Blood for the Emperor!" in English. The Americans called back, "Blood for Eleanor!" and "Tojo eats shit!"

The Americans in their prepared positions and armed with machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank guns, inflicted terrible casualties on every Japanese assault, because as we all know, it is both deadly and futile to launch a frontal attack on an entrenched enemy armed with modern weapons. Please don't try this at home.

The Japanese lost some 3,000 killed over those two nights, to the Americans' 80. Thousands more Japanese were wounded or sick or malnourished. As a unit, the Japanese 2nd Division was no longer capable of combat. Survivors were ordered to pull back, either back to the beach west of the American perimeter, where the 17th Army headquarters stood, or to the beach east of the American perimeter.

Admiral Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet, based at Truk, had sent a naval force to Guadalcanal, meant to support the ground offensive. Two new smaller carriers had arrived from Japan to join *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*. They were the light carrier *Zuiho*, which means "Auspicious Phoenix," and *Jun'yo*, which means "Peregrine Falcon." *Jun'yo* had begun construction as a passenger liner until the Navy bought it in 1941 and converted it into a carrier. *Jun'yo* had been part of the Japanese attack on the Aleutian Islands, and after the disaster at Midway, the Navy redesignated *Jun'yo* a fleet carrier, though it was on the small side.

The two new carriers together carried as many planes as either *Shokaku* or *Zuikaku* could, meaning Yamamoto now had at his disposal the equivalent of three fleet carriers, while the Americans only had one operational carrier, USS *Hornet*. The Japanese carriers, fully loaded with aircraft, would assist the Army, but also and once again, Yamamoto hoped to lure *Hornet* into the action and then ambush it with his own carriers.

On the morning of October 25, with his ships awaiting orders at Shortland Island, Yamamoto received a radio message from the naval liaison on Guadalcanal: *Banzai*. It was the codeword that meant the Army had captured Henderson Field. Yamamoto ordered his naval force to advance on Guadalcanal at once.

A few minutes later, Yamamoto received a correction from Guadalcanal: no, that had been a mistake; the Americans still controlled the airfield. Yamamoto ordered his ships to stop and wait, but one force, led by the light cruiser *Yura*, didn't get the message and kept on going. *Yura* was bombed and sunk by the Cactus Air Force.

The US Navy had sent a carrier task force to Guadalcanal, as Yamamoto hoped. He didn't know that USS *Enterprise* had returned after a hasty repair job at Pearl Harbor just two days earlier and was now accompanying *Hornet*.

On the afternoon of the 25th, search planes from the American task force spotted the Japanese carriers and launched an air strike, but the Japanese force had spotted the spotters and its commander, Admiral Nagumo, who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor, ordered his ships to turn north, away from the Americans, which kept them out of range. Nagumo believed it was too dangerous to stay, given that the Americans found his ships before he had found theirs.

Admiral Yamamoto was not happy with this decision, and ordered Nagumo to turn south again and engage the Americans. By then, it was night. The following morning, the two carrier task forces were within 200 nautical miles of each other, though they did not yet know it.

An American scout plane found the Japanese force at 6:45 AM, just after dawn, and radioed its position. The US task force was commanded by Admiral Kinkaid, who ordered his ships to head for the Japanese and his carriers to send out additional search planes. Just moments after he gave those orders, a Japanese plane found *Hornet*. Both sides scrambled to get strike forces in the air as quickly as possible.

As usual, the Japanese won the launch race. The Americans needed an additional half hour to get their strike force aloft. About a half hour after that, the two strike forces passed each other. Most planes continued toward their targets, although a few Japanese Zero pilots couldn't resist breaking off and attacking the Americans.

American radar picked up the Japanese planes when they were still 50 miles out, but Admiral Kinkaid was slow to order American Wildcats into the air to defend the task force. *Enterprise* was hidden in a squall, but the Japanese found *Hornet*. Two dive bombers landed bombs on *Hornet*'s deck; then the torpedo bombers got two torpedo hits on the carrier. *Hornet*'s engines stopped, leaving the ship dead in the water, an easy target for more Japanese dive bombers.

The Americans got some measure of revenge when a squadron of their dive bombers found *Shokaku* and landed multiple bombs on its flight deck. The captain thought at first his ship was lost, but when he called down to engineering, he was told that the ship's engines were undamaged and capable of 32 knots, so the big carrier turned around and fled the scene.

Shokaku was soon joined in its retreat by *Zuiho*. American dive bombers had blown a 50-foot hole in *Zuiho*'s flight deck; it was no longer capable of launching or landing its planes.

As the surviving aircraft from the Japanese first strike returned to their task force, they all had to land on *Zuikaku*, the only carrier still able to receive them. The returning first strike spotted *Enterprise* on the way back, and radioed the other American carrier's location to the approaching second strike force.

