

1995

## The Shame of Savo: The Sinking of HMAS Canberra—Anatomy of a Naval Disaster

Peter Charles Unsinger

Bruce Loxton

Chris Coulthard-Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Unsinger, Peter Charles; Loxton, Bruce; and Coulthard-Clark, Chris (1995) "The Shame of Savo: The Sinking of HMAS Canberra—Anatomy of a Naval Disaster," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 4 , Article 24.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss4/24>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

reduces the strategic role and hence the responsibility of Kimmel and Short in Hawaii, and second, it highlights MacArthur's failure to use properly the valuable resources entrusted to him.

MacArthur deservedly takes his lumps for responding so slowly to the outbreak of war and losing so many aircraft to surprise attack. Yet Costello's criticisms of MacArthur's conduct in the Formosa bombing controversy reveal nothing new. To some extent, the author has set up MacArthur as a straw man to allow the Hawaiian commanders off the hook for being so surprised in their placid backwater.

Costello greatly understates the value of the Pacific Fleet as a deterrent for Japan. Of course, it is obvious in hindsight that by 1941 the old American battleships were useless for modern naval warfare, but did Kimmel or the Japanese think so? Although citing Edward S. Miller's superb *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (1991), Costello gingerly avoids the true implications of Miller's revelations about Kimmel's prewar battle plan, other than to offer vague statements about proposals for immediate attacks on Japanese bases in the Marshalls. In fact, Miller demonstrated that Kimmel (a "black-shoe" battleship man to the bottom of his soles) hoped to entice the Combined Fleet into a battleship action off Wake Island. An admiral who thought his battlewagons would prevail at sea despite superior numbers of Japanese carriers would have little worry that these selfsame flattops could threaten his supposedly well protected lair.

The strength of Costello's book is its wealth of recently released information on cryptography. He provides a cogent discussion of U.S. and British efforts to break the Japanese naval cipher JN-25b and elaborates on what both countries might have known of Japanese intentions prior to the war. Costello details the intelligence that Washington failed to provide Kimmel and that, in the author's opinion, would have led to greater vigilance at Pearl Harbor. Yet in noting that Kimmel chose not to inform his colleague Short of the imminent destruction by the Japanese of their cipher machines, Costello doubts that the general would have acted any differently had he known. Perhaps the leaders in Washington felt the same way about Kimmel.

Costello is rightly outraged at the cruel treatment of Kimmel and Short, in contrast to the heroic stature accorded to MacArthur despite his many blunders in the Philippines. MacArthur should also have been quietly relieved of command, but two wrongs do not make a right. The true secret of Pearl Harbor and the disaster of the Philippines is the gross underestimation of the Imperial Japanese Navy by all Allied commanders from Roosevelt and Churchill on down, but for which only Kimmel and Short suffered.

JOHN B. LUNDSTROM  
Milwaukee Public Museum

---

Loxton, Bruce with Coulthard-Clark, Chris. *The Shame of Savo: The Sinking of HMAS Canberra—Anatomy of a Naval Disaster*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1994. 319pp. A\$34.95

During the early morning hours of 9 August 1942, a Japanese task force of surface ships entered the waters adjoining the island of Guadalcanal and inflicted a stunning defeat on the Allied naval force protecting the transports off-loading supplies to the Marines ashore. Four cruisers were lost: three American (USS *Vincennes*, *Astoria*, and *Quincy*) and one Australian (HMAS *Canberra*). Although many have studied the battle of Savo Island, there is now at last a book that looks at not only the engagement but other aspects of the incident as well. The new information includes intelligence, communications, and how Operation WATCHTOWER (the U.S. invasion of Guadalcanal) was supported by task force commanders and ships' captains.

Bruce Loxton (a former naval attaché in Washington, Director of Naval Intelligence, and student at the U.S. Naval War College and the Royal College of Defence Studies) was a midshipman on the *Canberra* when it sank. Loxton's coauthor, Chris Coulthard-Clark, has written several books on Australian defence history.

