



# Mission: History

*Studiorum Historiam Praemium Est*



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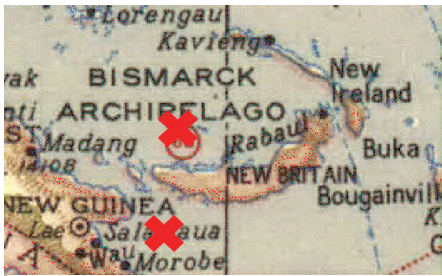
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1 March 1999

## 1943: Bismarck Sea - MacArthur's Air Corps Sinks Entire Jap Convoy

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, fought on 2, 3 and 4 March in 1943, involved for the most part only one navy, the Japanese, and at the end of the battle, even the Japs weren't involved.

At the end of the battle, eight Japanese transports and half of their eight-destroyer escort were on the bottom and they were put there by Army Air Corps



*National Geographic*

B-25 Mitchells trying something new called "skip bombing."

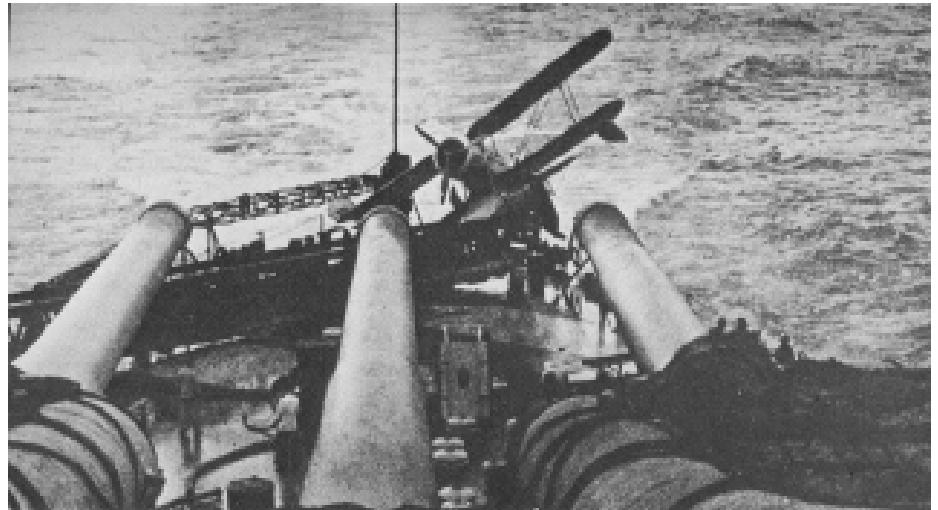
While the world's attention was riveted on Guadalcanal, an even more bitter battle was being fought on New Guinea, the last stepping stone in the Japanese planned conquest of Australia. At a place called Wau, an isolated Aussie garrison had fought off repeated assaults and the Jap commanders called for more troops.

The Japanese decided a division-sized reinforcement would be sufficient to settle the New Guinea issue once and for all and plans were laid to move about 7,000 troops from Rabaul to Lae across an unnamed patch of water, paralleling the north coast of the island of New Britain. The convoy sailed under cover of an approaching storm.

Major General George Kenney's B-

*(Continued on page 4)*

## 1941: Royal Navy Rules the Med After Routing Modern Italian Fleet



THE ONLY DAMAGE done by *Vittorio Veneto's* big guns at Cape Matapan was to her own observation plane. No one thought to secure or stow the aircraft before a parting salvo was fired from the after turret as the battleship left the scene.

## 1898: Oregon's Famous 14,000-Mile 'Dash' to Cuba

On 19 March 1898, USS *Oregon*, a new "big gun" battleship, steamed through the Golden Gate, taking her 13-inch guns to war on the other side of the nation.

When word had come that the battleship *Maine* had been sunk, *Oregon* was in something of a fix. She was in Bremerton, where coal was hard to get because of demands of the Klondike gold rush and her ammunition was in San Francisco. The ship finally had enough coal to leave Puget Sound on 3 March and she arrived in San Francisco three days later, where the crew set to work loading coal and ammunition.

On 18 March, orders were received for *Oregon* to proceed to Peru, and the next day she set out on her famous trip

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Night Action off Matapan Costs Axis Three Cruisers, Costs Italy its Will to Fight

By March 1941 the British had been at war for 18 months and were alone. The French had fallen and the Italians had recently joined Germany in its conquest of the world.

The balance of naval strength had

*(Continued on page 3)*



*National Geographic*

## 1943: Where the Hell are the Komandorski Islands, Anyway?

The Komandorski Islands are 850 square miles of Russia, off the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Bering Sea. They are a little less than 300 miles from Attu — west northwest. One of the oddest sea battles of World War II was fought there on 26 March 1943.

