



Mission: History

Studiorum Historiam Praemium Est



Volume I, Issue 4

★★★★★

3 May 1999

1898: *'You May Fire When Ready, Gridley'*



SURVEYING HIS ENEMY from his exposed position on USS *Olympia*, Commodore George Dewey ignored Spanish shot and shell until, closing the Spaniards, he uttered his famous, laconic command to his ship's captain: "You may fire when ready, Gridley."

Battle of Manila Bay Established America As Major Naval Power

As the United States was led ever closer to war with Spain, the Navy had six battleships, two armored cruisers, ten protected cruisers (deck armor only) and a number of smaller ships. It was a top-heavy force that, while it looked splendid in fleet reviews, did not rank with the navies of other nations.

Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, one of those pushing the U.S. into a winnable war, which he said "would be a splendid thing for the Navy," had Commodore George Dewey placed in command of the Asiatic Squadron.

In the bellicose frenzy following the destruction of *Maine*, Roosevelt, in the absence of Navy Secretary John D. Long, cabled Dewey in Hong Kong to coal his ships and prepare to attack the Spanish squadron of Rear Admiral Patricio Montojo y Pasarón at Manila. Dewey had four protected cruisers, three gunboats, a collier and a supply ship. Montojo had two protected cruisers and five unprotected cruisers. He also had behind him numerous shore batteries defending Manila Bay. Going into the engagement, it looked as though the Spaniards might have a slight edge. Moreover, Dewey was low on ammunition and the nearest resupply was in California.

Before dawn on 1 May 1898, Dewey's squadron entered Manila Bay through the South Channel, past a shore battery on the small island of El Fraile.

(Continued on page 2)

1942: Coral Sea Ends Japanese Advance in South Pacific

By May of 1942, the Japanese were on a roll. They had overrun much of East and Southeast Asia and the western and southwestern Pacific and had crippled the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, destroyed the American-British-Dutch-Australian fleet in the Battles of the Java Sea and had sunk the British battleships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*.

The Japanese had lost one destroyer, sunk, even though her naval strategists had regarded a 20 to 30 percent loss in warships as acceptable.

It may have been overconfidence bred of these easy victories that led the Japs to a decision to extend their defensive perimeter outwards from Rabaul

and to covet Australia. In any case, invasion forces were put together with the intent of taking Tulagi in the Solomons and Port Moresby on the southern tip of New Guinea, across the Coral Sea from Australia. A powerful screening force was built around the carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* and the light carrier *Shoho* to prevent interference from any American naval forces that might be in the area.

As it was, the Americans had been having limited success breaking the Jap naval code and knew of these plans. A force consisting of the U.S. carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, screened by five heavy cruisers, two light cruisers

(Continued on page 3)

When Dewey Called a Time-Out for Breakfast, Battle of Manila Bay Had Already Been Won

(Continued from page 1)

Most of the fleet had passed the island when soot flared up in the funnel of a gunboat, and the battery opened fire. Two cruisers and two gunboats returned fire and silenced the battery, but surprise was now gone.

At 0400, as Montojo ordered his forces to prepare for action, Dewey sent his collier and supply ship under protection of a gunboat to a safer part of the bay. The Americans then steamed for Manila, believing the Spaniards would be at that port. Montojo, seeking to spare the city, had moved his fleet to Cavite, south of Manila, and anchored his ships across the mouth of Bacoar Bay, in a general line from Sangley Point to Las Pinas. Dewey guessed correctly that the Spanish had done that and headed for Cavite.

As the Americans approached at about 0515, the guns of the Cavite fortifications and the Spanish ships began firing. Dewey held his fire for nearly a half-hour to conserve ammunition. Then, from his post on *Olympia's* open bridge, he told the ship's captain, "You may fire when ready, Gridley." When *Olympia's* eight-inch forward turret fired, the other ships followed suit.

Steaming at between six and eight knots, Dewey's squadron made five passes along the Spanish line. At around 0730, fearing he was low on ammunition and not wishing the Spanish to know of his plight, Dewey signaled his ships to break for breakfast. The U.S. press later played this up as an example of American *insouciance* in the face of shot and shell.