Loxton addresses the question of leadership in WATCHTOWER and examines in detail Admirals F.J. Fletcher, R.L. Ghormley, and R.K. Turner. He finds flaws in each man, but Fletcher receives most of his criticism. Loxton believes that the handling of the carrier groups left much to be desired—leaving the Marines on Guadalcanal without supplies was inexcusable, but the author criticizes Turner for the state of the surface forces covering the transports. Admiral Ghormley's command of the

entire operation also receives severe scrutiny. Loxton shows that there were serious flaws in the way WATCHTOWER was handled.

Communications were a real problem. A vital comparison between how the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy directed radio traffic is a good example.

The point made so well in John Costello's study of Pearl Harbor and the relationship between the planning people under Admiral Turner and the intelligence staff in the Office of Naval Intelligence prior to Pearl Harbor is examined again in Loxton's work from the perspective of WATCHTOWER. Prewar intelligence was clouded as well by poor assessments of the Japanese. Savo and other surface engagements in the Solomons are testimony to the effective use of the night. Although aerial reconnaissance on both sides was poor, the errors committed by the Allies proved crucial. Even with questionable identification of ships, the problem was compounded by the delays and misdirection between reconnaissance and commands. The division between General MacArthur's and Admiral Ghormley's commands, as well as the air reconnaissance planning within the command, caused real problems for WATCHTOWER commanders.

For those who like to immerse themselves in the technical aspects of a battle, *The Shame of Savo* will not disappoint. There is a chapter discussing the possibility that USS *Bagley* may have torpedoed *Canberra*, with a close examination of its battle damage, including discussion on other ships as well. Questions are raised about the picket ship USS *Blue* and how the passage

of the line of Japanese cruisers could have been missed at such close quarters—closer than one remembers from previous works on Savo.

There could have been a serious problem with this book. It is obvious this is a labor of love for the ship in which Loxton learned his craft, and for an outstanding captain and crew. The loss of the *Canberra*, and some of the haphazard comments that have been made about the ship, those who sailed in it, and about the service of which it was a part, could have contributed to a desire to overlook flaws or overcompensate in analysis. I do not believe that has happened here. Loxton has done an excellent job, and many myths about the battle of Savo Island are finally laid to rest.

PETER CHARLES UNSINGER  
 San Jose State University

---

Lundstrom, John B. *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign: Naval Fighter Combat from August to November 1942*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994. 626pp. \$44.95

This book completes John Lundstrom's authoritative two-volume history of the development of U.S. Navy fighter combat tactics, begun with *The First Team: Pacific Naval Air Combat from Pearl Harbor to Midway*, and it reflects the author's firm grasp of primary materials excavated in multiarchival and bilingual research. It masterfully describes and analyzes the pivotal role that U.S. Navy carrier fighting squadrons played between 7 August and 15 November 1942 supporting the first Allied amphibious

offensive in the Pacific, Operation WATCHTOWER (Guadalcanal).

Lundstrom details the pioneering work of Fighting Squadron VF 5 (*Saratoga*), VF 6 (*Enterprise*), and VF 71 (*Wasp*) as they covered the landings in the Solomons on 7 and 8 August. VF 5 and VF 6 went on to fight at the battle of the Eastern Solomons on 24 August and VF 72 (*Hornet*) and VF 10 (which replaced VF 6 in *Enterprise*) at Santa Cruz on 26 October. Both were "desperate carrier slugging matches," Lundstrom observes, "whose level of ferocity was seldom equaled until the Kamikaze onslaught of 1944–1945."

After Japanese submarines sidelined *Saratoga* on 31 August and sank *Wasp* on 15 September, their respective fighting squadrons shifted ashore to ply their trade alongside Marine Corps and Army Air Force units at Henderson Field. "Nowhere else," the author writes, "did aviators fly for months from a squalid airfield perched precariously on the front lines . . . subjected to almost incessant bombing and shelling." Finally, VF 10 from the "wounded but operational" *Enterprise* helped smash the last major thrust by the Japanese to retake Guadalcanal, in mid-November.

While some individuals might complain that an author's intimate familiarity with his subject could tempt him to inundate his reader with trivia, Lundstrom smoothly integrates a wealth of human touches into his narrative. His warriors bob in their Mae Wests miles from rescue on a lonely sea or encounter potent Australian beer; some even brood over the necessity of killing.

The reassessment of the competence of Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher