

## Condition “Very Red”

*Estimated 40–50; No time to count; planes could be seen in nearly every direction however, and those diving in first were followed closely by others.*

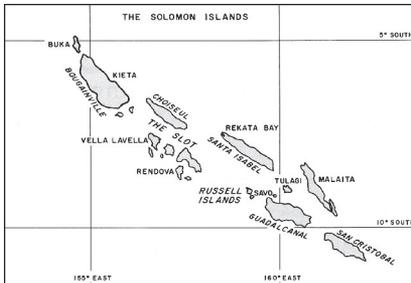
*Several planes were observed to fall during the attack and several more were observed gliding in a damaged condition after completing their dive. The necessity of looking for and shooting at new attackers prevented one from following the movements of any particular plane after it had ceased to become an immediate menace.*

USS Conflict (AM-85) Anti-Aircraft Action Report describing an attack on 7 April 1943 by a group of dive-bombers on shipping in Tulagi Harbor. An estimated 160 Japanese fighters and bombers attacked the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area that day.

By the spring of 1943, the Allies had pushed the Japanese out of the southern Solomon Islands, as witnessed by the enemy’s evacuation of all its forces from Guadalcanal by 7 February 1943. The next undertaking was to push them out of the northern Solomons. Guadalcanal Island had been a pivotal piece of island real estate; one that both sides had wanted to control and to which they had committed large numbers of forces. Aircraft launched from the bitterly contested, and now American-controlled Henderson Field enabled Allied forces to expand their presence in the South Pacific while thwarting the Japanese thrust.<sup>1</sup>

Fleet Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, commander-in-chief Combined Fleet, had tried earlier to engage and defeat the U.S. Pacific Fleet in decisive battles at Midway, Eastern Solomons, and Santa Cruz Island, and failed. Having lost Guadalcanal, he launched Operation I-GO, a counter-offensive in which an armada of aircraft attacked Allied ships,

Map 1-1



Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands was a bitterly contested piece of real estate. Its capture by U.S. ground troops, supported by air and naval forces, after months of combat with Japanese on the island, preceded continued Allied movement north-westward up the enemy-held Solomons.

Source: <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ACTC/img/actc-35.jpg>

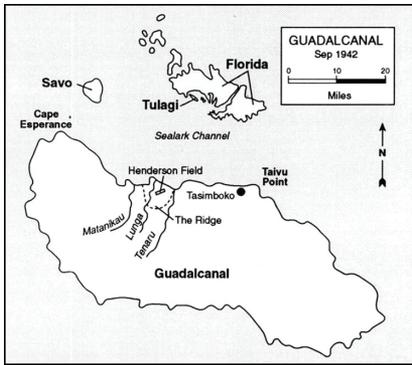
aircraft, and advanced bases in the southeast Solomon Islands and what today is known as New Guinea. New Guinea was then split into three areas: the Territory of New Guinea, the northeastern part of the island of New Guinea and surrounding islands; the Territory of Papua, the southeastern part of New Guinea; and, Dutch New Guinea, the western part of the island (later known as West Papua). The goal of the operation was to set back the Allies expected spring offensive and to give Japan time to prepare for defense of the Bismarcks Barrier. The Allies Papuan

Campaign had concluded on 23 January 1943, after Australian and American troops moving up the Papua coast captured in succession Gona, Buna, and Sanananda, removing the threat of a planned enemy land attack on Port Moresby. Located on the southeastern coast of New Guinea, Japanese control of Port Moresby would have afforded them a staging point and air base only 340 miles from the Cape York Peninsula in Australia, from which to sever the sea lines of communications from America. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific Area, now needed to gain an overwater route through the enemy controlled Bismarck Archipelago—a group of islands off northeastern New Guinea—to continue along a New Guinea-Mindanao axis his promised return to the Philippines.<sup>2</sup>

In support of I-GO, four Japanese Imperial Navy Third Fleet carriers—the *Hiyo*, *Junyo*, *Zuiho*, and *Zuikaku*—contributed 96 fighters, 65 dive-bombers and a handful of torpedo planes to augment the land-based force of 86 fighters, 27 dive-bombers, 72 twin-engine bombers and some additional torpedo planes of the Eleventh Air Fleet. This powerful air armada was first concentrated 565 miles west-northwest of Guadalcanal at Rabaul, the largest Japanese military



Map 1-3



Tulagi, a small island nestled inside the bay of Florida Island, lay twenty miles across the New Georgia Sound. This waterway, which orientated along a northwest-southeast axis, ran between the Northern and Southern Solomon Islands, was commonly referred to as “the Slot” by American servicemen.