Dewey did not realize it, but the Spanish were already beaten. Montojo's flagship, *Reina Cristina*, had suffered heavy damage and casualties. The admiral had her scuttled and transferred his flag to *Isla de Cuba*. As he surveyed his fleet, he saw that *Don Antonio de Ulloa* had been sunk, *Castilla* was ablaze and would soon sink, *Isla de Luzon* had three guns dis-

mounted and *Marques del Duero* had suffered heavy damage. Montojo ordered what was left of his fleet to retreat into Bacoar Bay and fight on as long as possible. During the breakfast break, Dewey learned that, in spite of what had appeared to be a strong Spanish barrage, he had suffered only nine injuries among his crews, most slight.

At 1115, the Asiatic Squadron went back to work, led by *Baltimore* instead of *Olympia*. Dewey had his squadron break ranks, sending individual ships to destroy separate targets. The gunboat *Petrel* entered the shallow waters of Cavite to fire or capture any vessels she might find. Her gunnery was so effective, the forces manning the fort surrendered. The Battle of Manila Bay was over. That night, *Olympia's* brass band entertained crowds of people who thronged to the Manila waterfront to see the victorious Asiatic Squadron.

Montojo had lost not only his fleet, but had suffered 381 killed or wounded. In addition to the nine Americans injured, one obese Navy engineer had died from heat prostration.

The immediate effect of the battle was the worldwide recognition of the United States as a major naval power.

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

Mail may be sent by conventional post to:

Ric Teague
2239 Wellesley Street
Palo Alto, CA 94306

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 or as typewritten copy, double-spaced, accompanied by a 3½-inch diskette containing the submission in MS Word 6.0 for Windows.

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

1904: Russian Fleet's Slow Dash to Disaster At Tsushima Straits

When war ended between China and Japan in 1895, Japan was in possession of parts of China, including Port Arthur at the entrance to China's Gulf of Chihli. Under pressure from Russia, Germany and France, she was forced to give up Port Arthur.

Soon thereafter, Russia negotiated the right to garrison Port Arthur and use it for a naval base. Europe was aghast at the cynicism of the move and Japan was angry, angry enough to go to war with Russia, which she did, with a sneak attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur in February 1904. Japan then besieged the port on land and blockaded what was left of the Russian Pacific fleet by sea.

In St. Petersburg, Tsar Nicholas II decided to send his Baltic Fleet, which was numerically superior to the Japa-



RUSSIAN ADMIRAL Rozhdestvensky

nese fleet, halfway around the world and defeat his enemy in a showdown sea battle. Having no coaling stations on the way, he arranged with his cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, to charter a fleet of colliers.

It was a grueling, seven-month voyage that got off badly when skittish Russians sank a British fishing boat in the North Sea, thinking it a Japanese submarine. Half the force transited the Suez Canal and half sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. When they reunited in Madagascar, they discovered that Port Arthur had fallen and the Pacific fleet had been sunk at its moorings.

(Continued on page 3)

Better Ships, Better Guns, Better Gunnery Sink Tsar

(Continued from page 2)

The Russian commander, Admiral Rozhdestvensky, was ordered to press on, knowing his force with its half-trained crews and weed-fouled hulls was in sorry shape for battle.

At last, on 13 May 1905, the Russians entered the Straits of Tsushima, a narrow passage between the island of that name and the Japanese island of Honshu. The next morning, the Russian force of five modern and three old battleships, an old armored cruiser, three coast defense ships and a few light cruisers and destroyers, saw Togo's fleet blocking the straits ahead of them. With better guns, better gunners and better ammunition, the Japanese began a devastating fire. One salvo actually displaced the armor belt of a Russian battleship, to be followed by another which penetrated her now-unprotected hull, capsizing her.

