

Excerpt from
Battle of Surigao Strait

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The waters were closing over unlucky *Wakaba* when Nishimura's fleet came in for a potential taste of same. At 0800 Third Section was steaming placidly through the Sulu Sea northeast at 18 knots. If the pace was relaxed, the vigil was not. An hour ago *Mogami* had launched two more Jakes to San Jose, and was preparing two more. On *Yamashiro's* fantail Air WO Tanaka Hiroshi and his six men were busy in preparations to catapult her two Jakes aloft as well, uneasily looking skyward at times. One of the planes was on the catapult and the other stowed atop the manually operated dolly which led from the port side of the ship toward the catapult. This arrangement was necessary, because *Yamashiro* had no hangar. The sky was clear with no clouds and the sea calm, the sun shining brightly. Nerves were tight and eyes watching for any sign of the expected enemy. ¹

There had been a false alarm at 0830 when *Mogami* flashed the word of a submarine stalking astern to starboard. The submarine was about nine kilometers astern and apparently simply tracking Third Section. Of course this implied the sub was guiding other forces. Nishimura did not miss the hint. At 0850 he ordered: "Tighten anti-aircraft and anti-submarine alert!"

The latter was a precaution, it was the former that counted. Nishimura was fairly sure enemy aircraft were en-route. In just five minutes, the wisdom of his suspicions and order were confirmed: at 0855 *Yamashiro's* radar reported pips bearing 20 degrees. The flagship hoisted flags to warn the fleet. On *Fuso* Kato Yasuo heard the bugle call for battle stations, but as his No.1 turret prepared for action, there came a tense lull. Turret Chief Oda's voice cut through the tension, "Get the Type 3 shells ready!"

Aboard *Mogami* Captain Toma ordered Messenger Hasegawa to sound General Quarters. Jumping over to the PA system and opening its cover, he sounded the bugle into it. Then Capt. Toma ascended to the AA control station and Hasegawa followed him. There with binoculars around his neck and a semaphore stuffed in his belt the messenger and Toma stood fearlessly in the open air among the lookouts watching the action unfold.

¹ ATIS Files, Tanaka, Hiroshi Interrogation. No 638.

On *Asagumo*, Chief Engineer Tokichi Ishii was resting in his room when the call to man battle stations came over the telephone. Ishii sprang up and dashed his way through narrow passages and hatches to the engine room. *Asagumo* had been using only No.2 boiler while making 18 knots. Ishii immediately ordered No.1 boiler be fired up, which would make 30 knots available. Ishii became more relaxed as his men sprang into action. Everything seemed under control and there had not yet been any vibrations of bombing attacks. It seemed a full ten minutes before further word came from the bridge by phone “enemy planes sighted”, followed by “three enemy planes sighted.” Another lull of about three minutes followed, then two excited calls:

“Enemy formation sighted”, “About 20 planes! Prepare to open fire!”

The planes closed in, and soon were identified as twenty-seven in number, comprised of TBF, F6F, and SB2Cs. They were boring in steadily. Nishimura wasn't going to wait for their arrival. He ordered all ships to open fire with each size gun as came in range, in hopes of disrupting their attack formations and target selection process. The enemy was approaching from starboard and at first the big 14-inch of the battleships opened fire, then as distance closed the whole range of fleet guns -- from AA to 5-inch. In the engine room Ishii felt *Asagumo* rock as the DD's main guns opened fire, to be followed soon by her AA guns. Shooting was good, and gunnery chiefs must have been pleased to see their bursts blooming in the sky at the right altitude and range of the approaching aircraft.

The aircraft were from the two search groups launched by *Enterprise* at 0600 each composed of six bombers and eight fighters with each of the bombers loaded with wing gas tanks and two 500-lb bombs. Though it had no connection with the sighted submarine, the group searching the second sector led by Lt. Raymond E. Moore sighted Nishimura at 0830, about the time *Mogami* was preoccupying the force with her report of a stalker. Lt Moore promptly radioed a contact report, giving Third Section's position, speed 15 knots on course 35 degrees. It was accurately reported as two *Fuso*-class battleships, one *Mogami* class cruiser, and four DDs. Moore had remained distant, preferring to wait till the first group searching the first sector could hustle over to make it a stronger combined attack. As he waited, Lt. Moore was glad that he had

decided to pass on the targets he had encountered a half-hour ago.²

At 0754 Moore's flight had sighted what looked like two DDs and one DE. Moore decided he would not break radio silence, or even attack. The ships sighted were astride their return leg course, and could be attacked on the way back to *Enterprise* if nothing else turned up. Moore preferred to go on hunting for bigger game. Now that bigger game was before him, and at 0840 as the other group led by Commander Robert E. Riera arrived, the *Enterprise* planes began to form up for a joint attack and turned toward the Japanese. Nishimura sighted them four minutes later. (Meanwhile, the soundness of Moore's decision regarding the 0754 sighting was affirmed for DesDiv 21 was just about to be attacked. *Franklin's* planes had begun diving on them barely ten minutes after *Enterprise's* planes bypassed them.)

