



U.S.S. Hornet Sea, Air & Space Museum

Additional Historic Information

Battle of Santa Cruz Islands (*Hornet CV-8*)

Compiled and Written by Museum Historian Bob Fish

LOSING THE BATTLE, WINNING THE WAR

During September and October, both the Japanese and the American forces on and around Guadalcanal had escalated the fighting in an almost piece-meal fashion, with reinforcements pouring in on both sides. The stakes became improbably high for this remote island and it became a national test of willpower. U.S. military planners were determined to keep the supply lines open with Australia while the Japanese were just as determined to cut them.

There had been many smaller naval clashes in the Solomon Islands area but in late October, the Japanese decided to launch a major offensive. Their tactical goals were to gain control of Henderson airfield on Guadalcanal, eliminate the 10,000 American troops on the island and destroy all allied warships in the Solomons area. On October 11, a massive naval force left Truk to provide cover for the invasion forces with four aircraft carriers, four battleships, ten cruisers, and 30 destroyers.

Unfortunately for them, VADM "Bull" Halsey had just been given command of the U.S. South Pacific Force. On October 24, *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *South Dakota* (BB- 57) arrived from Pearl Harbor along with their escorts, in effect doubling the firepower of the U.S. Navy in the area. The U.S. now had two aircraft carriers, one battleship, six cruisers, and fourteen destroyers in their strike team – the odds were only 2 to 1 against them, which was not bad by 1942 standards. Halsey immediately ordered this force to move north of the Santa Cruz Islands to intercept the IJN fleet and keep them from supporting the invasion force.

At dawn on October 26, *Enterprise* launched a search group of 16 SBD dive bombers with 500lb bombs. They made first contact and scored two bomb hits on the carrier *Zuiho*, knocking her out of the battle. However, she and two other IJN carriers had already launched a sixty-five plane strike against the U.S. ships. By 9:30 AM, *Hornet* had launched two strike groups with a total of fifty-four aircraft. The opposing air groups passed each other in the air.

Hornet's dive bombers fought their way through a determined Japanese fighter defense and planted six 1,000lb bombs on *Shokaku*, taking her out of further combat action. A second wave found the cruiser *Chikuma* and inflicted sufficient damage from two hits to remove her from the battle as well.



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By this time, however, *Hornet's* luck had run out. The *Enterprise* task group had steamed into a small rain squall and was not observed by the incoming Japanese air groups. All their fury was concentrated on *Hornet*. At 10:12 AM, the "Val" dive bombers opened up the assault. Captain Mason kept her moving at high speed, twisting and turning to dodge the rain of bombs falling out of the sky. One scored a hit on the aft end of *Hornet's* flight deck.



Figure 1: Pilot of a Japanese dive bomber about to crash his "Val" into *Hornet's* signal bridge.

Then the flight leader from *Shokaku*, whose plane had been fatally hit by anti-aircraft fire, intentionally crashed his aircraft into *Hornet's* island superstructure. This destroyed the signal bridge and rained live ordnance and flaming debris onto, and through, the flight deck below. As the last group of the bombers dove down, the torpedo aircraft closed in from multiple directions. Two torpedoes struck her hull on the starboard side, three more bombs exploded at various levels within the ship, and a burning "Kate" torpedo aircraft made a suicide crash into the forward hull on the port side.

Within ten minutes, *Hornet* had been substantially damaged from a frenzied air attack that came from all quarters. Scores of sailors had been killed or wounded, many fires were raging, there was no electrical power and she was dead in the water.



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Figure 2: With *Hornet* dead in the water, the cruiser *Northampton* prepares to take her under tow.

Several of her escort destroyers, notable the USS *Mustin*, USS *Russell* and USS *Morris* pulled alongside to render assistance. Many of *Hornet's* injured (75) and non-essential (800) personnel were evacuated directly onto these ships or into rafts in the sea. Braving horrific odds, the damage control parties gained the upper hand, putting out many of the fires, reducing the ship's list and getting back some of her propulsion. *Hornet* was taken in tow by the USS *Northampton* but hadn't gone far before coming under a new

air attack. At 4:30 PM, another torpedo hit her starboard side and two more bombs blasted the flight deck. She was again dead in the water and key engineering compartments were now flooded. It was clear the Japanese had no plans to let *Hornet* escape.

By 5:30 PM, *Hornet* was completely abandoned. Not wanting her to fall into the hands of the approaching IJN surface fleet, destroyers *Mustin* and *Anderson* were tasked with sinking her. In the span of two hours, they fired nine torpedoes and 369 rounds of 5" ammunition into her hull. While burning furiously, *Hornet* refused to sink even as the first Japanese vessels appeared on the horizon. Within a few hours, the Japanese destroyers *Makigumo* and *Akigumo* fired four of the deadly Long Lance torpedoes into the flaming hulk. *Hornet* slipped beneath the waves at 1:35 AM on October 27th.