Again, Admiral Kinkaid was slow to launch his fighters, and the incoming Japanese dive bombers got clear shots at *Enterprise*. Anti-aircraft guns on *Enterprise* fired at the bombers, and two of the carrier's escorts, the battleship USS *South Dakota* and the light cruiser USS *San Juan*, maneuvered close to *Enterprise* so they could bring their own anti-aircraft guns into play.

Two bombs hit the deck of *Enterprise*, but did no serious damage. When the torpedo bombers attacked, *Enterprise* was still able to move and maneuver and the big carrier was able to evade every torpedo fired at it. You can also take this as a sign of the lesser skill of replacement Japanese pilots.

An air strike from the fourth Japanese carrier, *Jun'yo*, found *Hornet* as the wounded carrier was being towed south by the cruiser USS *Northampton* at a speed of five knots. Seven torpedo planes attacked *Hornet*. Six missed, but the one that hit blew another hole in its hull. The order was given to abandon ship. American destroyers fired torpedoes at the hulk, but were unable to sink it, due in part to the ongoing problems with American torpedoes. Admiral Kinkaid gave the order to retreat, and the American task force withdrew, leaving *Hornet* behind until the carrier that had launched the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo was at last sunk by two Japanese destroyers.

History knows this engagement as the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. Both sides claimed victory, but it's hard to see this as anything but a win for the Japanese. The US lost one of its two operational carriers in the Pacific; *Enterprise*, the surviving carrier, was damaged, as were *South Dakota* and *San Juan*, the two ships that had helped defend it.

Two of Japan's carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuiho*, were heavily damaged and had to be sent back to Japan for repairs, but even so, Japan still had two fully operational carriers; the Americans had only *Enterprise*, damaged, but at least still afloat.

The Japanese victory looks less decisive though, when you consider aircraft losses. The United States lost 81 aircraft and 26 aircrew killed; Japan lost 99 aircraft and 148 aircrew killed. These were more serious losses than in any previous battle of the war, and the crews of the Japanese carriers felt they had little to celebrate. After the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, more than half of the 765 Japanese pilots and aircrew who had participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor had been killed in action, and Japan had few left in reserve and its naval air training program remained hopelessly inadequate for its Navy's needs.

At Truk, Admiral Yamamoto believed that four enemy carriers had been sunk and that his ships had won a great victory. That night, he wrote a haiku:

Contemplating the moon.

I mourn

The enemy's sacrifice.

[music: Traditional, “Edo Lullaby”]

In Tokyo, the Emperor issued an Imperial rescript praising Yamamoto and the Combined Fleet for its victory at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, while the Japanese Army pushed forward with its plans to land still more soldiers on Guadalcanal, now from the 38th infantry division. Small numbers of soldiers reached the island in early November, but 12,000 soldiers and 10,000 tons of supplies and equipment were still awaiting transport back at Shortland Island.

Yamamoto offered to escort 11 large transport ships, which would deliver them to Guadalcanal. He also sent a separate force of two battleships, *Hiei* and *Kirishima*, along with destroyer escorts. As before, the big ships would bombard Henderson Field and hopefully disrupt operations there long enough for the transports to unload and escape.

Allied intelligence were aware that the Japanese were still sending troops to the island and dispatched a convoy of their own, loaded with more American Marines, soldiers, and supplies and escorted by two task groups, one commanded by Admiral Norman Scott, who had won the Battle of Cape Esperance, and Admiral Daniel Callaghan, who was put in overall command. This would be Callaghan’s first experience of combat in his thirty years of naval service.

The American ships unloaded at Guadalcanal on November 11 and 12. They were attacked by Japanese aircraft from Rabaul, but suffered no serious damage, but on the 12th, the Americans picked up the Japanese battleship group headed their way. It wasn’t hard to guess that the big ships were planning either to shell Henderson Field or attack the convoy. The convoy ships unloaded as much as they could by dusk, then retreated, though they were still more than half full with the supplies and equipment there hadn’t been time to unload.

It was Callaghan’s task group that escorted the convoy as they left the waters of Guadalcanal. Once they were safely on their way home, his group reversed course to intercept the Japanese with a force of four cruisers and eight destroyers, up against two battleships and their escorts.

Callaghan’s force entered Ironbottom Sound in single file: four destroyers, four cruisers, and four destroyers. It was a safer way to navigate the restricted waters at night, and besides, this is exactly what Scott had done at the Battle of Cape Esperance, and it worked out pretty well for him.

The Japanese battleship force, led by Admiral Abe Hiroaki, was not expecting opposition. No ship smaller than another battleship would dare engage them, and the Japanese knew there were no American battleships in the region.

