

THE HISTORICAL RECORD, STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING,
AND CARRIER SUPPORT TO OPERATION WATCHTOWER

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Military History

by

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The Battle of Guadalcanal marked the first offensive ground operations conducted in the Pacific theater during World War II. One divisive issue of the Guadalcanal campaign is the withdrawal of carrier based aviation support on 8 August 1942, by Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher. The historical record is dominated by the argument that Fletcher faced very little threat and could have supported the invasion forces longer than he did. What influenced Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher to withdraw carrier based aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal invasion and was the decision valid? In order to objectively evaluate Fletcher's decision, this paper will first review historical literature and outline how the dominate opinion of Fletcher's decision developed. Next, it will look at Fletcher's character, development as a leader, and record from commissioning through the Watchtower campaign. This study will also review of the orders and guidance at the strategic level and the operations of subordinate commanders within Watchtower. Finally, the metrics of 1942 and the modern strategic military decision-making model will be applied to evaluate the validity of the decision to withdraw. The evidence clearly suggests that Fletcher's decision was strategically valid, in addition to being characterized inaccurately by historians.

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ABSTRACT

THE HISTORICAL RECORD, STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING, AND CARRIER SUPPORT TO OPERATION WATCHTOWER, by LCDR Scott T. Farr, 92 pages.

The Battle of Guadalcanal marked the first offensive ground operations conducted in the Pacific theater during World War II. One divisive issue of the Guadalcanal campaign is the withdrawal of carrier based aviation support on 8 August 1942, by Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher. The historical record is dominated by the argument that Fletcher faced very little threat and could have supported the invasion forces longer than he did. What influenced Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher to withdraw carrier based aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal invasion and was the decision valid? In order to objectively evaluate Fletcher's decision, this paper will first review historical literature and outline how the dominate opinion of Fletcher's decision developed. Next, it will look at Fletcher's character, development as a leader, and record from commissioning through the Watchtower campaign. This study will also review of the orders and guidance at the strategic level and the operations of subordinate commanders within Watchtower. Finally, the metrics of 1942 and the modern strategic military decision-making model will be applied to evaluate the validity of the decision to withdraw. The evidence clearly suggests that Fletcher's decision was strategically valid, in addition to being characterized inaccurately by historians.

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ACRONYMS

BB	Battleship
Betty	Mitsubishi Type 1 land attack plane
C3	Commander, Control, and Communication
CA	Heavy Cruiser
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet
CL	Light Cruiser
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
COMAIRSOPAC	Commander, Air, South Pacific
COMINCH	Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet
COMSOPAC	Commander, South Pacific
CTF	Commander, Task Force
CV	Aircraft Carrier
Dauntless	Carrier dive-bomber
DD	Destroyer
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
Hypo	U.S. Navy Cryptanalyst Station, Pearl Harbor
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JN-25	Japanese Imperial Code
Kate	Nakajima Type 97 carrier attack plane
OPLAN	Operational Plan
OTC	Officer in Tactical Command
TF	Task Force
TG	Task Group

SP	Motor Patrol Boat
SWPA	South West Pacific Area
USS	United States Ship
Val	Aichi Type 99 carrier bomber
Wildcat	Grumman F4F carrier fighter
Zero	Mitsubishi Type 0 carrier fighter

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The summer of 1942 was an uncertain time in the Pacific theater. Imperial Japanese forces had conquered the Philippines, Singapore, and Indo-China. They conducted carrier raids as far west as Ceylon, and operations in New Guinea threatened Australia. The Allies had slowed the Japanese juggernaut at Coral Sea and Midway, but not without cost--the loss of two precious aircraft carriers--*Lexington* and *Yorktown*. Allied resources were stretched thin due to operational losses as well as the commitment to seek victory in the European theater before focusing efforts against the Empire of Japan.

Operationally, the Japanese appeared to be in a formidable position. Twenty-three cruisers, eleven battleships, and seven fleet carriers were at their disposal. The United States could only muster a meager force of eight cruisers, six battleships, and four carriers in opposition.¹ Exacerbating this one-sidedness was the fearsome reputation that Japanese naval aviators held with United States forces. At the time, the Japanese carrier-based *Zero* fighter plane was considered the best in the Pacific, superior to the United States Navy's front line fighter, the Grumman *Wildcat*. Although the Japanese Navy had been bloodied by the loss of a small carrier at the Battle of Coral Sea and four large carriers at the Battle of Midway, they were aggressively consolidating their gains, intent on protecting their far-flung empire.

In May 1942 the Japanese moved to protect bases at Rabaul and Truk, and dispatched a naval invasion force to Port Moresby on the southeastern coast of New

Guinea. After the expedition was forced to retire at the Battle of Coral Sea, the Japanese turned their eye further east to the Solomon Islands. They embarked on an operation to choke off the sea-lanes of communication between the United States and Australia with the establishment of forward bases on the tiny islands of Tulagi and Gatuva.²

On 4 June, the United States dealt a serious blow to Japan at the Battle of Midway. Even though Midway's significance would not be realized for several years, both the Army and Navy wanted to capitalize on this victory before the Japanese could again go on the offensive. Fewer than four days passed before the Army presented the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) a daring plan for the invasion of Rabaul, with General Douglas MacArthur in command. It called for "one Marine and three Army divisions, plus two carriers with adequate screen."³ Rabaul was heavily defended by Imperial Japanese forces and Admiral Earnest J. King, Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet (COMINCH) was "appalled at the mere notion of sending precious aircraft carriers and the Pacific theater's only amphibious troops across the reef-strewn, poorly charted Solomon Sea into the teeth of a complex of enemy air bases."⁴ King was further determined never to let MacArthur command any major naval forces. No advocate of defensive operations, King proposed a plan to move up the Solomon chain, capitalizing on land-based support from captured islands.⁵ Finally on 30 June, King and the Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, met and resolved the issues involved with an offensive in the South Pacific. Their compromise ultimately became Operation Watchtower.

Watchtower was split into three "tasks" (figure 1). First, the Navy would have "the primary task of taking the Santa Cruz Islands, Tulagi and "adjacent positions."

(Guadalcanal was just a spot on the map with no known tactical or strategic value; it did not even merit a name in the planning.)”⁶ Second, the Army would lead an advance through New Guinea. The operation would culminate with an assault on the Japanese stronghold of Rabaul, led by the Army. The JCS set the date to begin Task I on 1 August.



Figure 1. South Pacific Area of Operations

Had it not been for the United States Navy’s breaking of the Japanese Imperial Code, known as JN-25, the campaign in the Eastern Solomon Islands might well have been known as the Campaign for Tulagi and Gatuva. However on 5 July, JN-25 decodes

identified Lunga Point on Guadalcanal as the site of a new Japanese airfield. The threat that land based Japanese air forces posed at this southerly position was significant. Long-range bombers could readily interdict the sea-lanes of communication between the United States and Australia. This would require war materiel to take a longer, more circuitous route south of New Zealand, further lengthening an already tenuous Allied logistical challenge. As a result, Guadalcanal became the strategic centerpiece of Watchtower.⁷

Upon learning the details of the entire Watchtower plan, the Commander South Pacific Forces (COMSOPAC), Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, consulted with General MacArthur in Australia to discuss the inherent challenges. At the conclusion of the meeting, MacArthur sent a joint message to the JCS asking that the operation be postponed. It stated (somewhat prophetically) that:

The Carrier Task Groups will be themselves exposed to attack by land based air while unprotected by our land based aviation and it is extremely doubtful that they will be able to retain fighter escort to the transport area, especially should hostile naval forces approach.⁸

It is ironic that after proposing the audacious Rabaul operation, MacArthur would now become so cautious. Marshall and King cited the urgency of Task I and ordered that the operation begin without consideration for the follow-on tasks. However, a reprieve of one week was granted; the landing date was now set for 7 August.

Within the Watchtower plan, the Navy and Marine Corps were tasked to take the former British port of Tulagi and the island of Guadalcanal. The primary assault force, the First Marine Division, was under strength and required augmentation by elements of the Second Marine Division, the First Raider Battalion, and two Hawaii-based units, the First Parachute Battalion and the Third Defense Battalion. The total strength available for landing forces in the operation rounded out to 19,000 men. Three aircraft carriers, the

Saratoga, *Wasp*, and *Enterprise* would provide air support for the assault force. At the time these three carriers constituted three quarters of the carrier forces available in the Pacific. Additional carriers were not expected for several months.

The challenges created by the compressed timeline designated by Washington cannot be dismissed. This critical factor not only affected the readiness of the assault forces, but the assets available to support, and the leadership of the operation as well. The expeditionary force commander, Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, commanding Task Force 61 (TF 61), had been on sea duty continuously since Pearl Harbor and was due for rotation. Unfortunately, with the coming operation, there was no more experienced carrier commander available to take his place. Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, responsible for the amphibious effort and commanding Task Force 62 (TF 62), was delayed from assuming command of his forces until three weeks before the landings on Tulagi and Guadalcanal.⁹ Rear Admiral John S. McCain, in charge of the land and water based aircraft of Task Force 63 (TF 63), had 290 planes to support Watchtower. Unfortunately, 145 of these critical assets were not able to directly support the operation because they were being employed as security for rear bases.¹⁰ Rear Admiral Victor A.C. Crutchley brought three Australian cruisers to Operation Watchtower. Crutchley was on loan to the Australian Navy from the British Admiralty due to a lack of flag officers in the Australian Navy. Although British, and in charge of only three commonwealth assets, he was given command of the cruisers and destroyers of Task Force 44 (TF 44).¹¹ These resource and leadership issues help to illustrate why many of the leaders involved in the operation referred to it as “Shoestring”.¹² Figure 2 shows the task organization of COMSOPAC for Operation Watchtower.¹³

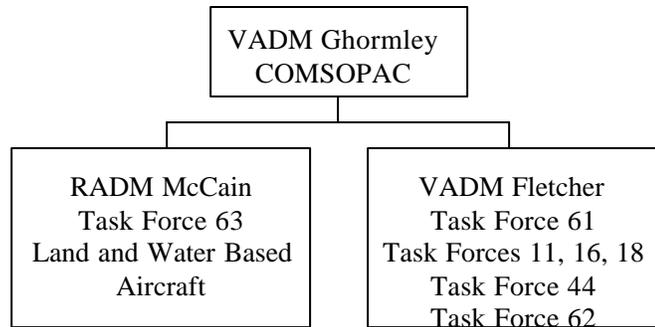


Figure 2. Task Organization of COMSOPAC for Operation Watchtower

On 27 July the Task Force Commanders met for the first time and conducted operational planning. This meeting, characterized by many as confrontational, left a chasm of expectations between Turner and Fletcher. Turner wanted continuous close air support for all of his transports as they unloaded. Turner’s staff had planned for most of the transports to be unloaded within the first 24 hours; however, six of the transports would require several days to unload.

