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July 16, 1943.

Dear Admiral Nimitz:

There goes forward with this letter a track chart of our night battle on 12-13 July off Kolombangara. Mr. Samuel Morison, the historian who enjoyed the show as my guest that evening, has christened this fracas "The Battle of Kolombangara" and I am willing to agree with him. This battle, like the Kula Gulf engagement, was fought in two phases. In the first phase, we gave them a terrible beating, sinking four and almost certainly five of their six ships present. In the second phase I did exactly what I swore would never happen to me, by running head on into the torpedoes of a fresh batch of four destroyers which came in from the northward. This last brush is a matter of great chagrin, as we lost the GWIN and had to be lucky to save our two cruisers. Also I greatly regret to report that these four Japs apparently got away with no damage.

The first phase was a perfectly beautiful show from any grandstand. Had I wished to draw a picture of a perfect night battle diagram, it would be the diagram of this phase. McInerney with his five destroyers was about 6,000 yards ahead of me with the three cruisers on a 30° line of bearing, HONOLULU, LEANDER, ST. LOUIS, with Ryan and his five destroyers about 3,000 yards astern of the ST. LOUIS. We just did get up to cross ahead of him. As shown in the diagram, the van destroyers fired torpedoes at about 0109; the cruisers opened fire at 0111, and the rear destroyers fired their torpedoes from 0112 to 0115. The cruisers fired about five minutes on this leg, the HONOLULU expending 702 rounds, the LEANDER 160 rounds, and the ST. LOUIS 580 rounds of six-inch. The leading enemy destroyer and the cruiser (second in column) identified in moonlight by the Black Cat plane as of the Sendai four stack class, were literally pulverized by this fire. In less than five minutes this cruiser and destroyer were dead in the water, pouring smoke and flames.

At 0116, the cruisers executed a simultaneous turn 180° to the left and reopened fire. During this turn, we received a report from the Black Cat that the remaining four destroyers were trying to break off to the northward at high speed, but they did not get far. According to the plot, a large number of our torpedoes should have arrived in this water at about this time; and all of our ships also reopened a furious fire. On this leg, lasting about nine minutes, we sunk either two or three more enemy ships. On this leg the HONOLULU expended 408 rounds and the ST. LOUIS 806 rounds of 6-inch.

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As to ships sunk, radar operators both on the HONOLULU and other ships state emphatically that no enemy ship went off the screen under her own power. They insist that every one was sunk. As against this radar dope, I have Lieutenant Barnett, our HONOLULU spotter in the Black Cat, who states that they made two bombing runs on an enemy destroyer making away at fairly good speed, and that they saw another destroyer dead in the water and apparently in a bad way. Lacking any reports from the destroyers at this writing, I feel certain of four, a very probable fifth, but am doubtful about the sixth. LEANDER report states that they saw three ships burning as we left their area after they had been torpedoed. They also saw a ship sink; whether one of those burning or not is not clear. Other observers state positively that they saw four ships burning at one time.

The LEANDER was hit on the port side by a torpedo just after she completed the 180° turn to the left. She had just fired her first salvo on the second leg. The HONOLULU had to maneuver very smartly to clear the LEANDER and lost some of her fire effect for a short time on this leg. How this torpedo found the LEANDER is a mystery to me. Mansergh's report states that the torpedo was apparently set to "W" or snake, and it is possible that this torpedo was nearing the end of its run at a most phenomenal range. According to my rough plot made on SG data, no torpedo fired by any Jap anywhere at any time could reach the ships of our formation after the turn away. Because of this I reported the LEANDER torpedo as possibly from a submarine, and there also exists a possibility that it might have been an erratic run by one of the fifty-five or more torpedoes we had put in the water ourselves. However, these Jap torpedoes seem to have a greater range than ours, and I am of the opinion that the LEANDER was torpedoed by the only Jap torpedo to reach our line and that this torpedo was wobbling on its last legs.

I consider that "cease firing" on this second leg marks the end of the first phase. At this time the destroyers were still firing on disabled enemy vessels. The cruiser had either sunk or was about to sink. At about this time, we received a report from the Black Cat plane that two enemy ships were escaping and the plane was directed to illuminate them with flares at 0130 (Never received). At the same time, I directed McInerney to pursue the enemy. At this time the escaping enemy destroyers could not be picked up on the screen so I brought the cruisers in line of bearing around to head up the slot and try and pick them up.