It was 1:30 the following morning—Friday the 13th—on a black, moonless night when the Americans detected the Japanese force, heading in from the northwest. Callaghan ordered his

own ships to turn north, attempting to cross the T of the approaching ships as Scott had done earlier.

The Japanese approached rapidly, and they were not arranged in a single neat line like the Americans. They were spread out. Soon the Americans realized they were smack in the middle of the Japanese formation. The American formation disintegrated as individual ships made rapid turns port or starboard to avoid collisions with the Japanese.

The two battleships' guns were loaded with incendiary shells. They were planning to set Henderson Field on fire, not engage ships at sea. Japanese sailors hurriedly unloaded the incendiary shells and stacked them on the deck to make way for the arriving armor-piercing shells meant for naval combat. This made the big ships especially vulnerable, since one American shell exploding on deck could ignite dozens of those incendiaries.

At 1:49 AM, *Hiei* and the Japanese cruiser *Akatsuki* lit up their searchlights to hunt for American ships. They both found the light cruiser USS *Atlanta*, just 3,000 yards away. The American ships began firing at the lights. A moment later, *Hiei*'s 36cm shells began landing on *Atlanta*. One of the first shots destroyed the bridge, killing Admiral Scott. Destroyers fired torpedoes. One struck, and *Atlanta* was soon helpless.

Hiei, lit up as it was by its own searchlights, became the principal American target, but now the Japanese had found USS *San Francisco*, Callaghan's flagship. Callaghan told his ships "We want the big ones!" meaning the battleships. "Get the big ones first!"

Seconds later, one of the Japanese shells took out *San Francisco*'s bridge, killing everyone including Callaghan. *Hiei* was now passing through the middle of the American formation. American destroyers were just meters away. They fired at the battleship with their 5" guns; they were too close for *Hiei* to fire back. Those were small guns, but within minutes they had pounded *Hiei*'s superstructure with more than fifty hits, one of which wounded Admiral Abe.

Abe ordered *Hiei* to withdraw. *Kirishima* followed. The smaller Japanese ships exchanged fire with the Americans for another forty minutes.

Afterward, the golden light of fires on seven crippled ships—five American and two Japanese—lit up the dark waters of Ironbottom Sound.

The battle was not yet over. The following morning, as the seven remaining American ships were limping back to the New Hebrides, they were spotted by a Japanese submarine, that unleashed a spread of torpedoes at the wounded USS *San Francisco*. They missed that ship, but some of them found USS *Juneau* behind it. A terrifying explosion ripped *Juneau* open and it rapidly sank. Captain Gilbert Hoover of USS *Helena*, now senior officer in the task group, decided it would be too dangerous to remain in the area to rescue survivors while a Japanese submarine was still nearby, so he ordered the task force to continue on their way.

North of Guadalcanal, the Cactus Air Force found the wounded *Hiei* and began bombing it. One bomb damaged its steering mechanism, and the battleship was unable to do more than make circles. B-17s and torpedo bombers finished it off.

The loss of *Hiei* infuriated Yamamoto, who thought Abe should have stayed and fought off the Americans. He relieved Abe of his command, but Japanese soldiers on Guadalcanal were starving and he was still determined to get the convoy through. That night, Japanese cruisers bombarded Henderson field but did little damage.

Soon after sunrise the next morning, American scout planes spotted the Japanese supply convoy. It was halfway to Guadalcanal. All day long, planes from Henderson Field, USS *Enterprise*, and B-17s from the New Hebrides repeatedly attacked the convoy, but it forged ahead. By sunset, six Japanese transports had been sunk and one disabled, but the remaining four reached Guadalcanal.

The surviving battleship, *Kirishima*, and its escorts returned that night to bombard Henderson field yet again. The main American task force, including the damaged USS *Enterprise*, which could still launch planes, had been keeping well to the south of Guadalcanal in daylight, as had its escorts, guarding America's only surviving carrier. But after dark, the task force commander, Admiral Willis Lee, left *Enterprise* behind and brought his two battleships, *South Dakota* and *Washington*, with four escorting destroyers, to intercept the Japanese.

At 11:00 PM, American radar found the approaching Japanese. The big ships exchanged fire. The Japanese concentrated their fire on *South Dakota*, until it and all four American destroyers were out of action, but USS *Washington*, still unscathed, surprised *Kirishima* when it moved in close and pounded its enemy with its 16" shells.

Thirty minutes later, the Japanese were forced to withdraw from the battle. *Kirishima* had to be abandoned and scuttled. Admiral Lee would later say of this engagement: "[O]ur entire superiority was due almost entirely to our possession of radar. Certainly we have no edge on the [Japanese] in experience, skill, training, or performance of personnel."