The venerable *Wildcat* fighters of Fletcher’s TF 61, tasked to provide this support, operated at a short range that would require the carriers to stay in confined seas for an undetermined amount of time. Fletcher, who viewed the carriers as “the major strategic asset of the Pacific Fleet,” did not want to risk them to land based air attack and the submarine threat, for the sake of off loading a few cargo ships.¹⁴ These misunderstandings were compounded by the fact that COMSOPAC Admiral Ghormley, failed to participate in, provide expectations, or guidance to the planning process.

Immediately following the operational planning, the amphibious forces of Task Force 62, the three carriers and escort vessels of Fletcher’s TF 61, and the surface

combatants of Task Force 44, joined off Koro Island near Fiji. Naval gunfire support and aviation close air support had the opportunity to practice bombardments. The exercise exposed the fact some landing craft engines were inoperable and provided the opportunity to have them fixed prior to the assault. The rehearsals were beneficial in providing practice of loading Marines in landing craft and coordinating efforts, but they failed to provide an end-to-end exercise with the landing forces never actually landing ashore. Undaunted, the force set out on the 1,100-mile transit to Guadalcanal.¹⁵

Adding to the myriad of challenges faced by Fletcher was the fact that reliable intelligence had become very difficult to obtain while the invasion force was steaming towards Guadalcanal. The Japanese “on August 1 made a drastic change to JN-25, evidently scrambling their code groups.”¹⁶ As a result, the vital force multiplier that had enabled victory at Midway was, for the time, not available.

Fortunately, the Marines who went ashore on Guadalcanal on 7 August met little organized resistance. Most of the Japanese at the landing point were construction troops who simply fled into the dense jungle. Within 24 hours the Marines held Lunga Point and Guadalcanal’s precious airfield, although the island itself was far from secure. Concurrent landings on Tulagi and Gatuva islands initially met stiff resistance but were firmly in Marine hands at the end of the day.

The Japanese, once convinced that Guadalcanal was the invasion site, chose to divert a large force of “27 *Betty* bombers, 18 *Zero* fighters, (and) 9 *Val* torpedo planes” (armed with bombs and initially tasked to strike Australia), to attack the Marine positions, on the afternoon of 7 August.¹⁷ American carrier-based aircraft successfully beat back the strike package, with few losses. “Of the 23 bombers that eventually made it

to the island, all but one were flamed, along with all 9 *Vals*.”¹⁸ Carrier-based aircraft decimated a subsequent raid on the morning of 8 August, although this time the transport *George Fox Elliott* and the destroyer *Jarvis* were damaged. *Elliott* was beached and abandoned after a burning plane plunged into her side, and *Jarvis* retired towards Sydney, Australia, after taking a torpedo and was never heard from again.

That evening, at 1807, Fletcher sent the following message to Ghormley:

Fighter strength reduced from 99 to 78. In view of large number of enemy torpedo planes and bombers in this area, I recommend the immediate withdrawal of my carriers. Request tankers be sent forward immediately as running low on fuel.¹⁹

After sending the message, and without receiving a response from Ghormley, Fletcher retired south.

This marks one of the most controversial actions taken at the beginning of the campaign for Guadalcanal. Marines ashore on Guadalcanal perceived the subsequent withdrawal as abandonment by the Navy.²⁰ At the surface this appears to be the case--the noted naval historian Samuel Eliot Morrison argues that Fletcher, “who had lost *Lexington* at Coral Sea and *Yorktown* at Midway, apparently was determined to take no risk this time.”²¹ Another historian stated that Fletcher could have “remained in the area with no more severe consequence than sunburn.”²²

What influenced Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher to withdraw carrier-based aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal Invasion? The method to evaluate the soundness of the decision to withdraw will review the historical record and look at Fletcher’s experience, orders, and the operations of other Task Force commanders. It will also review the decision within the terms of existing guidance in the Pacific during the

early days of World War II as well as within the framework of a contemporary decision making method.

How did Fletcher's experiences prior to and during World War II play in this decision? This paper will also look at experiences that influenced Fletcher while he matured as a leader. His successes, failures, and how he handled them, in short his character, will all be looked at from his days at the Naval Academy, through World War I, the interwar period, and the beginning of World War II. All reveal what type of man and leader Fletcher was.

How did the orders and guidance of Admirals Earnest J. King (COMINCH), Chester W. Nimitz (Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet-CINCPAC), and Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley (COMSOPAC) play in the decision to pull out? Their orders ultimately were the foundation that Fletcher based his decision upon. Ghormley failed to take an active role supervising the first offensive of the war-taking place in his theater. Significantly, although both committed to offensive operations, Nimitz and King shared a reluctance to risk losing any more carriers at that stage of the conflict.

How did the operations of the other Task Force Commanders, Rear Admirals Richmond Kelly Turner and John S. McCain, influence Fletcher's decision-making process? The roles of Rear Admirals Turner and McCain in the invasion as well as their Task Force operations, and how these factors affected the decision to withdraw will be reviewed. For example, RADM Turner wanted continuous fighter coverage for the unloading of all of his transports. Fletcher told him it was not possible to give him the desired coverage. RADM McCain contracted to provide both land-based aviation to Guadalcanal and air search to cover the invasion. Poor performance of one of the

missions led to disaster, the implied expectations of the other were not immediately fulfilled. How these issues ultimately played out significantly impacted the early phase of the campaign.

Did Fletcher's decision measure up to ADM Nimitz's metrics of "calculated risk" and his "three questions" for operational practicality? First, the withdrawal will be assessed against Nimitz's order of "calculated risk." This edict, issued prior to Midway and endorsed by King, directed Pacific Fleet carrier commanders to operate in the following manner:

You will be governed by the principle of *calculated risk* which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of your force to attack by superior force without good prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage to the enemy. This applies to a landing phase as well as during preliminary air attacks.²³

Throughout Watchtower this guidance was still in effect. Nimitz also kept three questions hanging on the wall of his office that he would pose to his commanders prior to embarking on an operation. They illustrate his no-nonsense approach to operations and his mind set for leadership:

1. Is the proposed operation likely to succeed?
2. What might be the consequences of failure?
3. Is it in the realm of practicability of materials and supplies?²⁴

These two metrics will provide an assessment framed within the standards of the Pacific theater of World War II.

Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher is most famous (or infamous) for his decision to withdraw the *Saratoga*, *Wasp*, and *Enterprise* from direct support of the Marines on Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and Gatuvu in contact with the enemy. In the terms of strategic operations, did the decision pass the current doctrinal FAS (feasible, acceptability, and suitability) test?²⁵ The situation which Fletcher faced will be subjected to this modern

decision-making model. The FAS test asks the following questions within the process of determining a course of action:

“*Feasibility*: Can the action be accomplished by the means available? Feasibility is an assessment of the concept (ways) given the resources available (means). Determining feasibility involves art and science.”²⁶

“*Acceptability*: Are the consequences of cost justified by the importance of the effect desired? Acceptability is determined by comparing the resources required (means) and the benefits to be achieved (ends). Understanding these costs is both art and science, because not all costs are tangible.”²⁷

“*Suitability*: Will the attainment of the objective accomplish the desired effect? A military objective is suitable if, when achieved, it leads to a desired objective. A similar concept is reflected in the term ‘adequacy’. Adequacy is defined as in Joint Pub 1-02 as: the determination whether scope and concept of a planned operation are sufficient to accomplish the task assigned.”²⁸

Through a thorough examination of these crucial factors and questions, this paper will attempt to shed additional light on the decision to withdraw carrier-based aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal Invasion and evaluate it against modern decision-making methods. This analysis will take into account the commander’s tasking, as well as the strategic, operational, and tactical situation, which VADM Fletcher faced at that critical juncture.

¹E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976.), 85.

²Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 155.

³Potter, *Nimitz*, 112.

⁴*Ibid.*, 112.

⁵Thomas J. Buell, *Master of Sea Power* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1980), 215.

⁶Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1982), 7.

⁷*Ibid.*, 8.

⁸George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians came to Conquer* (Washington, DC: U.S. Navy Department: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 383.

⁹Potter, *Nimitz*, 219.

¹⁰Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 298.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 294.

¹²Potter, *Nimitz*, 220.

¹³Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 292.

¹⁴John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 29.

¹⁵George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 311.

¹⁶Potter, *Nimitz*, 179.

¹⁷Stephen D. Regan, *In Bitter Tempest* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 188.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁹Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 192.

²⁰Henry I. Shaw, *First Offensive: The Marine Campaign for Guadalcanal* (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 1992), 48.

²¹Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II: vol. 5, The Struggle for Guadalcanal* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1949), 29.

²²Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 192.

²³Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 384.

²⁴E. B. Potter, *Nimitz*, 221.

²⁵Ted Davis, *Evaluating National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy* (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, ILE Common Core, Strategic Readings Book, August 2002), S2.4-1.

²⁶*Ibid.*, S2.4-1

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, S2.4-2.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Operation Watchtower was a well-documented event. It was the first offensive action taken in the Pacific by the United States at a time when Imperial Japanese forces remained formidable despite the results of Midway. Historians have written volumes on the actions fought in and around this legendary island of the Solomon Chain. Mentioning the word Guadalcanal conjures up images of beleaguered Marines fighting bravely against both the hostile jungle environment and a gritty Japanese foe. Commentary on the decision to withdraw carrier aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal invasion by Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher appears without exception in every work. Opinions on how this decision affected subsequent actions, from the Battle of Savo Island to the tenuous logistical situation endured by the Marines ashore have evolved over time.