Rear Admiral Charles H. McMorris' task group, if it can be called that, consisted of *Salt Lake City*, an 8-inch cruiser commissioned in 1929, *Richmond*, 6 inches, commissioned in 1923, and four destroyers.

McMorris, with his flag in *Richmond*, had been patrolling a north-south line west of Attu for about a week to interdict any Japanese efforts to reinforce their positions in Attu.

At 0730 on 26 March his ships were strung out in a six-mile-long scouting line 180 miles west of Attu and only 100 miles from the Russian Komandorski Islands. As dawn general quarters was being sounded, radar on the flagship *Richmond* and the van destroyer, *Coghlan*, picked up a force of perhaps five ships, probably transports with a

destroyer escort. McMorris concentrated his force.

At the same time Jap lookouts spotted the masts of the Americans and the two fleets, about 13 miles apart, steamed toward each other. McMorris



was sailing to meet two 8-inch and two 6-inch cruisers, two heavily armed merchant cruisers and two destroyers.

While the two forces were still 20,000 yards apart the shooting began with the Japs firing first on *Richmond*. They then shifted to *Salt Lake City* and stayed there for the rest of the battle. *Salt Lake City* scored the first hits on *Nachi* with her third and fourth salvos

and hit the Jap cruiser several more times with single shells. She then shifted her attention to *Maya*, the other Jap 8-incher and, for her efforts, got hit herself for the first time.

For the next hour or so the battle turned into a running gun duel fought mostly at about 20,000 yards, with the Japanese sacrificing their physical superiority to caution. *Salt Lake City* lost her steering hydraulics at 1002, but a diesel substitute was rigged permitting 10-degree rudder. Then, at 1010 she was hit by an 8-inch armor-piercing shell that penetrated her main deck and passed out below the waterline. Now, McMorris' objective was saving his ships.

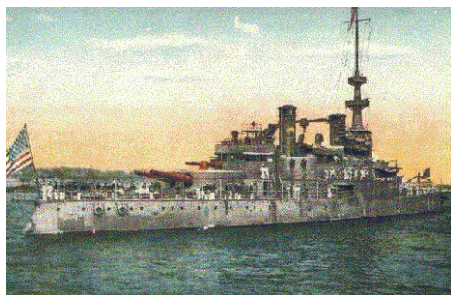
The battle had carried the Americans closer to Japan than to the United States, so McMorris broke off to the south and then turned east. *Salt Lake City* took another hit at 1103, which flooded the engine room. Even so, she maintained speed and kept up her accurate fire which prevented the Japs from closing the range to less than 9 miles.

At 1150, sea water got to *Salt Lake City*'s burners and steam pressure was lost. She was dead in the water, still shooting but a sitting duck herself and McMorris prepared to take off her crew with *Richmond* and the destroyers. But the Japanese were still cautious, so three U.S. destroyers broke off to deliver a torpedo attack on the heavies, 17,000 yards away.

As the Japs oddly broke off the action and turned toward home, *Salt Lake City* had purged her fuel lines and cut in fresh bunkers — she was making 15 knots. She was ready to fight some more but McMorris signaled a course for Dutch Harbor.

For all this action, the Americans suffered only 7 killed, 7 hospital cases and 13 minor injuries. The battle can't be called a victory over the Japs but it was a victory over two-to-one odds, though *Salt Lake City* shortened those odds some.

## Oregon Averages 11.5 Knots on Voyage 'Around Horn'



(Continued from page 1)

"around the horn."

For the 4,112-mile leg to Callao, Peru, *Oregon* could not make her best speed unless fresh water were conserved for her boilers. Captain Charles Clark broached the matter to the crew and the men cheerfully agreed to drink boiler condensate — it was warm, it wasn't fresh, but it was potable — even though the ship would be steaming in equatorial waters

The next leg of the voyage took *Oregon* 2,549 nautical miles to Port Tamar, Chile. On 16 April, she entered the

Straits of Magellan and two days later put in at Punta Arenas for three days of resupply and routine maintenance.

In the Atlantic now, *Oregon* sailed the 2,248 miles to Rio de Janeiro, where news was waiting that the United States and Spain were at war. With a new sense of urgency, the ship steamed another 2,970 nautical miles to Barbados, which because of neutrality laws, allowed her only a 24-hour stay. Leaving during the night, *Oregon* steamed another 1,670 miles to Jupiter Inlet in Florida, marking the end of its 14,000-mile "dash."

*Oregon* made the voyage at an average speed of 11.5 knots without a breakdown. She was available for immediate service in the North Atlantic Squadron.

## Your Ideas—and Help—would be Nice

Many of you probably have favorite maritime stories that could be reported in these pages, and may even have special

knowledge of them. Please tell us about them, so that they may be shared with all of our readers.





