

COMMANDER DESTROYER SQUADRON TWO

A16/FF12-4(2)
Serial 080

Fleet Post Office,
Pearl Harbor, T.H.,
May 18, 1942.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

From: Commander Task Unit 17.5.4
(Commander Destroyer Squadron Two).
To : Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet.
Via : (1) Commander Task Force 17.
(Commander Cruisers Pacific Fleet).
(2) Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet.
Subject: Action in Coral Sea Area on May 8, 1942,
report of.
Reference: (a) U.S. Navy Regulations, Article 712.
Enclosures: (A) U.S.S. MORRIS secret serial No. 001 of
May 10, 1942.
(B) U.S.S. HALMANN conf. ltr DD412/A9 of
May 12, 1942.
(C) U.S.S. ANDERSON conf. ltr serial 092 of
May 10, 1942.
(D) U.S.S. RUSSELL conf. serial 012 of
May 12, 1942.
(E) U.S.S. ANDERSON conf. serial 094 of
May 9, 1942.

1. In accordance with reference (a), a report is hereby submitted of the particulars coming to the attention of the Commander Task Unit 17.5.4 on May 8, 1942, when the task force with which this Unit was operating was attacked by enemy planes, and of the subsequent developments including the loss of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON and the rescue of survivors. Enclosures (A) to (E) inclusive, forwarded herewith, are reports of the commanding officers of vessels of this unit, now in company, covering these same events of May 8, 1942.

2. On May 8, 1942 Task Unit 17.5.4 was operating as Air Group Destroyers with Task Force 17, under the command of Commander Cruisers, Pacific Fleet in the U.S.S. YORKTOWN. Vessels in company consisted of Task Group 17.2 U.S.S. MINNEAPOLIS, NEW ORLEANS, ASTORIA, CHESTER, PORTLAND with Destroyers Attack Unit 17.2.4 U.S.S. PHELPS, DEWEY, and AYLWIN; and Task Group 17.5, the Air group, consisting of U.S.S. YORKTOWN, LEXINGTON and this Task Unit, U.S.S. MORRIS, HALMANN, ANDERSON and RUSSELL. The Task Force was in Cruising Formation "SAIL", axis 305°T, this unit on port side of screen.

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3. The following events of the day in chronological order were particularly noted:

<u>G.C.T.</u>	<u>L.C.T.</u>	
1926	0626	U.S.S. LEXINGTON launched 22 planes as scouting group.
2020	0720	U.S.S. YORKTOWN launched 8 bombing planes and 4 fighter planes.
2128	0828	Information was received that enemy consisting of 2 carriers, 4 cruisers, and 3 destroyers had been located by scouting planes.
2140	0840	Signal was received that position of enemy from Fleet Center bore 006° T distance 126 miles.
2156	0856	Signal received - Commander Carrier Division One assume tactical command.
2200	0900	Carriers launched striking groups; U.S.S. LEXINGTON 42 planes, U.S.S. YORKTOWN 37 planes.
2230	0930	U.S.S. LEXINGTON launched 14 plane fighter patrol. U.S.S. YORKTOWN recovered 5 planes.
2240	0940	Signal received - Go to General Quarters.
2245	0945	Changed speed to 20 knots.
2309	1009	Signal received - Strange aircraft sighted bearing 040°.
2310	1010	U.S.S. LEXINGTON launched 8 fighter planes and recovered 9 planes.
2313	1013	Signal received by TBS - Large group of enemy bombers headed this way bearing 027°.
2315	1015	Smoke sighted bearing 000° distance 10 miles, apparently from shot down planes.
2340	1040	Signal received Form Cruising Disposition "VICTOR". This unit formed on rear semicircle. Axis 305° T, cruisers on 3000 yard circle, destroyers on 4000 yard circle.
2355	1055	Signal received by TBL - Launch entire Combat Patrol Groups.
0009	1109	U.S.S. YORKTOWN launched 4 planes; U.S.S. LEXINGTON launched 10 planes.
0010	1110	Signal received by TBS - "Large group of torpedo planes bearing 020° distant 35 miles, now 22 miles, coming straight in."
0011	1111	Increased speed to 25 knots. Changed course to 125°T.
0012	1112	Signal received by TBS, "Torpedo planes now 15 miles".

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C.C.T.

I.C.T.