The evolution of opinion on Fletcher's role can be broken down into three schools of thought. The first, which will be referred to as the traditional school, argues against the necessity of the withdrawal. Traditionalists contend that had Fletcher not withdrawn the carriers, Savo Island could at best have been avoided, and if not avoided, American aircraft, at least, could have exacted swift revenge on the Japanese after the attack. Traditionalist arguments infer that had this been done, the Marines would not have been left in a challenging logistical situation when the transport ships departed early.

The second opinion, which will be called the quasi-traditionalist school, is still critical of Fletcher's decision. However, quasi-traditionalists utilize more information, and consider more than the lack of fighter strength and need to refuel as the reason for

withdrawal of the carriers. The third school, which will be referred to as the revisionist school, advocates that although Fletcher withdrew, it was the prudent course of action to take given the strategic situation that the United States faced at that point in the war.

Traditionalists

The first writings that comment on the withdrawal of naval forces during Operation Watchtower appeared in 1949 in histories of the First Marine Division, and fit into the traditionalist mold. They document the events up to RADM Richmond Kelly Turner's amphibious force transports pulling out from the vantage point of the Marine on the ground, and also form the opinion prevalent in the Marine Corps today on the issue. In *Uncommon Valor: Marine Divisions in Action*, the authors provide the following insight: "The Japanese Naval Victory on the third day of the battle [of Savo Island] was followed by the departure of the Navy. This gave a quality of desperation to the whole battle, which, from the viewpoint of the individual Marine, is probably remembered better than anything else about it. The men felt isolated and abandoned."¹ This attitude is further echoed in *The Old Breed: The First Marine Division in World War II*. "The feeling of expendability is difficult to define. It is loneliness. . . . [I]t is as if events over which you have no control have put a ridiculously low price-tag on your life. When word got around Guadalcanal . . . that the Navy had taken off and left the Marines, the feeling of expendability became a factor in the battle."² These sentiments are an undercurrent of the traditionalist school, but neither work directly indicts VADM Frank Jack Fletcher's decision to withdraw or argues that he could have provided further support.

The dominant traditionalist opinion that Fletcher could have provided further support is first argued in the writings of the historical luminary and Harvard professor,

turned wartime Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison. Publishing his first book on the topic in 1949, a *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: The Struggle for Guadalcanal*, Morison sharply criticized Fletcher's decision to retire his carriers as the action responsible for the Savo Island debacle and the ultimate withdrawal of Turner's transports before completing off load of their supplies to the Marines ashore. He issues the following assessment of Fletcher and the withdrawal:

It is easy to understand Turner's consternation of this dispatch [Fletcher's request to Ghormley to withdraw the carriers], even though Fletcher had warned him he would pull out before 10 August. It must have seemed to him then, as it seems to us now, that Fletcher's reasons for withdrawal were flimsy. Supposing his fighter-plane strength had been reduced 21 percent? His air group still numbered one more Wildcat than the three American carriers had had before the Battle of Midway. Supposing the Coral Sea to have been infested with night-flying bombers (which was by no means true) and that they threatened the safety of fast-stepping, well-defended carriers; were not these planes an infinitely greater threat to anchored transports? Turner could not presume to judge the oil situation; but it can now be ascertained from ships' logs that at noon 8 August the destroyers still had enough fuel for several days' operations, and they could have been refueled from the cruisers and the carriers, as well as from fleet oilers. No Japanese search planes had yet found the carrier force, and Fletcher had no evidence of having been 'snooped'; his force could have remained in the area with no more severe consequence than sunburn.³

This passage forms the crux of the traditionalist argument: in spite of his message to Ghormley stating otherwise, Fletcher had adequate resources in fighters and fuel at hand for his Task Force to continue operations in support of the landing operations at Guadalcanal. Morison lends credibility to this argument through his voluntary service as an active duty Naval Reservist aboard numerous warships in both the Atlantic and Pacific during the conflict and his writing of the fourteen-volume *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*. Indeed, in 1959 Frank Hough quotes this argument directly in the official Marine Corps publication *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, thereby reinforcing the traditionalist

argument.⁴ This would not be the last time that Morison was quoted as the source for this argument. Indeed, Morison again writes about the decision in his 1963 publication *The Two–Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War*. In this case he states:

This action of Turner’s stemmed from the worst of all blunders that night: Admiral Fletcher’s decision to retire his three-carrier task force from its covering position, depriving the landing force of air cover the next day. He did so on the flimsy ground that his fighter plane strength had been reduced 21 per cent in two days’ operations, and that his ships needed fuel-of which they were far from dangerously short. Probably the real reason was that ‘Frank Jack’ had already lost *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, and did not intend to lose another carrier.⁵

Here again, Morison reiterates his earlier argument about the precipitous nature of Fletcher’s actions. Morison’s two works, as well as Hough’s, are critical of Fletcher’s actions, however, it must be pointed out that at this point all three works state the opinion of one man, Morison.

Published at the same time as *The Two–Ocean War*, Samuel B. Griffith’s history, *The Battle for Guadalcanal*, discusses possible alternative courses of action open to Fletcher that would have enabled an alternative outcome than the tragedy suffered at Savo Island. “Had Fletcher remained, and sent planes to conduct pre-dusk searches toward the northwest, and elementary security measure obviously dictated by the situation, Mikawa’s column might have been detected.”⁶ Griffith then states that Vice Admiral Ghormley, “was loath to leave Turner and Crutchley without air cover, but did not feel that he could direct Fletcher to remain. After all, COMSOPAC could not read the fuel logs in Fletcher’s ships.”⁷ This reference, credited in the endnote to Morison, again refers to the message sent by Fletcher to Ghormley.

Eric Hammel's *Guadalcanal: The Carrier Battles* has an outstanding level of detail on engagements and actions, especially from the perspective of units and individuals involved. On judgment of Fletcher, Hammel is firmly entrenched in the traditionalist school of thought. In the work he writes of "imagined fuel shortages" and Fletcher's "running from imagined Japanese carriers" causing a "psychological defeat brought on by Fletcher's ignominious departure."⁸ Here Hammel notes for the first time that there was in fact a perceived threat from Japanese carriers to Fletcher's forces. Although critical in his assessment, Hammel contributes some additional perspective lacking in earlier works on Fletcher's thought processes.

In Edwin P. Hoyt's work, *Guadalcanal*, the author articulates realistic expectations of force capabilities and discusses the command and control challenges faced by the Watchtower operation. However, he also resides in the traditionalist camp by focusing his judgments on the number of fighters available to Fletcher and the failure of Fletcher to conduct air searches because he was "bemused with his worries."⁹ Hoyt's criticism of Fletcher is sharp: he states that Fletcher "turned the force around...and fled south, away from the enemy."¹⁰

The Eagle against the Sun, written by Ronald Spector, is a narrative of America's struggle with Japan in the Pacific. Spector, a neo-traditionalist published in 1985, states that Admiral Turner was upset by Fletcher's withdrawal and viewed it as "little better than a desertion, and most historians have agreed with him."¹¹ Close evaluation of the endnotes reveals that the historians who agree number two and are also traditionalists, specifically, Griffith and Morison.

An Australian midshipman present aboard HMAS *Canberra* at Savo Island, Bruce Loxton, wrote *The Shame of Savo Island* firmly in the traditional perspective. He is extremely critical of Fletcher, describing him as having a “deeply flawed record of command at sea” and that Fletcher was “not . . . an intelligent man.”¹² Loxton dissects Fletcher’s decision through the withdrawal message. However, Loxton does something no other author reviewed attempted: provide alternative courses of action that Fletcher could have pursued. The validity of these alternative courses of action are open to debate, however they are presented. For example, he states that if fuel were an issue, Fletcher had the option of detaching one carrier and some escorts to refuel while the other vessels remained on station providing support.¹³

Quasi-Traditionalists

The first of the quasi-traditionalists to be published is Richard B. Franks’ *Guadalcanal*. In it he describes Fletcher’s withdrawal, again in the context of the message sent to Ghormley, and questions the validity of the decision. However, he amplifies and states what Fletcher’s response to his many critics was. Specifically, Franks’ cites Fletcher’s concern over his losses suffered, a lack of intelligence on enemy submarine and carrier activity, and the guidance he was operating under from Nimitz’s “calculated risk.” At the end Franks concludes with the assessment that Fletcher “regarded the preservation of the carriers as more important than any other of his duties, including his responsibility as Expeditionary Force commander.”¹⁴

An individual who was present at Guadalcanal, the First Marine Division’s operations officer, Merrill B Twining wrote the other work of the quasi-traditionalist camp. This work provides revealing insight into the operation and assesses Fletcher’s

course of action from a perspective higher than the tactical level. Twining actually admits to Fletcher's concerns at the strategic level, stating, "He [Fletcher] had seen U.S. carriers sunk in battle and was loath to risk our last carriers in the Pacific in action against a greatly superior force. This was Fletcher's view on the strategic level, and in a way it was correct."¹⁵ Twining makes this important reference to the strategic situation but still advocates, not incorrectly, that to fail to provide support to a landing force is unacceptable. Although critical, this assessment manages to look at the decision from a broader perspective than just the message of withdrawal sent by Fletcher to Ghormley.

Revisionist

The revisionist perspective judges the withdrawal on more than just the text of Fletcher's message to Ghormley sent prior to his withdrawal. It takes into account a number of factors, including the strategic environment, command, and control issues, as well as force capabilities and limitations.

George C. Dyer writes about the withdrawal decision in *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, the biography of Turner. In it, Dyer states that one of Fletcher's primary concern was fuel; based on estimates the forces would be short "2.1 million gallons of fuel oil on departure from the Fijis for the Solomons."¹⁶ However, unlike the traditionalist school, Dyer expounds further on this challenge by stating that conducting high speed combat operations would require higher consumption rates than would be required at normal operational tempo.¹⁷ Dyer adds that Ghormley and MacArthur knew that "The carrier Task Group will be themselves exposed to attack by land based air while unprotected by our land based aviation and it is extremely doubtful that they will be able to retain fighter escort to the transport area, especially should hostile naval forces

approach.”¹⁸ Ghormley reinforced this when he stated “I wish to emphasize that the basic problem of this operation is the protection of surface ships against land based aircraft attack during the approach, the landing attacks and the unloading.”¹⁹ Thus, facts are presented for the first time that the challenges faced were not a surprise but issues that were foreseen. Compounding these challenges was the operational guidance of “calculated risk” under which Fletcher was operating. Land based aircraft could sink his three carriers without the potential for him to inflict more damage to the Japanese.

