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3 September 1943

SECRET

SECRET REPORT to  
ComDesDiv 12 (CIC 31.2)  
ltr FM12/416-3 serial  
(10) dated 16 Aug 43.

FROM: Commander Task Force THIRTY-ONE.  
TO : Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet,  
Via : Commander Third Fleet.

Subject: Action Report for Night of August 6-7,  
1943 - Battle of Vella Gulf.

1. This report describes an unique and highly successful operation wherein a force of six U. S. destroyers annihilated an enemy force of four vessels of which three are known to have been destroyers by testimony of survivors, and the fourth is believed to have been a cruiser. The complete destruction of these vessels, carrying, again by the testimony of survivors, a substantial number of troops, was accomplished without loss or damage to any of our own ships and without the loss or even wounding of a man.

2. From contact reports of vessels in the BARAKU area and from other indications, it appeared that a "Tokio Express" might run on the night of August 6th, presumably to reinforce the KOLONGATARA garrison with men and supplies. These indications became apparent on August 5th. At that time there were eight destroyers available to Commander Task Force THIRTY-ONE in the GUADALCANAL area. Of these, two were obligated on escort duty, but the remaining six were free for use to intercept the suspected enemy. There was not adequate time for a cruiser task force to reach the area and no request for additional forces was therefor made by Commander Task Force THIRTY-ONE, particularly since, unless the enemy appeared in great strength, six destroyers were believed to be adequate for the purpose.

3. It was assumed that in order to achieve maximum benefit of darkness for both approach and retirement, the enemy force would arrive at VILA at approximately midnight.

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His recent experiences in the KULA GULF might well lead him to avoid that approach route and it appeared probably that he would take the more direct route through VELLA GULF and BLACKETT STRAIT. On either course, however, he could be intercepted by vessels placed to the northwestward of MALDENHARA.

4. The usual route for our intercepting forces has been "up the slot" between NEW GEORGIA and SANTA ISABEL, as determined ordinarily because of the shorter distance and the usually brief notice afforded of enemy approach. On this route, however, our forces have usually been detected by float planes and possibly by Japanese coast-watchers or radar equipment, which has been suspected on WEST POINT.

5. In this case, ample time was available and, in order to avoid such detection and forewarning of the enemy, the destroyer detachment was sent to the southward of the NEW GEORGIA group and through BLACKETT STRAIT to arrive in VELLA GULF by 2230, in ample time to intercept the enemy force if inferences as to his movements were correct.

6. On the evening of August 5th, Commander [redacted] was orally advised of all information available, and appropriate operation order was issued by dispatch. From then on, the matter was in his hands.

7. How well he disposed of it can, of course, be judged by the results. His preparations, his battle plan and his consequent operations constitute a sound foundation and framework for the culminating success of the engagement itself.

8. His report evidences a thorough consideration of the situation and proper indoctrination of his commanding officers. Commander Task Force THIRTY-ONE is in complete agreement with the "lessons learned and recommendations" in page 12 of the report.

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9. It is believed that this action represents the first independent destroyer action in the South Pacific area. By reason of the demand for escort duty for convoys to the forward areas and of the necessity of screening aircraft carriers, battleships and other task force dispositions, there has been little opportunity for destroyers to operate in formation, train in squadron and division attacks. Although it is most gratifying that, despite this lack of training, these two divisions were so competent and efficient in an independent destroyer action, it illustrates the desirability, when other demands do not prevent, of affording adequate unit training to destroyer squadrons and divisions in night and day destroyer attacks.

10. Again, when night action by cruiser task forces have been in prospect or have occurred, the usual formation has been a miniature fleet disposition, with destroyers ahead and astern as screens for the cruisers. This formation, while protecting the cruisers from submarine attack, yet prevents independent and planned use by the destroyers of their major weapon, the torpedo, except as a weapon of opportunity. The successful use of the torpedo in this engagement is a renewed emphasis of the value of destroyers as torpedo carriers, a value which has been somewhat neglected in recent years, with the attention concentrated on the gun power. In night action where surprise, aided by our superior radar, may be hoped for with some confidence, it would appear preferable to mass the destroyers as an attack unit ahead of the formation, with the cruisers in supporting distance. By such tactics an undiscovered torpedo attack, as in this engagement, may be achieved, with equally damaging results before gun fire has warned the enemy of our presence.

11. Commander Task Force THIRTY-ONE believes that the highest commendation is due all participants in this engagement. In separate correspondence he is recommending the award of the Navy Cross to Commander ROBERTSON. It

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FIRST REPORT (Cont'd)

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1943 - Battle of Vella Gulf.

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It is presumed the letter will make recommendations for awards  
to his subordinates, in which recommendations, to the degree  
which may be considered appropriate by Commander South  
Pacific, the West Force Commander heartily concurs.

W. S. WILKINSON,

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