Because of the long-range main battery fire, the *Enterprise* planes began to make a high speed climb to obtain a favorable diving position from the east, out of the sun. The fused projectiles were bursting uncomfortably close, considering the range and altitude. The *Enterprise* fliers rated Nishimura's AA fire as fairly accurate and incessant, measurably adding to the challenges of their approach run as Lt. Moore described: "Some bursts were near as 500 feet at same level, and some above the formation, very spectacular, some being purple, red, blue, yellow and white. Some bursts contained double-bursting streamers. The major ships were in a column led by the *Yamashiro*, second *Fuso*, and third *Mogami*. The DDs were disposed in a square about the major units. The major ships maneuvered in such a way as to keep our formation under fire from the main batteries. Climb was continued to an altitude of 15,000 feet, at which point we were to eastward disposition. Projectiles, apparently 5-inch, followed the formation during the approach; most bursts were behind the formation but fairly accurate as to altitude."³

His description of the formation was remarkably accurate, even down to the position of *Mogami*, which had taken up the rear position of the three big ships. On port and starboard hands, some 1,500 to 2,000 meters abeam, the destroyers were disposed in a square. *Yamagumo* was 1,500 meters ahead of *Shigure* on the port flank, while DesDiv 4 flag *Michishio* preceded *Asagumo* on the starboard flank.

² Cdr. Edward Stafford, USN, *The Big E*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962 .)

³ *Enterprise*, USS. Action Report.

On *Michishio's* bridge, LtCdr Tomoo Tanaka was caught by surprise when *Yamashiro* opened fire and began to turn right. Somehow he had missed the warning, and had not seen the planes begin their run-in. Since *Michishio* with *Asagumo* was on the starboard flank of the battleships in the path of the planes this is surprising. Both immediately opened fire. To Tanaka's relief the hurtling aircraft seemed to ignore his ship, and went after the heavies under his protection. Meanwhile the sky all around the attacking enemy planes erupted with bursts of anti-aircraft fire.

Some of those 5-inch bursts were coming from *Yamagumo's* No. 1 gun turret, for whose gunners Petty Officer 2nd Class Morita Michio was busily loading shells and serving up powder charges from his post in the turret's handling room. The other DDs were firing as well. Down in the handling room as he shoved charges up through two openings to the turret crew above, Morita could not see or know what was going on, but it was clearly a vigorous anti-air battle. Even the huge 14-inch guns of the battleships were in action, albeit in a measured, professional manner.

On battleship *Fuso*, for example, only the forward turrets had swung around to bear on the enemy. There wasn't time or really need to bring the others on line. Deep in the bowels of the battleship's forward section, at a post similar to Morita's on *Yamagumo*, but in a much larger compartment Yeoman 1st Class Hideo Ogawa in *Fuso's* powder magazine heard No. 2 Turret Officer Goto's order to load powder and shells. At last *Fuso* was going to fire her main guns in anger at the enemy! ⁴

As Ogawa sweated with ten other men to seize the powder bags and maneuver them to the lift, he would not have felt his working space was all that larger than Moriya's on *Yamagumo*. The No.2 magazine was only some 5-6 meters square, but at least had good head clearance with the deck some 3 meters high. Since the powder containers were stored on top of each other on all four sides of the compartment, working conditions could get rather cramped with the eleven men in the compartment. The sense of claustrophobia was only aggravated by the fact that the only exit was up, by a steel hatch in one corner opening up into the shell room above. As Ogawa

⁴ ATIS Files, Ogawa, Hideo Interrogation No.656.

worked and the boom of battle began to filter down through the steel the great battleship's hull began to quake from near-misses. It was cold comfort that if the end came, for him it would surely be quick, surrounded as Ogawa was by 2,000 main battery powder canisters!

In the skies above the *Enterprise* planes were ready. Commander Riera's first division would take the lead BB [*Yamashiro*], while Lt. Moore's second division would take *Fuso*. Fighters would strafe and fire rockets, particularly the DDs, in an attempt to suppress their AA fire. They came out of the sun, and held their dives till the altimeters had spun down to 2,500 to 2,000 feet above the water before releasing their bombs. Released just before their bombs, their rockets swooshed ahead toward the towering superstructures of both Japanese battleships. Rocket hits were observed, but though bombs landed close around flagship *Yamashiro*, none directly connected.

Inside *Yamashiro*'s high battle bridge Lt. Ezaki said "an atmosphere of composure and fighting spirit prevailed...the enemy bullets showered like rain near the bridge, and pierced here and there." One went through the palm of a petty officer next to Ezaki. But when he glanced at Nishimura's face, "he looked as cool as cucumber, and was not perturbed at all. He was completely fearless and had iron nerves. Such a commander instilled composure and bravery to his men." A near-miss to starboard aft opened the plates, and for a time gave *Yamashiro* a list. Though the strafing and rockets did little damage to the stout armor and metal of *Yamashiro*'s superstructure, some twenty sailors were killed.⁵

For more information about Battle of Surigao Strait and the author Anthony P. Tully, please visit the book's website:

<http://ww2db.com/surigao>

⁵ Ezaki, Sumito. "The Mystery of BB *Yamashiro*'s sinking instantly"; Tanaka, Hiroshi Interrogation.