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The second phase may be said to begin at 0156 when we picked up what later turned out to be four ships on the screen, 285T, 20,400 yds. They could only be faintly distinguished on the long scale, and we seemed to be closing very slowly. Immediately the question arose: Are these four enemy ships attempting to escape instead of the two reported, or is this McInerney and his four destroyers in pursuit of the enemy? At this time the forward TBS went out and all messages had to be relayed by telephone through the duplicate TBS aft. By the time we got the four destroyers on the short scale SG, (limiting range 15,000 yds.) we illuminated him with starshells to establish his identity. Now it became clear for the first time that we were closing him rapidly. In the absence of any answer from our own destroyers that they were being illuminated, the enemy character of the contact seemed established, and I ordered a 60° turn to the right to uncover the port battery and gave "commence firing." Although this maneuver was executed within three minutes of the time the enemy first appeared on the screen at 15,000 yards, it was nevertheless too late as the two forces had been closing on opposite courses at high speed.

Shortly after "commence firing" was executed, and before either cruiser fired, the ST. LOUIS was hit on the port side at frame 10 by a torpedo. She had come hard left in an attempt to avoid this torpedo and fouled the HONOLULU line of fire. At the same time the HONOLULU was forced to maneuver violently to escape torpedoes herself. About one minute after the ST. LOUIS was torpedoed, the HONOLULU likewise received a torpedo hit at about frame 10 on the starboard side. This torpedo was at first thought to come from a direction away from the enemy and I reported it by despatch as a submarine torpedo. However, the plot made today indicates that this torpedo came in on a converging course from the stern as the HONOLULU maneuvered, and Captain Hayler now believes that it came from the enemy destroyers. The HONOLULU also received a torpedo dud exactly in the middle of her stern at the waterline. This torpedo was running at very high speed and punched a hole in the ship. The torpedo stuck in the hole for a period of about 15 minutes before it fell out. Some of the men aft who saw this torpedo sticking in the ship remarked that it had a black head and yellow body. There were plenty of torpedoes in the water in the vicinity of both ships, and that these ships did not receive more of these torpedoes was due to good fortune and superb ship-handling by the captains of both ships.

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Less than one minute after the HONOLULU received her torpedo hit, the GWIN was hit in the after engine room spaces, completely disabling the ship temporarily. Although she was able to make some turns on one engine later. As all communication with the GWIN was lost, a short time elapsed before Ryan in the RALPH TALBOT could locate her and stand by. RALPH TALBOT later took GWIN in tow alongside, and first the MAURY and later the JENKINS were also sent to assist in escorting her. Later, after daylight, an attack by Zeros forced the RALPH TALBOT to clear the side. By this time the GWIN was settling fast, so the remaining damage control crew was taken off and she was sunk. Our cruisers, well screened by destroyers, made 15 knots good and arrived in Tulagi about 1530, and the LEANDER making good 10 knots, made port about 1800. All ships received excellent fighter cover throughout the day. One group of 18 dive bombers and 10 Zeros was intercepted over VISUVISU Point at about 1000, and they promptly jettisoned their bombs.

Looking over one's shoulder we can always see how we should have done differently, and no one knows the fallacy of chasing Jap torpedo boats with cruisers better than I. However, had we been sure of the enemy identity of these fellows and opened up with our 6-inch along with our starshells while making a turn away according to doctrine, we might have polished them off also without any loss to ourselves. This time we did not quite make it. I feel that the decision to polish off the two ships reported by the Black Cat was sound. Three cripples got away from us on the night of the 6th, and we were all determined not to let it happen again.

I shall be very glad to get some of the destroyer reports, as we can then place some of the enemy damage more accurately and estimate the potential of our torpedo fire. We just this moment received McInerney's report on the rescue of the 116 HELENA survivors from VELA LA VELLA. A grand job. I do not know what I would have done had this tried and true outfit of mine been sent to SoWesPac.

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There are many more highlights of this action, but I believe this covers the basic features and will present to you just about all I know at present.

Please give my best to McMorris and the others of your staff.

With sincere regard as always,

W. L. AINSWORTH.

P.S. I imagine Spike Blandy will be happy to know that the Jap torpedo exploders are not all that they should be. Me too! I was so happy, I wiped a bucket of sweat right off my brow.

Admiral C.W. Nimitz, USN.,
Commander -in-Chief, Pacific Fleet,
c/o Fleet Post Office,
San Francisco, Calif.