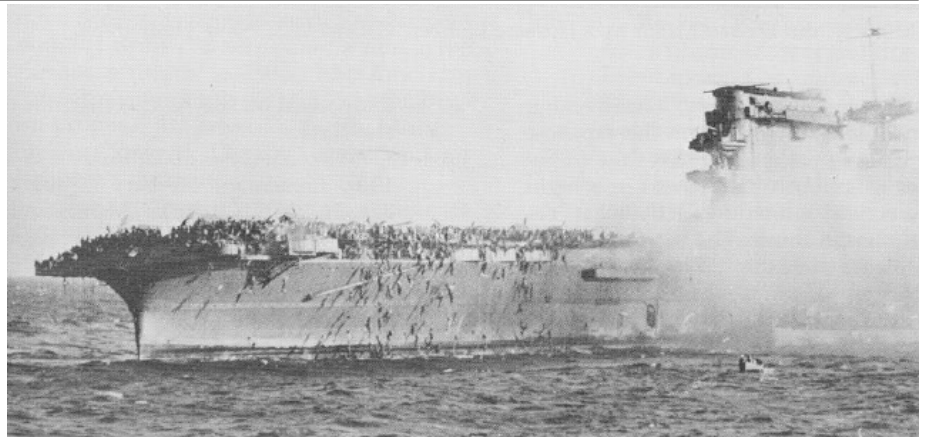
The battle continued with Togo crossing in front of the Russians —



JAPANESE ADMIRAL Heihachiro Togo

capping their T — more than once, pounding the hapless Tsarists. When night came, it was without mercy, for Togo sent his torpedo boats to harry the Russians. On the morning of the 15th, there were the heavy Japanese ships again. When the battle ended, two Russian battleships had been captured and the others destroyed. Only a light cruiser and two destroyers reached Vladivostok. The Japanese suffered almost not at all.

The era of steam and steel had arrived and naval strategists studied the Battle of Tsushima in vain for lessons.



THE CREW OF THE U.S. CARRIER *Lexington* pours over the side following the order to abandon ship. Lady Lex, CV-2, had been in the fleet since commissioned in December, 1927

(Continued from page 1)

and 13 destroyers was very much in the area. In addition to their carriers, the Japs had six heavy cruisers, three light cruisers and a dozen destroyers.

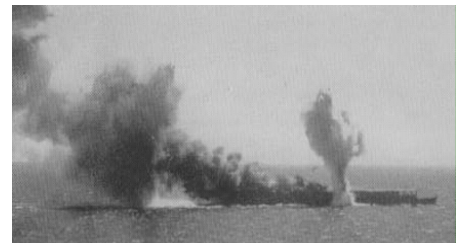
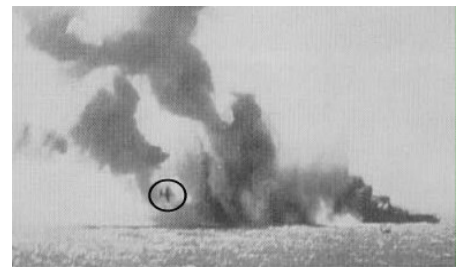
U.S. Task Force 17 under Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher with *Yorktown* attacked transports landing troops at Tulagi, damaging several and sinking one destroyer. Fletcher then joined the TF 11, Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, with *Lexington*. On 7 May, carrier aircraft located and sank *Shoho*, and thus began the first naval engagement in history in which the opposing forces did not make contact.

On 8 May, the Jap force was found and attacked by air, resulting in damage to *Shokaku*. At the same time, Japanese fliers found the American force, scoring hits on *Yorktown* and *Lexington*. Lady Lex took two torpedoes and three bomb hits, producing a 7 degree list and several fires. Damage control brought the fires under control and restored the ship to an even keel, making 25 knots, but suddenly gasoline vapors in her hangar deck exploded violently.

Capt. Frederick C. Sherman secured salvage operations and ordered all hands to the flight deck. An hour later he ordered "abandon ship," and Fitch and his staff transferred to USS *Minneapolis*. Sherman was the last to leave his stricken ship.

The results of the battle were a tactical victory for the Japs in terms of naval hardware destroyed or damaged,

but a strategic victory for the Allies in that Jap plans to invade Port Moresby were thwarted. *Yorktown* was rushed to Pearl Harbor for repairs, which were completed in time for the Battle of Midway, and heavy Japanese radio traffic during the Battle of the Coral Sea enabled Navy codebreakers to further refine their understanding of the enemy code — also instrumental in the ensuing success at Midway.