The revisionist John B. Lundstrom defends Fletcher in his book *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* and in his article published in U.S. Naval Institute’s *Proceedings* “Frank Jack Fletcher Got a Bum Rap.” In *The First Team* Lundstrom quotes Admiral William “Bull” Halsey as stating:

Land plane bases and the operating units thereon should be available in supporting positions before the operation is undertaken at all. It is only by this provision in advance that the risking of carriers in restricted covering positions can be avoided. While over caution is to be avoided, it should still be borne in mind that Midway remains the classic example of what can happen to a large powerful invasion force bent on carrying out its mission without the benefit of land based air support.²⁰

Lundstrom also addresses the discussion of Fletcher’s obsession over fuel. He points out that Fletcher could not count every barrel on every ship. He adds insight from Fletcher’s subordinate carrier commanders, Noyes and Kincaid, had warned him that “high speed spurts due to low wind conditions cost the escorts much more fuel than was previously estimated.”²¹

M. E. Butcher, in his article “Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, Pioneer Warrior or Gross Sinner?” amplifies on a point many traditionalists fail to mention in their argument. Specifically, that the resources available in 1942 were not the same resources available

during the rest of the war in the Pacific. Fletcher had three out of the four carriers in the Pacific in his force and no replacements were due until 1943. This dichotomy is best described by Admiral Kincaid, who stated when asked about Fletcher's decision, that it was a "valid decision at the time, but would not have been valid a year later in the war."²²

As the literature suggests, the three different schools provide varying insight into VADM Fletcher's decision to withdraw. The conventional wisdom of the traditionalist school is by far the most prevalent. These writers are critical of Fletcher's decision and view it from very narrow perspective. Specifically, they evaluate his decision based on the content of one message to Ghormley. It must be pointed out that the traditionalists refer to Morison's initial assessment of Fletcher's decision as the basis of their opinion. Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to refer to the traditionalist school of thought as the Morisionian school of thought. The quasi-traditionalists are critical of Fletcher, however, they take into account more facts and present the decision at the strategic level. Finally, the revisionists truly dissect the decision, taking into account the strategic environment, command and control issues, as well as force capabilities and limitations.

This literature also provides insight into Frank Jack Fletcher's career, the subject of the next chapter. It will look at his experiences from the Naval Academy through World War II and how these experiences prepared him to lead in combat. This chapter, too, will examine the validity of criticism leveled at Fletcher's character attributes-- specifically his courage and intelligence.

¹George McMillan, George Zurlinden Jr., Alvin M. Josephy Jr., David Dempsey, Keyes Beech, and Herman Kogan, *Uncommon Valor: Marine Divisions in Action* (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, 1986), 24.

²George McMillan, *The Old Breed: First Marine Division in World War II* (Washington, DC: The Infantry Journal Press, 1949), 45.

³Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II: vol. 5, The Struggle for Guadalcanal* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Co., 1949), 28.

⁴Frank Olney Hough, *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II* (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1958), 259.

⁵Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1963), 172.

⁶Samuel B. Griffith II, *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (New York: J. B. Lippencott Co. 1963), 58.

⁷*Ibid.*, 57.

⁸Eric M. Hammel, *Guadalcanal: The Carrier Battles* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1987), 85.

⁹Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1982), 30.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 192.

¹²Bruce Loxton, *The Shame of Savo Island* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 14.

¹³*Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁴Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Random House, 1990), 94.

¹⁵Merril B. Twining, *No Bended Knee* (Navato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), 46.

¹⁶George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer* (Washington, DC: United States Navy Department: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 312.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 383.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 383.

²⁰John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 85.

²¹*Ibid.*, 86.

²²M. E. Butcher, *Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, Pioneer Warrior or Gross Sinner?* *Naval War College Review* 40, no. 1 (winter 1987): 77.

CHAPTER 3

FRANK JACK FLETCHER

“There is a fine line between a hero and a goat.” This timeless saying is particularly applicable to Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher. As an Iowan who went off to the United States Naval Academy seeking adventure, Fletcher ended up above average in his 1906 class standing, although he had never before seen the ocean. During the United States intervention in Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1912, he stood exposed on the bridge wing of his moored ship while receiving sniper fire. In World War I, he initially volunteered for duty that other officers hesitated to take--command of a small vulnerable sloop of war. After the Navy decommissioned all of the unseaworthy craft, Fletcher took over command of a destroyer and led it against U-boats in the North Atlantic. During the interwar period, he successfully commanded capital ships of the line. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he led the Navy to victory at Coral Sea and Midway. In spite of these successes, the historical record has criticized him for his decision to withdraw from Guadalcanal. How did his experiences prior to and during World War II play in this decision?

Frank Jack Fletcher was born in 1885 and grew up in Iowa in a “modestly well to do (family) with some political clout”.¹ His uncle was Frank Friday Fletcher, a progressive naval officer who ultimately achieved the rank of Admiral and ended up turning down a promotion to Chief of Naval Operations. Frank Friday’s letters from exotic locations and occasional visits home inspired Frank Jack to seek an appointment to the United States Naval Academy.² Frank Jack earned an appointment to the Naval

Academy and began his career as a midshipman in the summer of 1902. He graduated ranked 30th of 116 in February 1906 alongside a number of midshipmen who would later play pivotal roles in the conflict in the Pacific. They included “Robert L. Ghormley, the eventual COMSOPAC; Leigh Noyes, a senior flag officer in the Pacific; Milo Draemel, who became Chief of Staff to Nimitz; Isaac Kidd, the first admiral to die in the war aboard the battleship *Arizona*; John McCain, carrier admiral (as well as Task Force commander at Guadalcanal); Aubrey W. “Jake” Fitch, a lifelong friend and carrier admiral who served under Fletcher (at Guadalcanal); and Bill Calhoun, logistic commander in the Pacific war.”³

Fletcher’s initial assignments were typical for “passed midshipmen” embarking on a naval career. He started out serving in the Atlantic, then transferred to the Pacific and served aboard several battleships and destroyers, as well as a survey ship. He developed a reputation for being meticulous about gunnery and in four short years, took command of “USS *Dale* (DD 4) in the Asiatic Torpedo Flotilla.”⁴ During his initial assignments, while going through the process of becoming qualified in various shipboard duties, as well as during his first command, Frank Jack stayed in close contact with his uncle, Frank Friday. Success as the Commanding Officer of *Dale* led to subsequent commands in the Asiatic Fleet. Growing restless with Asia, he moved back to the Atlantic and on to the staff of Frank Friday aboard the USS *Florida* (BB 30).⁵ This early phase of his career illustrates his seafaring acumen, highlighted by his early selection for command. It also demonstrates Fletcher’s attentiveness to developing his career through the nurturing of the relationship with his higher-ranking uncle.

When tensions rose with Mexico in 1913, the Wilson administration sent a flotilla commanded by Frank Friday Fletcher to the Gulf of Mexico. The senior Fletcher gave command of the *Esperanza*, a steamship chartered by the Navy, to Frank Jack for the crisis.⁶ Frank Jack took *Esperanza* into the Mexican harbor of Vera Cruz to evacuate refugees from the situation ashore. Once moored to the pier, Fletcher's ship came under sniper fire. Instead of withdrawing the vessel off shore, Fletcher stationed Marines as sentries around his vessel and walked the decks exposed while all the refugees were loaded-without injury. Success in this operation led him to be placed in charge of a passenger train being used to shuttle American and international refugees out of the Mexican interior. Although crossing heavily mined tracks and dealing with obstinate Mexican patrols, Fletcher was able to bring out over 2,000 refugees safely to Vera Cruz. His heroic action earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor.⁷ The citation states:

He was in charge of the *Esperanza* and succeeded in getting on board over 350 refugees, many of them after the conflict commenced. This ship was under fire, being struck more than 30 times, but he succeeded in getting all the refugees placed in safety. Later he was placed in charge of the train conveying refugees under a flag of truce. This was hazardous duty, as it was believed the track was mined, and a small error in dealing with the Mexican guard of soldiers might readily have caused conflict, such a conflict at one time being narrowly averted. It was greatly due to his efforts in establishing relations with Mexican soldiers that so many refugees succeeded in reaching Vera Cruz from the interior.⁸

It is important to note that for a relatively small operation, there were 55 Medals of Honor awarded for the Vera Cruz incident. This figure unfortunately cast a pall over the significant achievement the medal represents. During the mission Frank Jack learned a great lesson: "maintaining personal composure tended to calm subordinates; a firm but courteous demeanor was not only tactful, it was essential."⁹ It also shows Fletcher's courage, ability to perform under fire, and in military operations other than war.

After Vera Cruz, Lieutenant Fletcher assumed duty as Admiral Fletcher's Aide and Flag Lieutenant. Some insight is also shed on his self worth, as he felt that "how he stood with his peers who had served in combat was the only important issue to him. He didn't care how he stood with those outside the brotherhood."¹⁰ Following this long series of sea duty, he reported to an assignment at the Naval Academy, where he met and married Martha Richards. Upon completion of his orders at Annapolis, Frank Jack moved to an assignment aboard the USS *Kearsarge* (BB 5). Shortly thereafter, the United States entered into World War I and Fletcher requested duty as commanding officer aboard the converted sailing yacht the *Margaret* (SP 527).¹¹ The *Margaret* and her sisters were unwieldy vessels that were lightly armed and completely unsuitable for their primary duty as antisubmarine patrol sloops. The Navy eventually realized its acquisition error and mothballed the craft.

Fletcher was moved to command of USS *Benham* (DD 49) where he seized the opportunity to show his mettle "chasing subs, defending convoys, (and conducting) hazardous patrol."¹² For his efforts aboard *Benham* Fletcher received the Navy Cross. Fletcher's willingness to move from duty aboard a capital ship of the line to an untested platform for combat duty demonstrates that he was not risk averse. Indeed, moving from a battleship to a tiny sloop--poorly armed for its duties, at that--could not only be hazardous to a young officer's career, it could be extremely hazardous to his health. However, Fletcher was willing to accept these risks in order to prove himself worthy of follow on command and promotion.