IRONCLADS SLUG IT OUT on the second day of the Battle of Hampton Roads during the American Civil War. Though *Monitor* (foreground) and *Merrimack* hammered each other for seven hours, neither did the other much hurt. But *Merrimack* had proved the superiority of an armored steamship over a wooden sailing ship and *Monitor* showed the value of a revolving turret.

## 1862: Ironclads Introduce New Era of Sea Warfare In Duel at Hampton Roads

When Confederate Commodore Franklin Buchanan steamed out of Norfolk Navy Yard on 8 March 1862, it was in *Merrimack*, a Federal steam frigate that had come with the captured real estate. The rebels had cut her down to the waterline, built a flush deck and placed a huge deckhouse on that, covered with two layers of railroad iron. Her mission was to break the Union blockade in Chesapeake Bay.

As she entered Hampton Roads, *Merrimack* was met by fire from the frigate *Congress*, 50 guns, and the sloop *Cumberland*, 30, but the shot bounced off her with a clang. *Merrimack* then opened fire on *Cumberland* with her bow gun and on *Congress* with her broadside, doing significant damage. Then Buchanan steered directly at *Cumberland*, stove in her side with his heavy bow ram, and sank her. He then turned on *Congress*, setting her afire and forcing her to surrender. *Merrimack* then retired for the night and Buchanan, wounded, turned command over to a Lieutenant Jones.

During the night, there arrived in the Roads the Union ironclad *Monitor*, which anchored behind *Merrimack's* intended prey for the next day, the Union frigate *Minnesota*. *Monitor* was commanded by a Lieutenant Worden, who had been specially named captain.

When Jones took *Merrimack* out the following morning, *Monitor* emerged from behind the target and the two ships joined in the first battle between armored, steam-powered warships. It showed mostly that they couldn't harm each other, even though at one point *Merrimack* ran aground.

By mid-afternoon, the two ships had hammered at each other for seven hours and their crews were exhausted. The tide was on the ebb, which concerned Jones because of *Merrimack's* 22-foot draft. Worden had been wounded when the small doghouse on *Monitor's* fore-deck had been hit. The battle ended as if by mutual consent.

## Matapan: It Was Heart of Oak Against Marshmallows

(Continued from page 1)

shifted in the Mediterranean. Mussolini had a modern fleet of mostly new ships, including two new 15-inch battleships, and Hitler had fallen heir to the French fleet, including the new battleship *Richelieu* and the as-yet-to-be-completed *Jean Bart*. The battleship *Strasbourg* was at Toulon, with numerous cruisers and destroyers.

Under extreme German pressure, Italian commander Iachino sailed on 27 March to intercept a British convoy thought to be on its way to Alexandria. At the same time, steaming northwest from Alexandria was a British fleet under Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham with three World War I battleships and the carrier *Formidable*.

"ABC's" flagship, *Warspite*, was accompanied by *Barham* and *Valiant*, the latter equipped with something new called radar. Four cruisers were already far ahead, off Crete, where they would engage Italian cruisers the next day with neither side scoring a hit.

Shortly before noon, the cruisers happened upon the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, which began firing. The cruisers turned tail and radioed a message picked up by the main fleet. Planes from *Formidable*, launched earlier to look for the Italians, now arrived and attacked *Vittorio Veneto*, doing no damage but saving the cruisers.

*Formidable's* aircraft struck again, this time coincident with an attack by land-based RAF planes, hitting *Vittorio*

*Veneto* with a torpedo. The damage was quickly repaired, but Iachino feared more of the same, knew he would get no help from the Aeronautica Militare and turned back to Taranto. Then a third attack damaged the cruiser *Pola*, stopping her dead in the water. Iachino sent two cruisers, *Fiume* and *Zara* to help their stricken sister.

The British battlefleet continued toward the Italians, not knowing that two cruisers were headed toward them. It was dark now, but *Valiant's* radar could see and picked up the Italians.

The Italians had never trained for night action and, as the unseen British drew closer, did not have their turrets manned -- their guns were trained fore and aft as ABC steamed parallel to and within 3,000 yards of the Italians. The guns of *Warspite*, *Barham* and *Valiant* were manned and trained and as soon as searchlights lit up the Italian cruisers, began firing. It took only three minutes to sink *Fiume* and *Zara* and a pair of destroyers for good measure. About 2,300 Italian sailors were lost.

Before sinking *Pola*, the British took off her crew and found that following the torpedo attack, seamen had broken into the ship's liquor locker and were in no condition to fight. *Vittorio Veneto* fled the carnage, firing a parting salvo from her after turret.

A photograph of the battleship's observation plane, blown off its catapult by the muzzle blast, shows the only damage done by the ship's guns.

## 1811: At the Battle of Lissa, Nelson Protégé Takes the Measure of the French

William Hoste had served under Horatio Nelson as a midshipman and at numerous battles. His greatest achievement was a victory against superior forces, fought by Hoste with his commodore's pennant flying in *Amphion*, a 32-gun frigate given him by Nelson, to a decisive conclusion that would have



National Geographic

pleased his mentor.

