

THE BATTLE OF EMPRESS AUGUSTA BAY

Via Noumea Wireless- United Press San Francisco -An exclusive write-up.

NOTE: This write-up has been altered slightly for publication by the censors.

Aboard a light cruiser off Bougainville sinking at least one heavy cruiser and four destroyers and severely damaging another two cruisers and two destroyers. Out gunned, but never out fought an American Task Force just handed the Imperial Japanese Navy one of the soundest thrashings it has yet received. The three-hour running sea battle--the war's longest--was carried out to a brilliant conclusion off Bougainville by Rear Admiral "Tip" Merrill of Natchez, Miss., who matched six-inches against eight-inchers and won.

Merrill's warships scored a second overwhelming triumph in less than two hours after the battle's last shot was fired when they beat off an enemy air revenge mission, shooting down seventeen of a force of sixty-seven dive-bombers. Not a single AMERICAN SHIP was lost in either engagement.

Only twenty-four hours earlier, Merrill's task force ran right up under the Jap's nose at Rabaul to mercilessly bombard the enemy's bases at Buksa and in the Shortland Island AREA. In both of these raids shore batteries were at five until silenced.

The stage for the sea battle was the north end of the Solomon Sea, about thirty-five miles west of Empress Augusta Bay. When intercepted, four destroyers, four cruisers, four destroyers--comprising twelve units in three groups composed the Jap Force. This Jap Force was on a direct course between their base at Rabaul and Empress Augusta Bay. Their apparent intention was to intercept and destroy our transports and supply ships unloading there and bombard the marines ashore. Admiral Merrill's orders were explicit--prevent any such occurrence. He exceeded orders by not only doing just that but virtually destroying the entire opposing task force as well--never at any time, however, leaving even the tiniest entrance into Empress Augusta Bay where into a segment of the Jap Force might slip in the heat of battle.

With the surprise element in our favor, the choice of battle site was Admiral Merrill's. He had two alternatives--fight off of uncharted shoals surrounding Empress Augusta Bay or farther westward in an area permitting more sea room. Merrill chose the former, despite its disadvantages, because his mission was to maintain units in position across the entrance to Empress Augusta Bay. The compensation for the selection of the less favorable of the two battle sites, however, ADMIRAL Merrill's first, in order to gain sea room to aid maneuvering, secondly, to enable the movement of any possible cripples to the unengaged side of the battleline, and thirdly, to keep at all times the battle line between the Japs and Empress Augusta Bay.

The enemy was west-northwest of us when intercepted. We stood in on an intercepting course between them and Express Augusta Bay to cut them off from the latter. Our general movement was to the west, away from the bay. We commenced firing at two forty-nine, a.m. Our first salvoes were fired to the starboard, on a southern course, firing to the west. There followed sixty-five solid minutes of intensive gunnery duelling at long range.

Our ships started hitting almost immediately. Within ten minutes, this ship's first target--believed to be a heavy cruiser--was stopped. One ship in the center of the enemy ~~column~~ column blew up completely. Meanwhile, the confused enemy was resorting extensively to star shells to illuminate us. Float zeros were overhead dropping flares to aid them. The battle area looked like something out of a Deallie movie.

From the open bridge, where I was viewing the proceeding in a heavy rain, the scene was one of utter confusion. Our ships were twisting and turning, constantly maneuvering, yet, somehow, never losing sight of specific targets. Dark brown clouds of gunsmoke were billowing up everywhere to merge into the low lying rain clouds. From sea level to a height of only several hundred feet, star shells and flares were furnishing almost incessant illumination. It reminded one of Market street on a foggy night. The enemy's eight-inch salvoes appeared almost as one enormous explosion when seen from the line of fire. Great geysers of water were shooting up on all sides of us, ahead of us, astern of us. Every time a star shell broke into light, it brought into sight the churning water, split up by anywhere from six to nine-gun salvoes. Several ships were burning around us. Others were smoking heavily dead in the water. Our destroyers were darting in and out among the goliaths, then streaking off elsewhere to take a crack at something their size of larger cripples. They are credited incidentally with no less than five torpedo hits against the largest enemy units.