After World War I, Fletcher served all of his shore duties in Washington, D.C. He also held several commands in the Asiatic Fleet where he developed an affinity for

Chinese artifacts and also demonstrated an open mindedness and respect toward other cultures of the Pacific Rim, which was unusual in the racist atmosphere of the early twentieth century Navy.¹³

In the Philippines, Fletcher took part in action against the Colorum rebels. He was personally involved in several landings where he led parties of Philippine Constabulary and U.S. Marines ashore in pursuit of the rebels. In these operations he received praise for his work and bravery.¹⁴ These experiences in the Far East added depth to his knowledge of the culture in the region that would serve him well in the conflict in the Pacific with the Japanese.

At one point in this time period, Fletcher recognized aviation as an up and coming facet of naval warfare. He applied for flight training, but failed his flight physical. There is no record of him giving any further thought to flying or to the tactics, techniques, and procedures of Naval Aviation. This oversight would expose Fletcher to future criticism as a battleship admiral, which was not without merit. However, it must be noted that at the dawn of World War II in the Pacific the sum total of carrier combat experience in the entire Navy was zero. Whoever was in command of carrier forces would be developing and learning as engagements took place.

After another round of duty in Washington, D.C., Fletcher transferred to the Pacific aboard the USS *Colorado* (BB 45) and assumed duties as the executive officer. Here Fletcher was involved in an incident that could have very well ended his career. On the night of 16 March 1928, *Colorado* steamed into the channel of San Pedro Harbor in California while the civilian steamer *Ruth Alexander* headed out to sea. Through the inky night, passing signals were mixed up and the two ships collided.¹⁵ Although a stressful

affair for Fletcher, both a naval court of inquiry and a civilian judicial review cleared him of any negligence. Much relieved, Frank Jack departed for the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Follow on duty took the Fletchers to the Army War College in Washington D.C. During these two educational experiences, Frank Jack gained an appreciation of the need for interservice cooperation.¹⁶

Again moving to sea duty, the Fletchers departed for Manila where Frank Jack became Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet, aboard the cruiser USS *Houston* (CA 30). Much of his time on staff centered around issues with China and Japan. Fletcher's next staff duty in Washington, D.C., was very successful. He enabled the Navy to improve funding received for new construction to a whopping \$238 million. His good work earned him the choice of his next assignment--he requested command of the USS *New Mexico* (BB 40). *New Mexico* was the flagship of Battleship Division 3, Battle Force Pacific.¹⁷ Under Fletcher *New Mexico* shined as an outstanding ship and crew. "Captain Frank Jack Fletcher quickly gained a reputation as a superior ship handler and outstanding battleship skipper."¹⁸ After this command he was assigned as Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Navigation and received his promotion to Flag rank.¹⁹ Fletcher's success in these demanding billets shows his acumen both at sea and ashore. A ship is said to assume the personality of its commanding officer, due to the near absolute authority a skipper has over his ship and crew. *New Mexico's* success reflects this superior performance on Fletcher's part.

As the storm clouds of war broke on the horizon, Fletcher transferred to the West Coast where he assumed command of Cruiser Division 3, followed by Cruiser Division 6, aboard USS *Minneapolis* (CA 36) as part of Cruiser Scouting Force, U.S. Fleet.²⁰ On 7

December 1941, Fletcher cruised southwest of Hawaii when he learned of the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor.

As the United States entered World War II, few officers had the combat experience of Frank Jack Fletcher. Ironically, with the Pacific Fleet's battleships on the bottom of Pearl Harbor, Fletcher was driven to command aviation forces for the first time in his career. ADM Husband E. Kimmel, CINCPAC, made the decision to relieve Wake Island shortly after 7 December. In a controversial move, he appointed Frank Jack Fletcher Commander of Task Force 14 over the aviator Aubrey "Jake" Fitch. Kimmel chose Fletcher for his combat experience and familiarity with the Japanese. However, Kimmel's decision went against the aviation communities' argument that only qualified aviators should command aircraft carrier forces.²¹

Fletcher departed for Wake on 17 December with orders to resupply, fly off a Marine fighter squadron, and evacuate as many civilians from the island as possible. Unfortunately, the limited speed of the logistics ships, compounded by anti-submarine countermeasures, made the progress of Fletcher's relief force to Wake excruciatingly slow. Heavy weather further hampered attempts to refuel at sea, causing even further delays. Meanwhile in Pearl Harbor, Vice Admiral William S. Pye had replaced Kimmel at CINCPAC, and was filling in until the arrival of Chester Nimitz. A debate swirled at CINCPAC regarding the usefulness of the Wake resupply effort because intelligence showed three Japanese carrier forces moving into the area. Pye did not want to risk a carrier in the endeavor, so on 21 December CINCPAC Staff created a contingency plan. The plan called for a quick dash in and out of the island by the logistics ships under the screen of several destroyers to complete the assigned task. Fletcher would reach that

position on approximately 23 December. Unfortunately, on that day the Japanese invaded the island and seized control before the relief expedition was in range. Fletcher received orders to return to Honolulu. This caused a great deal of distress for Fletcher and his staff. No one relished the idea of leaving fellow countrymen behind to the enemy.²²

Samuel Eliot Morison stated, “The failure to relieve Wake resulted from poor seamanship and a want of decisive action.”²³ He held Fletcher responsible for the slow refueling of TF 14 ships and argued that more could have been done to relieve Wake. However, Morison ignores the fact that both the CNO and Secretary of the Navy viewed Wake as a strategic liability and did not merit the further investment of already scarce resources.²⁴ Morison also ignores the fact that a battlegroup commander has nothing to do with the seamanship displayed by the subordinate units of his command. Ensuring that his ships are prepared to perform high-speed operations without restrictions is a commander’s responsibility. These inaccurate historical notes help propagate the impression of Fletcher as unaggressive and incompetent

The early part of 1942 was spent in training and in transit to the south Pacific area. Finally, in March Fletcher’s forces launched strikes against Japanese forces landing at Lae and Salamaua. These “raids sank two large transports and two other vessels, while nine other ships, including a light cruiser and two destroyers were damaged.”²⁵ Although small, it proved an important early victory, but no credit was given to Fletcher. Next, on 3 May, Fletcher struck at the Japanese landing on Tulagi. Although the pilots returned in high spirits and reported a large number of vessels sunk, the strike had mixed results against the landing forces there, “sinking only a destroyer, two patrol boats, and a transport, with a second transport badly damaged.”²⁶ Nimitz viewed the results

unsatisfactory when compared to the amount of ordnance expended. He urged Fletcher to have his squadrons take target practice at every opportunity.²⁷ Here Fletcher learned to make cautious use of early reports from the returning aviators.

The running Battle of Coral Sea lasted from 4 May until 8 May and illustrated to Fletcher the difficulty with which naval forces could have finding and engaging each other in the over the horizon battle space of carrier warfare.

The Japanese had launched Operation MO, which was intent on taking Port Moresby in New Guinea. Fletcher maneuvered his forces and searched for the enemy aggressively, as did the Japanese. Both sides managed only sporadic contact from 4 May through 6 May. On the morning of 7 May both sides made definitive contact. The Japanese drew first blood by attacking and sinking the destroyer *Sims* and severely damaging the precious fleet oiler *Neosho*.

While the *Sims* and *Neosho* were being struck, one of Fletcher's search planes found "Admiral Marumo Kuninovi's (force) of two light cruisers and some gunboats, but incorrectly identified them as two carriers and four heavy cruisers."²⁸ Fletcher immediately sent all his aircraft roaring off the decks of *Lexington* and *Yorktown* toward the misidentified carriers. Enroute to their target, the 93 plane strike package spotted the Japanese invasion force's covering group and blasted the light carrier *Shoho* out of the water. Fletcher decided to hold off on launching a follow-up strike that afternoon, until his forces located the large deck Japanese carriers. The Japanese, however, had located Fletcher's surface forces, and launched an afternoon strike against them. *Lexington* picked up the raid on her radar and sent fighters aloft to splash the Japanese, downing nine aircraft. In the low light of late afternoon, some of the Japanese aircraft misidentified

the American carriers as their own and were blasted from the skies while attempting to land.²⁹

The next day, both Japanese and American carrier aircraft searched for and found each other, attacking almost simultaneously. The Americans struck the *Shokaku* and badly damaged the large carrier. Unfortunately, *Zuikaku* lurked in a nearby squall and escaped undamaged. The Japanese attacked the *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, and although returning Japanese pilots reported both sunk, *Yorktown* was only “lightly damaged and the *Lexington*, although more heavily hurt, was still able to steam at 25 knots and to conduct flight operations.”³⁰ Unfortunately, that afternoon a series of explosions ripped through *Lexington* and forced her to be abandoned. An escorting destroyer later sank her. E. B Potter said of the battle: “It was becoming clear that the Japanese had won a tactical victory. Their loss of the converted 12,000-ton *Shoho* and a few small vessels off of Tulagi was a small price to pay for the sinking of the *Neosho*, *Sims*, and the 33,000-ton *Lexington*. For the United States, however, the Battle of the Coral Sea was definitely a strategic victory: the main Japanese objective, the capture of Port Moresby had been thwarted. For the first time in World War II, a Japanese advance had been turned back.”³¹ Fletcher had no time to contemplate the significance of the battle, however, he was learning the lessons of carrier warfare that would pay off in less than a month.

In April 1942 American decodes of JN-25 traffic identified several Japanese operational plans. The most alarming contingency called for a large scale “operation in the Pacific, involving most of the Combined Fleet.”³² The Aleutians, Pearl Harbor, and Midway made up the list of obvious candidates for the focus of an offensive. Although unsure of the exact objective, American code breakers were able to identify tiny Midway

atoll as its primary focus through an ingenious manipulation of information. A false message, sent unencrypted from Midway, stated the island was having trouble with its freshwater generation systems. Several days later, a decoded Japanese message stated that the subject of their offensive was experiencing water problems. Thus, the Americans identified Midway as the Japanese operational focus.³³ The four fleet carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, and *Soryu* would support the Japanese invasion force. Vice Admiral Bull Halsey's Task Force 16 (TF16), made up of *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, were in Pearl Harbor as Frank Jack Fletcher and *Yorktown* limped into port. The damage to *Yorktown* was estimated at 90 days to repair.