THE END OF *Shoho*. Top — dive bombers hit Jap carrier, starting fires. Middle — torpedo on starboard quarter. Bottom — hangar deck explodes as U.S. plane heads home.

1941: *British Avenge Hood, Sink Bismarck*

In May of 1941, Britain relied on a sympathetic but neutral United States not only for the tools of war but for food for her people. Those necessities were carried to the island in convoys, through North Atlantic waters infested with U-boats. If the Germans could put a fast squadron of surface warships in the North Atlantic, Britain might be driven from the war without the need to invade England.

On 18 May, under Admiral Günther Lütjens in Kriegsmarineschiffe *Bismarck*, in company with KMS *Prinz Eugen*, a heavy cruiser, slipped out of the occupied Polish port of Gdynia. There were, at the moment, no fewer than 12 British convoys at sea in the North Atlantic.

It was believed that the ships would sail northwest and enter the Atlantic through the Denmark Straits, which separate Iceland from Greenland. Two cruisers were on station there, *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*. About 600 miles to the southeast were the battle cruiser *Hood* and the new battleship *Prince of Wales*, which was not yet fully worked up.

Both British cruisers sighted *Bismarck* on 23 May and came under fire. Admiral Sir John Tovey, Commander in Chief of the Home Fleet, hearing *Norfolk's* report, ordered *Hood*, *Prince of Wales* and six destroyers to the scene. At dawn on the 24th, they intercepted the German warships.

Hood and *Prince of Wales* began firing at about 25,000 yards and *Bismarck* responded. A few minutes into the fight, a shell from *Bismarck* plunged through *Hood's* foredeck and exploded in the ship's magazines. When the smoke cleared, *Hood* had vanished. Now, *Prince of Wales's* untested armament acted up. The ship turned away from *Bismarck* to bring her after turrets to bear when her forward guns failed and soon an aft turret failed. By the end of the engagement, only one turret was functioning.

Prince of Wales had taken seven hits, but had inflicted the damage that was to be *Bismarck's* eventual undoing when one of her rounds had holed the German's hull and a fuel oil bunker beneath the waterline and another had flooded a



A CONSOLIDATED PBY *Catalina* of the RAF Coastal Command spots *Bismarck* as Lütjens heads for the safety of the French coast. Though damaged by the ship's anti-aircraft fire, the plane got off its message, and the Royal Navy swarmed to the attack

generator room, causing one boiler to be shut down, with a loss of ship speed. Lütjens knew he had to return to a friendly port, so he turned on the trailing British in a feint to allow *Prinz Eugen* to slip away to raid convoys.

The British continued to shadow Lütjens but, not knowing his damage, guessed wrongly that he had turned west. Instead, *Bismarck* was making for St. Nazaire. The next 31 hours were filled with confused reports.

On the morning of 26 May, *Bismarck* was re-sighted by a Catalina aircraft which came under heavy fire but got off a report that the German battleship was about 690 miles west of Brest. Tovey, headed west with the bulk of the Home Fleet, including the battleship *King George V*, had actually crossed the Germans' wake twice.

At the same time, the carrier *Ark Royal* was steaming north from Gibraltar and the battleship *Rodney* was sailing to join Tovey. Aircraft from *Ark Royal* attacked *Bismarck* at about 8:45 p.m. on the 26th, jamming the ship's rudders, which sealed her fate. During

that night, five destroyers, detached from a convoy, shadowed *Bismarck* and harassed her ineffectually with torpedoes. The next morning, they delivered the German ship to Tovey.

At 8:46 a.m. on 27 May *King George V* and *Rodney* began to exchange fire with *Bismarck* at about 16,000 yards. An hour and one-half later, the German battleship had ceased firing and was aflame, but she would not sink. It was thought that torpedoes from the cruiser *Dorsetshire* sent her to the bottom, but that was not the case.

Survivors reported that no shell or torpedo had penetrated *Bismarck's* armor and that her machinery was still intact when her engineering officer was ordered to blow the sea valves.

Bismarck, had been fought by every type of ocean-going warship except submarines. The loss of *Hood*, the pride of the British fleet, about balanced the equation, but in the end, the German battleship was not allowed to increase the existing menace to the British Atlantic lifeline.