Almost incessant illumination is aiding the accuracy of the enemy's gunfire, so Admiral Merrill orders our ships to make smoke and orders counter-illumination by star shells short of the enemy line. Great thick black rolls of smoke slide out of the funnels emphasizing eeriness of the picture. The roar of our gunfire is deafening. Salvo splashes are observable on all sides. The ship just ahead of us is straddled by almost every heavy enemy salvo, but speeds on unscathed its guns roaring. An incessant stream of reports pours in over this task force flagship's tbs (talk between ships); but, despite the deafening din of gunfire, the very violent maneuvering, and the fact that we are now fighting almost in stygian darkness, never once is our formation confused or disrupted, never once is a difference of opinion expressed over any procedure or an order questioned.

Sixty-six minutes after our first salvo, the backbone of the enemy's battle line is broken. He is running away--those of his units that are able to do so. Our battle line firing ceases at 0400, but it is not until 0545 that our last shot is fired--by a destroyer salvo which puts the final touch on the last cripple and enemy con of the Fubuki class.

We gather up our chicks and the destroyers make a final count of noses and then we head for Empress Augusta Bay. The entire three hour action has been fought in a circle with a radius of twenty miles. Three hours earlier we had sighted the enemy thirty miles offshore. In the interim, we have fought east and west about thirty miles, north and south about twenty. We secure from general quarters about six a.m. and go below for a cup of coffee and a bite to eat.

But the respite isn't to last for long. At seven forty-five a.m., general quarters sounds and we race topside. Large groups of enemy planes are coming in. At eight hundred they are here--between sixty and seventy Aichi ninety-nine dive bombers, easily identifiable by their fixed landing gear. They can't be going to make too steep a dive, however, as they are only twelve thousand feet up. At eight four all hell busts loose. The Nips are coming in in scattered groups, in glide-type forty-degree dives, strafing as they swoop past. Not a single bomb hit is scored. We even turn the after turret of our main battery loose on one and blew him to bits. Two bombs land close aboard and shake us badly, but no damage done. At eight twelve all sorts of falling planes are around the formation. At least five enemy airmen bail out only to die beneath the waves. One pilot parachutes down off our port beam, a bare four-hundred yards away from me. He is unfortunately in the direct line of machine gun fire and the twenties and forties cut him to shreds.

At eight twelve and a half, a second wave is about through. They dive over selected targets and then attempt to skim away at wave level. This ship has already accounted for five of the enemy by itself. At eight twenty-eight all remaining enemy planes are gone. They didn't seem overly enthusiastic about their job. Quite a few did not even disgorge their bombs.

We've been at our battle stations over twelve hours of the past thirty-two and at ease at battle stations for about half again as long, but when I go below, I find the wardroom jammed with noisy, enthusiastic though tired officers.

It seems incredible that only thirty-two hours ago we were bombarding Buka; that only a day ago we were duelling briskly with shore batteries in the Shortland Island prior to bombarding. This bombardment, incidentally, represented the first daylight bombardment carried out during this war. Single shots of shore batteries, whose calibres ranged from three to six inches, splashed around us liberally and several whistled through the mast.

Lastly, I can think of no better way of closing this report than by making public the text of a message Admiral Merrill sent to all units of his task force: "Seldom has a task force been called upon to accomplish such varied and difficult missions in so brief a period. Seldom, if ever, have these missions been accomplished so thoroughly and at so little cost. Our folks at home need have no anxiety as to the outcome of this or any other war as long as they continue to produce such fighters to man our fine ships. God bless all of you. # /s/ ADMIRAL MERRILL

+++++NOTE: THIS WRITE UP CANNOT BE MAILED+++++