Mustering adequate resources for the coming battle was vital for Nimitz. CINCPAC greeted *Yorktown* upon arrival at Pearl Harbor and inspected her while the dry-dock was still draining. He stated, "We must have this ship back in three days."³⁴ Nimitz also faced a decision on who should command the operation. Halsey and Fletcher had both been at sea fighting the Japanese for the past six months under extreme stress. Halsey would have commanded the upcoming operation, but entered the hospital upon his arrival in Hawaii with dermatitis, which was brought on by the stress of command. TF 16 would be turned over to Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance. Fletcher too was showing the strain of combat, his "ramrod posture and jaunty stance had somehow gone a little limp. To Nimitz's inquiry how he felt, he replied, 'Pretty tired'. Nimitz nodded and said that normally, after so long a spell of sea duty with combat, he would have sent him home for leave, but unfortunately he needed Task Force 17 in another important mission."³⁵

After a review of his record, Nimitz chose Fletcher for overall command of the Midway operation. Fletcher faced an overwhelming problem: his meager force of “3 carriers, 7 cruisers, and 17 destroyers . . . would face an overwhelming Japanese force of 4 fleet carriers, 2 light carriers, 11 battleships, 12 heavy and light cruisers, and 53 destroyers.”³⁶ Faced with this numerical disparity, Fletcher decided that a maneuvering force, split up and operating independently would carry the battle. This tactical decision was augmented by the employment of operational deception: two vessels in the southwest Pacific began fake radio communications on frequencies used by aircraft carriers, convincing the Japanese that forces were deployed other than around Midway. Fletcher and Spruance lay in wait for the advancing Japanese.

On 4 June Admiral Nagumo Chuichi, commanding the strike force of Carrier Divisions 1 and 2, launched half of his aircraft on a raid against Midway, saving the other half for a strike on the American carriers, when they were detected. On the way to their target, the Japanese attackers were spotted and aircraft from Midway were immediately launched to hit the enemy carriers, while the American carriers wheeled to close with the enemy. Spruance, in his first act as a carrier Task Force Commander, launched all of his aircraft as soon as he reached position. Fletcher, capitalizing on his experience of the past six months, cautiously held his aircraft on deck. The historian Ronald Spector noted: “He probably remembered how a faulty scouting report at the Battle of the Coral Sea had led him to waste his striking force on the small carrier *Shoho* while the big Japanese carriers went unmolested.”³⁷ Ninety minutes later, Fletcher launched a conservative strike package, holding half his dive-bombers and most of his fighters in reserve to see what unfolded. Although not qualified as an aviator, Fletcher was applying his lessons learned

from commanding carriers for the last six months. Spruance's aircraft had to search for the Japanese carriers and by a stroke of luck, converged over the enemy's big flattops at the same time Fletcher's strike arrived. Although the Japanese fighters decimated the torpedo bombers, the *Zeros* were dragged low and ended up engaged in whirling dogfights with American *Wildcats*. This left high altitude *Dauntless* dive-bombers completely unopposed. The *Dauntless* pilots took full advantage of the situation, rolling in on deadly attack runs that crushed the *Akagi*, *Kaga*, and *Soryu*. *Soryu* was abandoned shortly after the attack with *Akagi* and *Kaga* going to the bottom that night.³⁸

Unfortunately, the remaining Japanese carrier, *Hiryu*, launched a late morning attack against Fletcher's *Yorktown* that met with success. In the strike three bombs and two torpedoes found their mark, with devastating results. *Yorktown* was ordered abandoned, leaving Fletcher without a carrier in his Task Force. Fortunately, that afternoon planes from both the *Enterprise* and the stricken *Yorktown* found *Hiryu* and sent her to the bottom. The Japanese attempted to continue the invasion without air support but were forced back after losing a cruiser and having another heavily damaged.³⁹

It was a great victory for the Americans and Fletcher. Unfortunately, the victory was tarnished by the ignominious demise of *Yorktown*. After being abandoned, she remained afloat and was taken undertow for return to Pearl Harbor. Even though six destroyers escorted her, *Yorktown* and a destroyer tied alongside providing salvage support were torpedoed by a Japanese submarine and sunk.

Less than one month after the Battle of Midway had concluded, events unfolded that would set the course for Fletcher's next mission. "In the late afternoon of 5 July...word came from Pearl Harbor that station Hypo (cryptanalyst station) had broken a

radio dispatch indicating that a Japanese naval party had landed on Guadalcanal. From the fact that the party included Pioneer Forces, fleet intelligence deduced that the enemy was about to construct an airfield on that island. (To conceal the source of this info, a cover story was later released stating that a Southwest Pacific search plane had observed the field under construction.)⁴⁰ In order to prevent the Japanese from going after New Hebrides and New Caledonia the Navy and Marine Corps needed to take Guadalcanal.⁴¹ The logistical lifeline to Australia depended on this mission and Frank Jack Fletcher would be the man in command.

The evidence suggests the harsher criticisms of the traditionalists vis-à-vis Fletcher's character are at the least oversimplified, at best overstated, and in all probability incorrect. Fletcher was brave, but not rash. He understood the strategic environment in which he was operating and his commander's intent. Fletcher was intelligent and cautious, vital attributes when 75 percent of his nation's precious carrier aviation capability--all that stood between the Japanese and the South Pacific--were on the line. Fletcher's assignment history shows that he carefully managed his career, this fact exposes him as a careerist. In contemporary vernacular being described as a careerist carries negative connotations--careerists are often thought to be risk averse. Fletcher's actions prove otherwise. From commissioning through Flag level assignments, he chose to stay at sea when ever possible. Additionally, he sought out risky assignments, an example being the ill resourced submarine hunting sloop of war during World War I. Fletcher may have been a careerist, but he was also a warrior.

Fletcher commanded successfully in battle from Mexico through the first six months of war with Japan. He had earned the Congressional Medal of Honor and the

Navy Cross for valor and bravery in combat. Although not a qualified aviator, he took command of the carrier forces that would hold the line against the Japanese juggernaut. However, his wartime record was not without setback, for which he has borne an unfair amount of responsibility. Wake Island represented a strategic liability that the United States could not afford to hold on to. Although sent on the mission and then told to abort it by higher authority, historians have harnessed the yolk of failure around Fletcher's neck. Fletcher commanded at Coral Sea what was arguably a tactical defeat but undoubtedly a strategic victory. Applying lessons learned from these previous battles, at Midway he led his force to the greatest strategic victory the United States had achieved to the day. Unfortunately, although won against much larger forces, both battles were not without the loss of two carriers, which the historical record finds difficult to forgive. How did his experiences prior to and during World War II ultimately influence his decision to withdraw at Guadalcanal? J. B. Lundstrom best describes Fletcher:

Plain and unpretentious, a warm individual, Fletcher had strength of character and a careful approach to war. Although naturally excitable, he was not rash, but acted aggressively when he saw the need. Despite what his critics have said, his innate caution never degenerated to timidity.⁴²

Who was responsible for shaping the strategic environment in which Fletcher operated? How did the operations of the other Task Forces influence his decision-making process? The next chapter will review the strategic and operational environment that Fletcher operated in during Watchtower.

¹Stephen D. Regan, *In Bitter Tempest* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 11.

²*Ibid.*, 8.

³*Ibid.*, 14.

⁴Ibid., 24.

⁵Ibid., 25.

⁶Ibid., 29.

⁷Ibid., 29-32.

⁸Ibid., 33.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 34.

¹²Ibid., 38.

¹³Ibid., 40.

¹⁴Ibid., 42.

¹⁵Ibid., 46.

¹⁶Ibid., 49.

¹⁷Ibid., 56

¹⁸Ibid., 64.

¹⁹Ibid., 65.

²⁰Ibid., 66.

²¹Ibid., 73.

²²Ibid., 81

²³Ronald H.Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993),
106.

²⁴Ibid., 104.

²⁵Ibid., 151

²⁶Ibid., 156.

²⁷E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 70.

²⁸Ibid., 160.

²⁹Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 161.

³⁰Ibid., 162.

³¹Potter, *Nimitz*, 85.

³²Ibid., 66.

³³Regan, *In Bitter Tempest*, 158.

³⁴Potter, *Nimitz*, 85.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Regan, *In Bitter Tempest*, 156.

³⁷Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 173.

³⁸S. E. Smith, *The United States Navy in World War II* (New York: Quill Publishing, 1966), 290.

³⁹Ibid., 298.

⁴⁰Potter, 115.

⁴¹Ibid., 179.

⁴²Lundstrom, 6.

CHAPTER 4

THE PLAYERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

After the United States' stunning victory at the Battle of Midway, American leaders felt better postured to initiate offensive operations in the Pacific theater. Whether these operations would be under Nimitz and the Navy or MacArthur and the Army was as yet undetermined. A mere two days after Midway, General MacArthur forwarded a plan to Washington detailing an operation for the invasion of Rabaul. He requested a division of Marines for amphibious assault and two aircraft carriers to support the landings. Admiral King in Washington was not about to subordinate aircraft carriers and Marines to MacArthur. Additionally, King considered the risks inherent in the plan too high. As a result, Operation Watchtower emerged as the first offensive in the Pacific. In response to the building of Japanese air and seaplane bases in the Solomons, Watchtower moved ahead quickly in order to prevent any interdiction of the vital sea-lanes of communication to Australia. A battle weary Frank Jack Fletcher would again be called upon to lead the operation.

The strategic leaders of Watchtower were Admirals Ernest King and Chester Nimitz, with Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley expected to "exercise strategic command in person."¹ They provided the compass by which Fletcher would guide his forces at Guadalcanal. How did the leadership of King, Nimitz, and Ghormley play in Fletcher's decision to pull out?