The American success at preventing a bombardment of Henderson Field put the four surviving Japanese transports in a difficult position. They would not have enough time to unload before daybreak, when they surely would be discovered and attacked by American planes, so their commander ordered them to run aground. By the time this was achieved, the first gray light of dawn was illuminating the sky. Within minutes, dive bombers from Henderson Field began attacking. The attacks lasted all day, until the transports were smoldering hulks. Of the 12,000 soldiers and 10,000 tons of supplies that had left Shortland Island, only 4,000 soldiers and a few tons of supplies made it to Guadalcanal intact. There were now more Japanese mouths to feed on the island, and virtually no new supplies.

In Washington, President Roosevelt told a reporter, "[I]t would seem that the turning point in this war has at last been reached."

These engagements, which are collectively known as the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, cost both navies the lives of nearly 2,000 sailors each. The Japanese lost two battleships sunk, three cruisers damaged, three destroyers sunk, and four damaged. The US suffered one damaged battleship, two cruisers sunk and two damaged, and seven destroyers sunk and three damaged. The Americans also lost two admirals, Scott and Callaghan, in a single action. They were the first American flag officers killed in action since Isaac Kidd, who went down with USS *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor.

Most important, the Japanese effort to reinforce and resupply their ground forces on Guadalcanal failed. Yamamoto and other senior officers of the Imperial Navy were now convinced that it was impossible to continue supporting the Guadalcanal campaign. The Navy could not afford to lose ships and sailors and pilots at this rate.

The Army command disagreed strenuously. In a meeting on December 7, 1942, the first anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, senior commanders of the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy literally came to blows as they argued over what should be the next step in the war against America.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Dana for the kind donation, and thank you to Steven for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Dana and Steven help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I must ask for your indulgence once again, as I am taking an extra week off here to help me get caught up, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we, along with Roosevelt and Churchill and their respective military leaders, consider the question of what should come next after the invasion of North Africa. Casablanca, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I described to you in today's episode the sinking of the US Navy's light cruiser USS *Juneau* by a Japanese submarine on November 13, 1942, and how Captain Hoover, commander of USS *Helena*, judged it unlikely that anyone would survive the sinking of *Juneau*, ordered the task force to continue to the New Hebrides.

Along the way, Captain Hoover radioed a nearby US Army B-17 on patrol and reported the sinking of *Juneau* and asked them to notify headquarters to send search aircraft to look for survivors.

The crew of this B-17 were under orders to maintain radio silence, so they did not make their report until after landing at their base. Sadly, this report got lost in the shuffle and days passed before someone realized that no action had been taken on the report. A search operation was hastily launched and on November 20, a week after the sinking, the destroyer USS *Ballard* rescued two survivors from a life raft. The following say, a PBY Catalina flying boat rescued five more. Three others were saved when their raft was washed ashore on a nearby island.

These ten survivors reported that nearly a hundred of *Juneau*'s crew, out of a total of nearly 700, had survived the sinking, only to die of thirst, exposure, or shark attack before their rescuers came.

And there was worse news. Among the crew were five brothers from Waterloo, Iowa, named George, Frank, Joe, Matt, and Al Sullivan. The five brothers had enlisted in the Navy soon after the Pearl Harbor attack, and at that time had requested that they serve together. Although the Navy had a policy of not assigning siblings to the same ship, it was usually not enforced, and all five of the Sullivan brothers were serving aboard *Juneau*. According to the survivors, three of the brothers had been lost when the ship sank, while the other two were among those who died while awaiting rescue.

The news of the sinking of *Juneau* was kept secret for a time, for security reasons, but on January 12, 1943, a naval officer visited the Sullivan home. "I have some news for you about your boys," he said. Their father, Tom Sullivan, asked, "Which one?" The officer replied, "I'm sorry. All five."

The sacrifice of the five Sullivan brothers became a national news story. President Roosevelt sent their parents a personal letter of condolence. Pope Pius XII sent the family, who were Catholic, a condolence message along with a silver medal and a rosary. The parents, Tom and Alleta, went on a national speaking tour promoting war bonds.

The deaths of the five brothers spurred the US War Department to adopt the "Sole Survivor Policy," which initially exempted from military service the sole surviving son of any family that had lost one or more children in the line of duty in military service.

The policy is still in place in today's US Department of Defense. It has been broadened over the years, and in its current form, it exempts all sons and daughters from any family which lost a father, a mother, a son, or a daughter in military service, or have a family member with a disability related to military service.

The story of the Sullivans was the subject of a 1944 motion picture, The Fighting Sullivans, directed by Lloyd Bacon and released through Twentieth Century Fox. The deaths of the Sullivan brothers and the Sole Survivor Policy form part of the story background in the 1998 American war epic, *Saving Private Ryan*, which was directed by Steven Spielberg and released through Paramount Pictures.

[music: Closing War Theme]