0013	1113	Signal received by TBS, "Our planes have sighted enemy and are going after them".
0014	1114	Signal received by TBS, "Enemy bombers coming in. protected by nine enemy fighters"
0015	1115	Enemy attacked. Position Lat. 14° 45'S. Long. 155° 20'E. Weather good with blue sky and scattered clouds; wind from SE, force 3; barometer 29:79, sea, 2, with swells from SE; visibility 20 miles. Enemy approached from high in the sun and dived out of a large cumulus cloud which was at an altitude of about 4000 feet. The first wave consisted of about six torpedo planes which directed their attack at the U.S.S. LEXINGTON. Fire was slow in starting, and extremely erratic. This attack was followed closely by a dive bomber wave which was concentrated on the carriers. At the first attack the carriers increased speed and constantly maneuvered. Due to these maneuvers the U.S.S. YORKTOWN and U.S.S. LEXINGTON became quite widely separated and the formation broke into two separate screens operating about the two carriers. Two ships of this unit, U.S.S. MORRIS and ANDERSON, remained with LEXINGTON along with U.S.S. MINNEAPOLIS, NEW ORLEANS and DEWEY. Two ships of this unit, U.S.S. RUSSELL and HAMILMAN, operated with the U.S.S. YORKTOWN along with U.S.S. AYLVIN and PHELPS, and U.S.S. PORTLAND, ASTORIA and CHESTER. Due to this separation and to the erratic avoiding action taken by the carriers, an effective screen was maintained with difficulty. Repeated attacks were made on both carriers by both torpedo planes and divebombers. Fire by both anti-aircraft and automatic weapons was heavy though erratic and several planes were observed to be shot down. Several hits were observed on the LEXINGTON and many near misses.
0027	1127	A plane was observed approaching low to water making a typical torpedo run toward U.S.S. LEXINGTON. Taken under heavy fire by all ships in the vicinity. As it came close to the U.S.S. LEXINGTON through extremely heavy fire it was identified as friendly and fire was ceased. It landed on the U.S.S. LEXINGTON and crashed over the side. The U.S.S. MORRIS was directed to rescue the personnel of this plane and maneuvered to pick up Ensign F.R. Mac Donald, 304

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		U.S.N.R., the pilot, and HAMILTON, C.H., RM.3c, U.S. N. The admirable conduct of this pilot, who was found to have been wounded previously in aerial combat, was the subject of a separate report to the Task Group Commander.
0032	1132	(About) Action ceased.
0037	1137	Changed speed to 25 knots.
0103	1203	Signal received that U.S.S. YORKTOWN Radar was out of commission.
0106	1206	Set course 028°T speed 15 knots. U.S.S. YORKTOWN and LEXINGTON groups joined up and screen was re-formed. Both carriers appeared to be damaged and fuel oil was noted in the wakes of both.
0125	1225	Carriers commenced recovery.
0233	1333	Changed speed to 19 knots.
0300	1400	Changed speed to 25 knots and course to 200° T.
0303	1403	Several ships on starboard quarter of formation opened fire on planes which proved to be friendly. No hits were observed.
0330	1430	U.S.S. DEWEY was ordered to search astern for survivors.
0345	1445	U.S.S. LEXINGTON reported that fires on board were not under control.
0346	1446	Heavy explosion was observed on the U.S.S. LEXINGTON.
0355	1455	The U.S.S. LEXINGTON signalled by flaghoist for ships to stand by her.
0408	1508	Commander Task Force 17 assumed tactical command. U.S.S. PHELPS, MORRIS, and ANDERSON closed the U.S.S. LEXINGTON to render assistance if required.
0425	1525	U.S.S. YORKTOWN launched inner air patrol. U.S.S. LEXINGTON reported a serious explosion on board.
0436	1536	U.S.S. HALMAIN was ordered to relieve U.S.S. PHELPS in standing by U.S.S. LEXINGTON.
0440	1540	U.S.S. LEXINGTON reported that pressure had been lost, fires were out of control, ship was listing badly, and that all lower deck stations had been abandoned.
0450	1550	U.S.S. LEXINGTON requested U.S.S. MORRIS to come alongside to put over fire hoses and furnish pressure on them.
0507	1607	U.S.S. MORRIS went alongside starboard side of U.S.S. LEXINGTON with difficulty and passed over three fire hoses. The disembarkation of wounded was commenced, two motor whaleboats leaving the starboard side of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON and others being lowered to the MORRIS.