Admiral Earnest J. King held the top position in the Navy during the majority of World War II. In fact, he wore two hats as Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and

Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet (COMINCH), wielding both operational and administrative control over the entire Navy. “Never before had an American naval officer exercised the authority and responsibility delegated to King by the President of the United States, and never again would one do [*sic*] so.”² Beginning his career as a surface warfare officer, King transitioned to aviation at the very senior rank of Captain and commanded the carrier Lexington. Although a newcomer to aviation, he advocated aviators as solely qualified to command carrier forces. King was a caustic, driven man who had little patience for commanders who failed to share his aggressive spirit. He also chaffed at the “Germany First” strategy that the United States had committed to and wanted to assume offensive operations in the Pacific as soon as possible. Indeed, when asked, in early 1942, by General George C. Marshall how the Navy would protect the sea-lanes to Australia, King responded with a plan that called for a “step-by-step general advance . . . through the New Hebrides, Solomons, and the Bismarck Archipelago.”³ King viewed the aircraft carrier as the decisive strategic asset in the Pacific Theater and urged his commanders to continuously apply pressure to the Japanese at every opportunity. This aggressive mindset, drunk from the fountain of naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan, led him to sponsor Doolittle’s raid and endorse the isolated carrier raids in the Pacific in early 1942. It is interesting to note that these operations were conducted in spite of the broad spectrum of resource challenges faced by Navy at that time in the war. These operations also put his valuable carriers in very vulnerable situations, with the potential for minimal tactical or strategic benefit.



Figure 3. Rabaul, Solomons, and New Hebrides

Although King personally did not like the Pacific Fleet commander Nimitz, they managed to develop an effective working relationship. This in spite of King's attempts from his offices in Washington, D.C., to "control carrier task forces [in the Pacific], often by countermanning Nimitz's orders."⁴ He refused to allow Nimitz the latitude to make Flag Officer assignments within the Pacific Theater and even controlled awards and promotions.⁵ King demonstrated his controlling style after Coral Sea, where Fletcher lost the *Lexington*, a ship King previously commanded and loved.

Fletcher so impressed Nimitz with his performance that CINCPAC radioed King, recommending Fletcher for a promotion to Vice Admiral and a Distinguished Service Medal. Nimitz stated that Fletcher had "utilized with consummate skill the information

supplied him, and by these engagements in the Coral Sea between the 4th and 8th of May won a victory with decisive and far-reaching consequences for the Allied cause.”⁶ King curtly responded, “I must express my feeling that destroyers might have been used in night attacks on the enemy.”⁷ Although American ships lacked radar, effective torpedoes, were poorly trained for night combat operations, and the tactical situation did not favor pursuit, King viewed Fletcher’s lack of reckless action as timidity. This caused further erosion in King’s faith in Fletcher.⁸

The loss of *Lexington* at Coral Sea did provide King some perspective and temper his aggressive attitude. Previously, King viewed carriers as “huge, powerful, and seemingly unsinkable.”⁹ Now his beloved *Lexington* rested in a watery tomb at the bottom of the Coral Sea, proving their vulnerability. King went off the deep end, proposing to Nimitz that naval aircraft fly off the carriers and operate from shore side in order to augment land-based aviation. He even proposed that carriers not “operate beyond range [*sic*] of Allied land based air.”¹⁰ Nimitz, realizing the potential tactical opportunities that could be lost due to these restrictions, disagreed. “Still concerned about conserving his carriers, King ordered Nimitz [prior to the Battle of Midway] ‘to employ strong attrition tactics and not--repeat--not allow our forces to accept such decisive action as would be likely to incur heavy losses in our carriers and cruisers.’”¹¹ This edict from King led to an order of strategic impact, issued by Nimitz, which would influence Operation Watchtower in August 1942--*calculated risk*.

The second strategic level commander of Watchtower was Chester Nimitz. Nimitz had progressed through the ranks as a surface warfare officer and then submariner, commanding both surface and submarine squadrons. He assumed command

of the Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas on the last day of December 1941. He moved into an extremely tense situation, inheriting a staff that had endured the ignominious defeat of Pearl Harbor. Although morale was low, Nimitz displayed his leadership qualities early on. He called a meeting of the assembled staffs, where they expected to be thanked for their service, before being transferred out of Hawaii. However Nimitz “dropped a bombshell, but not the sort the assembled officers were expecting.”¹² He proceeded to say that he in no way blamed them for what happened at Pearl Harbor, and that he knew they were excellent officers by virtue of the fact that they had been assigned to Hawaii. He wanted them to stay on and “provide continuity through their familiarity with their duties.”¹³ He also was not prone to badgering his commanders at sea. This is well illustrated by an incident that occurred during the Battle of Midway. After Naval Aviators had blasted all four of the Japanese heavy carriers from the water, Nimitz’s staff noticed late that night that Spruance’s Task Force appeared to be east of their last known position, apparently fleeing from the enemy. When they brought this to Nimitz’s attention, “he refused to intervene or even take the matter seriously. ‘I’m sure Spruance has a better sense of what’s going on out there than we have here. I’m sure he has a very good reason for this. We’ll learn all about it in the course of time. From here we are not in a position to kibitz [*sic*] a commander in the field of action.’”¹⁴

This was in stark contrast to King’s controlling methods, which may explain why the pair formed such a complimentary team. King felt that Nimitz was “too lenient with subordinates who had erred. ‘I could never understand,’ King would say, ‘why people in command were so touchy about kicking people out.’”¹⁵ Someone who they would disagree on “kicking” out was Frank Jack Fletcher.

After the Battle of Coral Sea, Nimitz ordered Fletcher, aboard *Yorktown*, back to Pearl Harbor for repairs in anticipation of the Japanese push towards Midway. As Admiral “Bull” Halsey would be unable to participate in the upcoming operation due to hospitalization for dermatitis, Fletcher would, by virtue of seniority, act as Senior Task Force Commander. This did not sit well with King, owing to Fletcher’s loss of *Lexington* at Coral Sea. He ordered Nimitz to assess Fletcher’s suitability for command. Although it appears King may have already made up his mind on the matter, Nimitz looked further into it.¹⁶

Upon Fletcher’s arrival in Pearl Harbor, Nimitz and Fletcher conducted a brief inspection of the damage to *Yorktown* and then proceeded up to CINCPAC headquarters. Upon arrival, they exchanged a few pleasantries and then Nimitz “began a review of Fletcher’s wartime record. As the reason for the interrogation gradually dawned on Fletcher, both he and his interrogator became increasingly embarrassed.”¹⁷ Fletcher, completely unprepared, asked for an opportunity to review his record. Nimitz granted the request. The following morning, “Fletcher made his verbal report to Nimitz, who asked him to submit it in writing.”¹⁸ Nimitz forwarded the report to King, with a glowing cover letter that stated Fletcher had his full support and described Fletcher as an “excellent, seagoing, fighting naval officer and I wish to retain him as a task force commander in the future.”¹⁹ Fletcher would command the Midway Task Forces, but he had lost one carrier and King didn’t forgive commanders who lost ships. King was not happy having Fletcher in charge.

The CINCPAC Operations Plan (OPLAN 29-42) for Midway was a bulky document detailing the forthcoming operation. Nimitz attached a separate letter to the

OPLAN addressed to Fletcher and Spruance that would have far reaching effects on future operations. The guidance issued by Nimitz reflected King's obsession with preserving the Pacific's valuable carriers and the resource challenge faced by the Navy at that time. Nimitz directed, "In carrying out the task assigned in Op Plan 29-42 [*sic*], you will be governed by the principle of *calculated risk*, which you will interpret to mean the avoidance of exposure of your force to attack by superior enemy forces without the prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage to the enemy."²⁰ From Fletcher and Spruance's conduct at Midway, it is clear that they understood the reasons behind this order and supported it fully.

The commander who King and Nimitz expected to "exercise strategic command *in person* [emphasis mine]" over Fletcher's forces in Operation Watchtower was the Commander, South Pacific (COMSOPAC), Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley.²¹ Ghormley was a Naval Academy classmate of Fletcher's who had helped develop the "Rainbow" war plans as Assistant Chief of Naval Operations during the inter war period.²² Ghormley moved to Noumea, New Caledonia, and stood up COMSOPAC after being relieved by Admiral "Betty" Stark as the senior Naval Officer in London.²³ He set up his headquarters aboard the old naval auxiliary *Argonne*. Ghormley held a reputation of being "widely experienced and outstandingly intelligent" and was considered suitable for the job by both King and Nimitz.²⁴ His well-honed diplomatic skills would be useful in dealing with the "hyper sensitive Free French in New Caledonia and the worried New Zealand Government in Auckland."²⁵

Ghormley's leadership within the framework of Operation Watchtower has been a source of controversy. He did not involve himself in, or provide a great deal of guidance

to, the planning or execution of the operation. The traditionalist school of history refers to MacArthur and Ghormley's joint message to Washington questioning the prudence of Watchtower and Ghormley's lack of involvement in the operational planning of the operation, as evidence of his misgivings about the operation. However, his lack of involvement could be due in part to a directive received from Nimitz in May with respect to Pacific Fleet Forces operating in the South Pacific Area:

When Fleet Task Forces operate in the South and/or Southwest Pacific Area, my command of them will, unless otherwise specified, be exercised through you. Under some conditions these forces will be made available to you to accomplish such of your tasks as you see fit. At present, their tasks are being assigned by *me in broad terms in order that sufficient initiative may be left to the Senior Task Force Commander, and ordinarily will require little amplification by you* [emphasis mine]. It is expected, however, that you will exercise such direction as you may consider necessary when changed or unforeseen situations arise.²⁶

Nimitz included not only Ghormley's South Pacific Area, but also MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area. This inclusion likely intended to ensure no misapplication of naval forces by MacArthur. Whether this directive was the reason Ghormley failed to command in person is open to debate, however, it must be considered. What is clear is the expectation that King and Nimitz held for COMSOPAC. They expected Ghormley to command the operation in person. King stated in a naval message in early July that it "is assumed Ghormley will be made Task Force Commander at least for Task 1 (Watchtower) which he should command *in person in the operating area* [emphasis mine]."²⁷ Nimitz followed up a few days later with a message telling Ghormley, "You will *exercise strategic command in person* [emphasis mine]."²⁸ Why Ghormley chose not to be at the scene of the fight and disregard these directives from his superiors remains a mystery, but the stresses of combat command on a leader can have wide ranging physical

and mental effects. The Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox noted in a letter to Nimitz that he “had repeated reports of his [Ghormley’s] physical condition, which gave me a good deal of anxiety.”²⁹ The historian E. B. Potter noted that upon his relief as COMSOPAC, Ghormley had a number of abscessed teeth removed, greatly improving his health and job performance as the commandant of the 14th Naval District in Hawaii.³⁰ Whatever the reason, Ghormley did not involve himself in the pre-invasion planning that took place aboard *Saratoga* at the end of July, nor did he provide any operational guidance to Fletcher. This disassociation on his part had the effect of thrusting Fletcher, whether he realized it or not, into a position of strategic command of Operation Watchtower.