Source: [www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/npswapa/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003130-00/sec6.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/npswapa/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003130-00/sec6.htm)

ships retiring down Lengo Channel. (Tulagi was nestled inside the bay of larger Florida Island, which both lay twenty miles across the New Georgia Sound, termed “the Slot,” from Guadalcanal.) A separate group of planes approached the destroyer *Aaron Ward* (DD-483) and the tank landing ship, *LST-449*, she was escorting. As four of the planes remained overhead, the others attacked in pairs, sweeping down to dive bomb the warships, located off the northern coast of Guadalcanal near Berande Point proceeding eastward towards Lengo Channel.<sup>5</sup>

The first air attacks were, however, on ships in Tulagi Harbor. Present there were the former resplendent four-masted barkentine *Erskine M. Phelps*—which built in 1898, had been relegated to duty as a bunker barge (AON-147)—with the New Zealand minesweeper HMNZ *Moa* (T233) fueling alongside, the minesweeper *Conflict* (AM-85), oiler *Kanawha* (AO-1), and some thirty smaller vessels including a group of tank landing craft, LCTs 58, 62, 63, 156, 182, 322, 323, and 369. The action opened with 40 to 50 olive-brown colored,

The body of water was referred to thus by sailors, due to the large numbers of ships and aircraft sent to the bottom there during the recent Guadalcanal Campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Across the twenty-mile wide Sound, the submarine rescue ship *Ortolan* (ASR-5) lay off the north coast of Guadalcanal. At 1500, she sighted a large formation of 75-100 planes, twenty miles distant, approaching from the west. The main body initially split into four striking groups: one toward the task force of which she was a part, located to the north and west of Florida Island; a second toward the Tulagi area; a third toward Henderson Field; and a fourth toward a convoy of transport

single-wing bombers diving down steeply and very fast, amidst anti-aircraft fire from ships and two quads of 40mm guns on the heights of Tulagi, to release bombs. The *Moa* took a direct hit and sank in four minutes with the loss of five men missing and one officer and twelve men wounded. *Kanawha*, attacked off Songonangona Island at the entrance to Tulagi Harbor, suffered two direct bomb strikes that set her aflame and knocked her engines and fire rooms out of commission. As the planes pulled up out of their dives and leveled off, about twelve headed towards, unbeknownst to them, the location of the *Niagara* and the *Rail*, and others flew eastward.<sup>6</sup>

The 267-foot *Niagara* (AGP-1) was a former yacht, the *Hi-Esmaro*, converted to the Navy's first motor torpedo boat tender. She was moored starboard side to the bank of a small bay at Florida Island near the mouth of the Maliali River, with the minesweeper *Rail* (AM-26) made up outboard of her receiving water. The *Niagara's* after action report described briefly the arrival of the enemy aircraft over Tulagi, and the ensuing attacks against shipping there, and the action involving the tender:

At 1500 planes approached from the westward and were engaged by our planes over the Tulagi Area at about 12,000 feet. Dive bombers started peeling-off in a steep dive attacking ships in Tulagi Harbor. Bombs appeared to be released between 600 and 1,500 feet altitude. Planes pulled out of their dives between 75 and 200 feet altitude.