He was using the island of Lissa (now Vis) off the coast of Dalmatia in the Adriatic as a base for his squadron, *Active*, 38 guns, *Cerberus*, 32, *Volage*, 22 and *Amphion*. While lying off Lissa on 13 March 1811, *Active* signaled at first light that she had seen a strange fleet to windward.

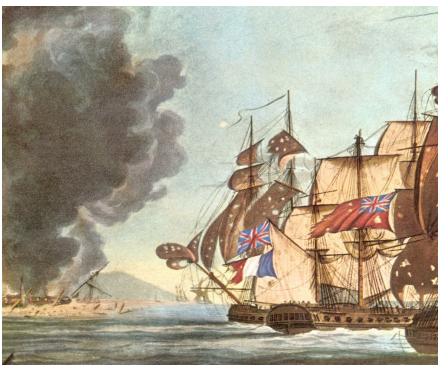
The strange fleet was a combined French and Venetian squadron of six frigates and five lesser ships under the French commodore Dubordieu whose orders were to defeat Hoste and occupy Lissa. He had what should have been overwhelming superiority in *Favorite*, *Flore*, *Danae* and *Carona*, all 44 guns, *Bellona*, 32 and *Carolina*, 28.

Dubordieu formed in two divisions and, in Hoste's words, "bore down to

attack under all possible sail." Hoste formed his four ships in a compact line, to greet the bows of the attacker with broadsides. Hoste flew one signal: "Remember Nelson." The captain of *Volage* recorded "it was worth a thousand cheers."

As Dubordieu bore down, unable to use his broadsides, he was stopped "by the well-directed fire and compact order of our line," in Hoste's words. The French then tried to round the end of the British line in order to bring it under fire from both sides, as Nelson had done to the French at the Nile. *Amphion* greeted him so "warmly" that "in the act of wearing he went on shore on the rocks of Lissa in the greatest possible confusion," Hoste reported.

In the following *melée*, superior British seamanship and gunnery more than made up for the disparity in



THE BRITISH SQUADRON, including a captured prize, watches Dubordieu's ship burn on Lissa — it was his funeral pyre.

strength. At the end of the action, four frigates had defeated six, captured two and driven the enemy leader ashore where he perished. Hoste himself was wounded but would not quit the deck until the battle was won.

### How to Get in Touch

*Mission: History* has been asked to provide an address for reader communications. E-mail may be sent to this address:

[navhist@pacbell.net](mailto:navhist@pacbell.net)

Submissions are not encouraged because of constraints on the time available for editing. If such are sent, they should be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word 6.0.

Quite welcome, however, are suggestions of events for coverage. Please offer suggestions two months ahead of the anniversary of an event.

## Bismarck Sea: B-25 Mitchells Vindicate Billy Mitchell

(Continued from page 1)

17s attacked the convoy on 2 March as it broke out of the weather off the western tip of New Britain, sinking one transport and damaging two others, but it was just a taste of what was to come, and the Japanese pressed on through Vitiaz Strait during the night.

On 3 March the B-25s came, with the Jap convoy strung out in a loose formation on a sunlit sea, about to round Cape Cretin on New Guinea's Huon Peninsula. The planes were "on the deck" and the Japs, fearing torpedoes, turned to meet them bow-on, just what the fliers wanted.

The noses of the B-25s had been modified, and where once a bombardier had worked, were eight .50-cal. machine guns. After strafing the ships stem to stern, the planes banked gracefully around and came at them beam on at deck height.

Bomb bay doors opened and the pilots released 500-pound bombs, fitted with delayed-action fuses, which skipped across the water and holed the sides of the enemy ships. Of 37 bombs dropped in the first wave, 28 hit their targets. By noon, another 150 bombs had been skipped into the unfortunate convoy.

The carnage kept up all afternoon until, at dusk, all of the transports were

either sunk or sinking. Four undamaged escorts fished out as many survivors as they could before fleeing north. The sea was dotted with life rafts, men clinging to wreckage and swimmers. There had been no time for the ships to launch their boats.

The night of 3-4 March brought no surcease for the Jap survivors. U.S. Navy PT Boats from Milne Bay arrived to find only one abandoned transport and two crippled destroyers afloat. The boats dispatched the transport with two torpedoes and after daybreak the Air Corps returned to send the destroyers to the bottom.

Now the PT Boats and Air Corps had the grisly task of mopping up the survivors — for these were Japanese soldiers still in sight of their objective. The day was spent machine gunning anything on the surface.

Prior to the battle, the patch of ocean enclosed by the Bismarck Archipelago had had no name, but news reports have to tell where events take place. For that reason, those waters became the Bismarck Sea in headlines, reports and on maps.