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0600	1700	Another explosion was observed on U.S.S. LEXINGTON.
0604	1704	An explosion was observed on U.S.S. LEXINGTON.
0604	1708	Word was passed on the U.S.S. LEXINGTON to abandon ship. Some six hundred survivors were landed on the U.S.S. MORRIS, some being then transferred by boat to other vessels in the vicinity.
0614	1714	U.S.S. MORRIS backed clear of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON, with difficulty avoiding large numbers of men in the water. U.S.S. ANDERSON was on station near the port bow of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON and picked up personnel in the water.
0635	1735	U.S.S. HAMMANN went alongside starboard side of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON and took off additional survivors.
0639	1739	U.S.S. MORRIS went alongside U.S.S. MINNEAPOLIS and transferred some 200 survivors plus 2 injured, clearing at 1750.
0648	1748	U.S.S. HAMMANN cleared the side of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON. A heavy explosion was observed on the port side of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON.
0652	1752	A heavy explosion was observed on the starboard side of the U.S.S. LEXINGTON endangering the U.S.S. HAMMANN which was backing clear with survivors.
0707	1807	A severe explosion was observed on the U.S.S. LEXINGTON, and fire commenced burning fiercely amidships.
0711	1811	A very heavy explosion was observed on the U.S.S. LEXINGTON, blowing flaming debris in all directions. Boats from this unit were operating close aboard U.S.S. LEXINGTON rescuing survivors from the water.
0720	1820	U.S.S. HAMMANN fouled main circulators with debris and lost completely the ability to back.
0740	1840	Two boats from the U.S.S. ANDERSON damaged in rescuing survivors and they were abandoned.
0741	1841	U.S.S. PHELPS was directed to sink the U.S.S. LEXINGTON with torpedoes. Destroyers transferred as many survivors to the nearest cruisers as possible by boat.
		The U.S.S. LEXINGTON was observed to be burning fiercely fore and aft with many explosions.
0820	1920	U.S.S. PHELPS fired five torpedoes into the U.S.S. LEXINGTON.
0853	1953	The U.S.S. LEXINGTON sank in Lat. 15° 15'S, Long. 155° 27'E. Task Force reformed on course 225° T at speed 14 knots using zigzag plan No. 7.

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4. While many planes undoubtedly were shot down during the attack it is felt that the fire was relatively ineffective. The antiaircraft fire by the various 5" batteries was erratic and uncoordinated; that of the automatic weapons, particularly 20 mm, was frequently directed at targets far beyond effective range; fire of all batteries was often directed at planes that had finished their attack when other targets, still attacking, were available. Since similar short-comings have been reported before by other forces, it is assumed that the fact that this was the first air attack for a large part of the Task Force, it may be an explanation and that improvement in the effectiveness of the fire may be expected in later attacks. While improvement in fire discipline may be expected, it is felt that effective fire in defense of the screened vessel cannot be anticipated from 5" batteries against torpedo and dive bomber planes until there is a considerable change in the doctrine. Some arrangement must be made for controlled, coordinated fire of screening ships antiaircraft batteries against dive bombing and torpedo attacks pushed home with determination against the vessel screened if an effective defense is to be achieved. Uncoordinated fire results in confusion of bursts, targets not engaged at all, and danger to own ships from duds and fragments.

5. The attacks of the Japanese planes were made with skill and determination. They did not appear to be deterred by the fire even when becoming effective. No effort seemed to be expended in evasive tactics and many planes were shot down in consequence, after completing their attack. The dives made by the dive bombers were steep and appeared similar to those made by our own bombers. Pull outs were made at low altitudes. The torpedo plane tactics appeared to this observer to differ somewhat from those employed by our planes; attack was made in a dive of from 45° to 65°, the pull out was made at an altitude of 200 - 500 feet and the torpedo dropped at the pull out. The range to the target at the launching of the torpedo was short. After dropping the torpedo, the planes turned and flew away slowly close aboard vessels of the screen. No horizontal or glide attacks were noted. It was particularly noted that the enemy did not appear to be deterred in the slightest by antiaircraft fire and would fly into and through it without hesitation to reach his objective. The widely held opinion that A.A. fire, even when not effective, serves to frighten away the attacking planes was not substantiated by the observations made during this attack.

6. The conduct of all officers and men observed during this action and in the events following was splendid. Morale was high and the spirit evidenced was in accordance with the finest

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traditions of our Navy. Attention is invited to the enclosures in which the commanding officers concerned report on several individual cases of commendable action. It was particularly noted that a fine morale prevailed upon the U.S.S. LEXINGTON when sinking and among the survivors rescued. When alongside the U.S.S. LEXINGTON shortly before it was abandoned, although the vessel was shrouded in smoke and racked with repeated explosions, there was no panic or fear. Personnel were cheerful and seemed only bent on aiding their more seriously wounded shipmates in disembarking. The conduct of the wounded was superb; many most painfully and seriously wounded and burned men were transferred to the vessel in which this observer was stationed, hurriedly and by makeshift methods that must have meant agony for them. Not a single case of complaint or whimpering occurred, and in fact, the wounded were cheerful and helpful. Men with broken legs and men burned almost beyond recognition dragged themselves down ladders without assistance. Attention is invited to the splendid performance of duty during the rescue work of the Commanding Officers of the MORRIS, HAMANN and ANDERSON, Commanders Harry B. Jarrett, U.S. Navy, Arnold E. True, U.S. Navy, and Lieutenant Commander John K.B. Ginder, U.S. Navy, respectively. The intrepid and seamanlike way that these officers handled their vessels about the listing and burning LEXINGTON without regard for the flames and explosions emanating from her, was in accord with every fine tradition of our Navy and of the sea, and undoubtedly contributed to the rescue of many survivors who might otherwise have been lost.

Gilbert C. Hoover
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