Ten or twelve planes retired up the channel toward the *NIAGARA* sharp on the port bow at high speed and low altitude. All planes except one passed to port; that one passed just clearing the treetops and partially obscured to starboard. The planes came in two waves, distance between each plane of each wave varied from 300 to 1,000 yards.<sup>7</sup>

The aircraft were unaware of the presence of the two ships—due to foliage along the shore that obscured them from scrutiny—had expended their bombs, and were not prepared to strafe the two vessels. The *Niagara* took every plane streaking down her port side under fire with all eight of her 20mm guns. The combined barrage of gunfire from her and the *Rail* downed or damaged several bombers that crashed back in the woods or were streaming smoke as they withdrew. The action concluded at 1520 with the *Rail* having suffered some damage due to friendly fire. Eager to down the enemy, *Niagara's* gunners had fired through the minesweeper's topside rigging, and shot away

her boat boom, as well as the starboard forward guide for the mainmast and two high-frequency radio antennas.<sup>8</sup>

## **SMALL COASTAL TRANSPORT SHOOTS DOWN TWO ATTACKERS**

The ships in the area had earlier received a “Condition Red” broadcast from Guadalcanal at about 1445 and a few minutes later, as large numbers of planes appeared over Tulagi and Savo Island off the northwest coast of Guadalcanal, and the water between them, an unprecedented “Condition Very Red.” When an alarm signaled Condition Red, it meant that an enemy air raid was imminent. Adm. William F. Halsey, commander South Pacific Force, had directed the withdrawal of all Task Force 32 ships, along with Task Unit 36.1.3—comprised of destroyers *Farenholt* (DD-491) and *Woodworth* (DD-460), and oiler *Tappahannock* (AO-43)—and the *Kanawha* from Guadalcanal at the earliest practical time in anticipation of Japanese air attacks. Many ships had fled or were fleeing; others, whose departure had been delayed and smaller vessels too slow to attempt escape, awaited arrival of the enemy overhead.<sup>9</sup>

Among the ships still present at Tulagi that afternoon were a group of six recently built wooden-hulled “Small Coastal Transports.” Following a lengthy Pacific crossing, the *APc-23*, *24*, *25*, *26*, *33*, and *34* had arrived at Guadalcanal a few days earlier on 29 March, and reported for duty to commander Landing Force Flotillas, South Pacific, Rear Adm. George H. Fort. The 103-foot stubby ships, whose complement was three officers and twenty-eight enlisted, were of austere construction. Today, Navy frigates and smaller ships driven by a single propeller are fitted with two propulsion engines, so that in the event of a casualty to one engine, the ship can still operate. Larger ships such as destroyers and cruisers have four engines driving two shafts, and carriers, nuclear reactors powering four shafts. The *APc*s were propelled by a single 400 hp diesel engine. For self-protection, the diminutive ships had four single 20mm anti-aircraft guns. These type weapons would prove to have little stopping power against enemy heavy aircraft and kamikaze attacks. However, they were effective at short ranges in which slower heavier-caliber guns had difficulty tracking a target. Skill of gunner’s mates in manually training and elevating mounts was paramount for acquisition of high-speed aircraft. Some *APc*s also had two or more .30-caliber or .50-caliber machine guns but they were of little use against enemy planes. As might be

expected, additional armament was greatly desired by the crews of ships going in harm's way, and machine guns found their way aboard by whatever means possible. A former commanding officer of one of these ships joked that he probably would have been court martialed by the Navy for the theft of guns, explaining "they knew who took them," had he not received an award for valor associated with the defense of his ship.<sup>10</sup>

The *APC-33*, commanded by Lt. James E. Locke, United States Naval Reserve, was making a portside approach to Sturgis Dock at Tulagi when a group of approximately thirty-five enemy dive-bombers, approaching over land from off her port bow, appeared suddenly less than five miles distant. He immediately ordered starboard rudder to open the shore and gain sea room to maneuver and try to evade planes making diving and strafing attacks. As a pair of Vals made a run on the wooden ship from her starboard side, her gunners opened at 1,000 yards with guns elevated from 70 to 85 degrees above the horizon and continued to fire at the aircraft until they had closed to 300 yards. Japanese carrier-based Val dive-bombers with a top speed of 239 miles per hour were a difficult target for shipboard gunners, and very deadly. In addition to carrying a single 550 lb. bomb or two 132 lb. ones, the aircraft were fitted with three 7.7mm machine guns, enabling concurrent bombing and strafing runs. The necessity of applying a large lead angle for such fast moving aircraft was emphasized in Navy training. The 20mm gunners aboard the *APC-33* had apparently learned this lesson well as, despite no previous combat experience, they shot down both aircraft. Hit in the forward part of the fuselage, the planes burst into flames directly overhead, and plunged into the water astern of the ship.<sup>11</sup>

## **RESCUE OF KANAWHA SURVIVORS**

The fleet oiler *Kanawha* had similarly tried to escape the confines of Tulagi Harbor. However, while still in the narrow channel nearing the entrance, with little maneuvering room, five planes attacked her. Two dropped bombs hit the ship; one demolished her engine room causing a loss of power and fires aft, the other struck forward of her bridge, setting bunker oil aflame. With no means to fight the blaze except with buckets of water, which were ineffective, the commanding officer ordered the crew to abandon while there was still slight way on the ship, to preclude for survivors entering the water the hazard of

burning oil on the surface. There were then no other vessels nearby for rescue work.<sup>12</sup>

Thereafter, several small vessels, including submarine chasers, coastal transports, tank landing craft, and the minesweeper *Conflict* proceeded to the *Kanawha* to fight the fire aboard her and pick up survivors. The minesweeper *Rail* approached the *APc-33*, which had recovered Lt. C. W. Brockway, the *Kanawha*'s first lieutenant and navigator, and fourteen of her crew, two seriously injured. At Brockway's request, the larger steel-hulled ship took him and eleven of the men off the *33* for transport alongside the *Kanawha* to determine if the fire aboard her could be brought under control. The flames were extinguished, but it was evident the oiler was sinking. Three ships made up to her—the *Rail* alongside to port, the fleet tug *Menominee* (AT-73) to starboard, and the net tender *Butternut* (YN-4) towing ahead—and, as she continued to draw more water, beached the *Kanawha* on the southeast point of Tulagi Island. The efforts to save her would be for naught. She slid off the reef at 0400 the following morning and sank in about twenty-five fathoms of water.<sup>13</sup>

## **AARON WARD SUNK; JFK ABOARD SHIP DAMAGED IN SAME ATTACK**

The *Aaron Ward*, the first American warship to fire its guns in anger in World War II—the second shot from its No. 3 gun had sunk a Japanese Type-A midget submarine off the entrance to Pearl Harbor the morning of 7 December 1941—was also sunk by enemy aircraft. At 1512, as three planes dove out of clouds near the sun flying an attack profile, the destroyer's commanding officer ordered flank speed and her 40mm and 20mm guns opened. Ranges to the targets were inside 2,000 yards, allowing just seconds to bring down the aircraft. It was too little time; one bomb hit the after engine room, rupturing the ship's side and flooding the compartment. Two others landed abreast each fire room, and the explosions parted hull seams or blew holes in the sides, and both these compartments flooded as well. Three other planes dove on the destroyer, and bomb hits in the water close aboard to port aggravating the existing damage. The *Ortolan* took the *Aaron Ward* in tow, and fleet tug *Vireo* (AT-144) came alongside and began to pump water from her forward engine room. Despite the efforts to stem flooding aboard the destroyer, she sank while under tow to

Purvis Bay, Florida Island. In addition to the loss of their ship the survivors suffered twenty-seven shipmates killed and seven missing.<sup>14</sup>

Aboard the *LST-449*, whom the *Aaron Ward* had been ordered to screen and had joined off Togoma Point on the north coast of Guadalcanal, was Lt. (jg) John F. Kennedy, USN. After taking passage aboard the transport *USS Rochambeau* (AP-63) from San Francisco to Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, he had boarded the tank landing ship there along with 170 soldiers and a few other naval officers bound for assignments in the Solomons for transit to Guadalcanal. The *LST-449* had arrived off Togoma Point at noon, and twenty minutes later received warning that condition red was in effect. Thereafter a boat came out with orders to form task unit 31.1.1 with the *Aaron Ward* and the *LST-446* and to retire in the direction of Espiritu. Neither of those ships were then in sight. The destroyer was sighted a few minutes later and joined at high speed. The *446* never rendezvoused with the *Aaron Ward* and *LST-449*.<sup>15</sup>

Nine Vals attacked the *LST-449* at 1509; a minute later two bombs landed in the water close aboard off the port and starboard quarters of the ship. The commanding officer dodged these, and four more near misses, by maneuvering with full right and left rudder. Lt. Carlton S. Livingston's vision was obstructed by a tank landing craft being carried on deck, necessitating his ordering the rudder put over when the bridge phone talker relayed to him a lookout reported a plane was diving. The ship was shaken severely by the bomb explosions, three off each side of the LST and all within seventy-five feet. The blast from the nearest one, which landed off the ship's port quarter, lifted the stern, causing the vessel to list to starboard about twenty degrees. The explosion also lifted and stove in the side of a 36-foot landing boat suspended from port davits, sprung bulkheads, and caused some machinery derangement.<sup>16</sup>

Her gunners expended 1,600 rounds of 20mm ammunition and 13 rounds of 3-inch/.50-caliber during the action. Despite jams on the No. 2 and No. 6 twenty-millimeter guns, and the first shell for the 3-inch gun failing to seat, two planes were shot down and were seen to crash in the water and a third was on fire and trailing smoke as it withdrew. When the attack had eased, the LST closed the *Aaron Ward*, from which smoke was emitting and red flames licking to offer assistance. Before she could reach her, the *Ortolan* made fast to the

destroyer, whereupon the *LST-449* stood down Lunga Channel. She and the submarine chaser *SC-521* retired eastward towards Espiritu Santo, to avoid being in the Guadalcanal area in the event of another air strike there the following day. The LST put into Guadalcanal on 12 April and Tulagi across the Slot two days later. Kennedy disembarked there, reported to Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron Two, and took command of the *PT-109* on 23 April 1943.<sup>17</sup>

The officers and men of the *Aaron Ward*, *LST-449*, and *SC-521* received battle stars to affix to the Asiatic-Pacific campaign ribbons on their uniform blouses. Lieutenant Livingston saved the *LST-449*, and undoubtedly the lives of some of those aboard her, including possibly Kennedy's. In his endorsement of the after action report, Rear Adm. George H. Fort noted that Livingston had had little room for error in evading falling bombs, due to his ship's slow speed, which allowed little time to get out from under free-falling ordnance dropped by low flying planes:

The Commanding Officer, U.S.S. LST 449 deserves great credit for his smart handling of his ship during this attack. Although his ship is capable of only ten (10) knots speed, he succeeded in avoiding six (6) bombs, and suffered only minor damage as a result of near misses.<sup>18</sup>

Ideally, gun crews could train their mounts on enemy aircraft and down them before they could dive bomb or strafe their target. This, however, was hard to do against fast moving, maneuvering planes, which is why small, slow vessels in particular sought to acquire machine guns—by whatever means possible—to augment their self-defense capabilities.

## FINAL TALLY

In addition to sinking the destroyer *Aaron Ward*, the fleet oiler *Kanawha*, and the New Zealand minesweeper *Moa*, dive-bombing attacks damaged the cargo ship *Adhara*, the tank landing ship *LST-449* and the oil barge *Erskine M. Phelps*. United States Pacific Fleet "Operations in Pacific Ocean Areas, April 1943" summarized enemy losses thus:

Of more than 160 enemy aircraft sighted over or en route to Guadalcanal-Tulagi area, our fighters report destroying 26 VF [fighters]

and 13 VB [bombers] at the loss of 1 pilot and 7 planes. In addition, ships report shooting down about 25 VB. There is probably some duplication in both ship and aircraft reports. From a study of location of crashes observed and planes sighted retiring, it is estimated that the total damage inflicted on the enemy from fighters and AA [anti-aircraft] fire was less than 25 planes.

Commander, Naval Base Fold [Tulagi] also expressed a conservative estimate of enemy losses in the Tulagi Harbor area, due also to a reluctance to double or triple-count planes hit by more than one ship or by Marine Corps artillery battery fire:

No correct estimates of number of planes shot down can be given as reports from different vessels and [shore] gun positions vary widely. To date wreckage of three enemy planes have been found in this area; and it appears definite that four more were downed.

Shipboard fire may have accounted for additional enemy aircraft, beyond those found, as some damaged planes may have crashed out of sight in ocean waters or island jungles, while trying to make it safely back to their airfields.<sup>19</sup>

The six coastal transports apparently all emerged unscathed from the air raid. Although information is scarce regarding the actions of the *APc-23* and *APc-25*, they too, like the *APc-33*, received battle stars. Summary information about the diminutive ships, which had just arrived at Guadalcanal, ending a three-month voyage from San Pedro, California via stops at Pearl Harbor; Tutuila, Samoa; Viti Levu, Fiji; Noumea, New Caledonia; and Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, as well as the names of their commanding officers follows:

Ship	Length in Feet	Disp. Tons	Year Built	Commanding Officer
<b>Built at Fulton Shipyards, Antioch, California</b>				
<i>APc-23</i>	103	147	1942	Lt. Dennis Mann, USNR
<i>APc-24</i>	103	147	1942	Lt. Bernard F. Seligman, USNR
<i>APc-25</i>	103	147	1942	Lt. John D. Cartano, USNR
<i>APc-26</i>	103	147	1942	Lt. (jg) James B. Dunigan, USNR
<b>Built at Anderson &amp; Cristofani, San Francisco, California</b>				
<i>APc-33</i>	103	147	1942	Lt. James E. Locke, USNR
<i>APc-34</i>	103	147	1942	Lt. (jg) H. B. Palmer, USNR

## STALEMATE

*Everyone knew there “could be only one Yamamoto and nobody could take his place.” His loss “dealt an almost unbearable blow to the morale of all the military forces.”*

Vice Adm. Shigeru Fukudome, Fleet Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto’s chief of staff, commenting on the death of the Japanese admiral responsible for the December 7th attack on Pearl Harbor, who was shot down over Buin Island, Solomon Islands, by an American P38 Lightning fighter aircraft on 18 April 1943<sup>20</sup>

The 7 April 1943 air raid on the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area temporarily brought Allied naval surface operations to a standstill. All shipping was withdrawn to the south, and a proposed surface ship bombardment of enemy airfields at Vila and Munda in the New Georgia Island Group by Rear Adm. Robert Giffen’s Task Force 18 was cancelled. For nearly ten days, Allied operations focused generally on the immediate defense of existing positions. Overall, there was little change in the Allied and Japanese positions. The enemy had demonstrated mobility of air power by the attack on 7 April, followed by immediate withdrawal of the attack group; however, overall, Japanese air operations remained essentially defensive. It thus appeared that until Allied forces could impose a sufficiently heavy rate of attrition to weaken enemy strength, the current stalemate broken occasionally by sudden strikes in force would continue.<sup>21</sup>

A degradation in Japanese leadership occurred on 18 April 1943, when Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto was gathered to his ancestors. The commander in chief Combined Fleet had planned to tour Japanese bases in the Solomons and New Guinea to inspect air units participating in the I-GO operation and to boost morale following the dispiriting Japanese loss of Guadalcanal. He and staff members had boarded two “Bettys” at Rabaul that morning at 0800 and accompanied by six “Zeros” took off for Buin airfield, on the southern coast of Bougainville near Kahili village. Just as the escorts withdrew and the bombers prepared to land, one of a flight of four P38 Lightning fighter aircraft—termed the “Killer Section”—launched from Henderson Field shot down the aircraft carrying Yamamoto and a second fighter of the 339th Fighter Squadron disposed of the other bomber. The other twelve P38s of the group were there to fly top cover.<sup>22</sup>

After an encoded message advising the commanders of Base Unit No. 1, the 11th Air Flotilla, and the 26th Air Flotilla of Yamamoto's itinerary, as well as the number and types of planes that would transport and accompany him, was intercepted and deciphered by U.S. naval intelligence, the information was passed to Washington, D.C. American President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to "get Yamamoto." Knox then instructed Adm. Chester W. Nimitz of Roosevelt's direction who, after consulting Adm. William F. Halsey, Jr., commander, South Pacific, authorized the mission. The details of Yamamoto's death were hushed up. The *New York Times* of 21 May 1943 reported:

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of the combined Japanese Fleet, who reportedly boasted he would dictate peace terms to the United States from a seat in the White House, was killed during April "while engaged in combat with the enemy" aboard a warplane, Japanese Imperial Headquarters announced in a communiqué broadcast domestically this morning by the Tokyo radio.

"Gosh," said President Roosevelt upon hearing the news.<sup>23</sup>