This illustrates a critical weakness within Watchtower that is relevant to the success of any military operation: command and control. It is apparent that there were expectations within the command structure of Watchtower that were not realized, and the subsequent performance of missions suffered as a result of this confusion.

Having reviewed the senior leadership of the operation, it is now important to review the role that the other Task Force commanders, within the context of their Task Force’s operations, and how they impacted Fletcher’s decision to withdraw. How did the operations of the other Task Force commanders, Rear Admirals Richmond “Kelly” Turner and John S. McCain, influence Fletcher’s decision-making process?

Kelly Turner commanded Task Force 62 (TF 62), the amphibious forces of Operation Watchtower. An experienced planner, he previously served as King’s war plans officer on the Chief of Naval Operations staff and was hand picked by King and Nimitz for the mission because of his integral role in its planning.³¹ A late blooming aviator like King, Turner was “brilliant, caustic, arrogant, and tactless”--which boosted

King's confidence in the future success of the operation.³² In spite of the confidence of his superior, Turner was not without apprehension. When told by King that he would command the Amphibious Forces, Turner "protested he knew too little about amphibious warfare."³³ King retorted, "You will learn."³⁴ Turner's apprehension highlights the fact that although the Navy-Marine Corps team had refined amphibious *doctrine* during the interwar period, practical exercises had not been stunningly successful and the Navy and Marine Corps had never attempted it in combat. Much like the evolving nature of carrier warfare, amphibious warfare would be learning on the fly. Unfortunately, this inexperience would lead to flaws in planning assumptions and unrealistic expectations, ultimately culminating in the controversy surrounding the withdrawal of Fletcher's carrier forces of Task Force 61 (TF 61).

The very first meeting of the principle commanders involved in Watchtower took place in San Francisco on 5 July between Turner and Fletcher. They sat down to discuss the details of the plan and two challenges became apparent: direct air support during the amphibious assault and land based air support to the entire operation. The first issue would be handled with assets from Fletcher's aircraft carriers. The second issue would be solved through coordination of land based air assets in MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area and McCain's Task Force 62 (TF 62).

At the conclusion of the San Francisco planning session, Fletcher and Turner concluded that carrier air would provide cover for the invasion for three days: two days before the assault and the day of the assault (D day, 7 August). This was acceptable because Turner assumed he could unload and withdraw his transports on the day of the assault.³⁵ This overly optimistic assumption by Turner would cause the most friction

during subsequent planning. Ghormley reviewed the initial plan and informed King and Nimitz on 8 July that unloading the transports would take between 36 hours and four days. Eight days later, on 16 July, Ghormley sent out his OPLAN covering Task One and “unexpectedly assigned Fletcher in tactical command as CO of the Expeditionary Force (TF 61).”³⁶ Unfortunately, Fletcher’s TF 61 had departed on 7 July and was steaming in radio silence toward the South Pacific. Able to receive transmissions, but not respond, he was incapable of participating in any coordinated planning until arrival off Koro Island at the end of the month.

Meanwhile, Turner conducted planning on his own, modifying his operations twice while Fletcher was in transit. Change one, transmitted 20 July, outlined air support requirements for the invasion: numbers of aircraft, positioning, and control measures. Change two was released five days later on 25 July and proved contentious. Turner revised his initial optimistic assumption and stated that he would be able to send to the rear most of his ships by D Day plus one (8 August) and that “the real difficulty would be with the five cargo vessels.”³⁷ Turner had identified a challenge in unloading five of his transports and could give no estimate on a required timeline, stating only that offloading could take from three to six days. He requested air support for the entire time. Fletcher consulted his air experts aboard *Saratoga* and deduced that in order to provide short-range fighter support to the transports, the carriers would have to remain in a restricted position south of Guadalcanal. Any extended operations would increase the risk of attack by land based planes and submarines. “He [Fletcher] felt that the preservation of his carriers, which he [and King and Nimitz] considered the major strategic asset of the

Pacific Fleet, must be his paramount goal.”³⁸ Extended operations violated *calculated risk* and Fletcher could not support any contingency beyond D Day plus one (8 August).

Nine days before the invasion, the principle commanders converged at the only unified planning session held for the entire operation. Fletcher, Turner, McCain, Major General Alexander A. Vandergrift (commanding 1st Marine Division), and Ghormley’s Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan rendezvoused aboard *Saratoga*. Here, Fletcher’s unwillingness to support the amphibious operations beyond D Day plus one caused a great deal of acrimony between him, Turner, and Vandergrift. Vandergrift felt betrayed by Fletcher and cast “aspersions on Fletcher’s fortitude.”³⁹ Turner, in classic form, attempted to use his temper to influence Fletcher and change his position. Fletcher did not flinch--after considering all options; he acquiesced slightly and stated that the carriers could not stay in support of the amphibious operations any later than the morning of D day plus 2 (9 August).⁴⁰ When notified of this agreement by Callaghan, Ghormley sent Fletcher a proposal for continuous fighter support to the invasion by stripping the carriers of their fighters and sending them ashore to Guadalcanal. Considering that the field on Guadalcanal was not capable of logistical support for these fighters and that this course of action would emasculate the carriers defensively, it was unacceptable. Turner’s biographer, Vice Admiral George C. Dyer states, “CTF 61 [Fletcher] did not buy this proposal and COMSOPAC later decided it was impractical.”⁴¹

The second challenge to the entire operation centered on land-based air support. McCain, commanding TF 63, was charged “to support the Expeditionary Force and to arrange with the Commander of South West Pacific Area (SWPA) [*sic*] for the coordination of aerial reconnaissance in support of that force.”⁴² McCain had a

formidable force of 290 aircraft at his disposal. MacArthur's command would make 20 long-range B-17 bombers and 40 Australian Hudson reconnaissance aircraft available for tasking. However, these figures fail to reflect TF 63's true capabilities. Of the 290 aircraft under McCain's operational control, fully "145 were in the rear area of the South Pacific (Fiji, Tonga, and Samoan Islands) and were able to support Watchtower only by air reconnaissance and by keeping rear bases secure."⁴³ Command and control of the aircraft was also an issue--it must be highlighted that McCain did not have *operational control* over MacArthur's air assets, only *coordination* responsibilities. Coordination of these assets in search and reconnaissance over such a large area would prove a daunting task, exacerbated by the fact that the separation of the COMSOPAC and SWPA occurred 35 miles west of Guadalcanal at 159 East Longitude (figure 4)

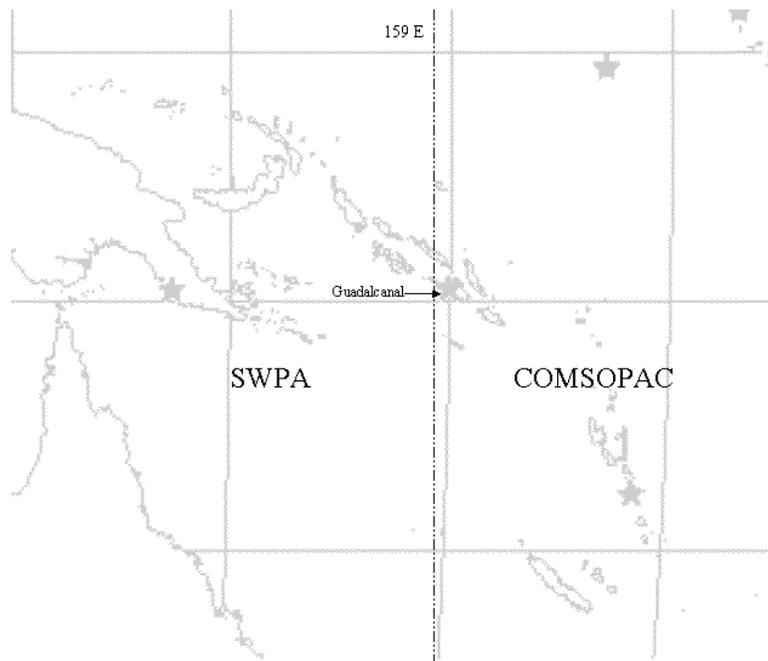


Figure 4. SWPA-COMSOPAC

MacArthur's air assets were responsible for searching north and west from Australia to 158 East Longitude. McCain's TF 63 aircraft could search west of the meridian by 120 miles, if required, thus providing what appeared to be a comprehensive overlap of search areas.⁴⁴ Additionally, during planning Fletcher detected a vulnerability in the search patterns and sent a message to McCain asking that TF 63 aircraft reach the northern point of their search pattern at sundown, in order to more readily detect approaching surface vessels attempting a night attack. In the event that TF 63 aircraft were unable to perform their missions, TF 61 would perform dawn and late afternoon scouting missions, to prevent the undetected approach of enemy surface combatants.⁴⁵

In addition to reconnaissance, the threat of Japanese land-based air on Rabaul and Buka would have to be neutralized in order to ensure Watchtower's success. McCain's TF 63 aircraft did not have the operational reach to effectively interdict these bases; besides, they were well within SWPA area of responsibility. Thus, McCain was required to coordinate the suppression of these bases with Major General George C. Kenney, the commander of SWPA's Allied Air Force. Success in this mission was determined to be essential to allow Watchtower forces a permissive operational environment. It was noted, "If this operation is a success [the bombing of Rabaul and Buka], the task is a cinch. If not, we may lose a carrier."⁴⁶

Thus, there were many operational cards that had to stack up just right, in order to maximize the chances for a successful operation. Close coordination on the part of all Task Forces would help ensure success. As the fleet steamed northward on 6 August, one card landed right where they needed it; the carriers cruised under a thick overcast layer that stymied Japanese air searches. Although there were several hostile aircraft detected,

none made contact and it appeared to Fletcher that they would make their approach undetected. How would the other cards fall?

Turner's amphibious operations on D day were challenging after the initial landing of troops. Marines storming ashore on Guadalcanal found little resistance from the construction troops building the airfield on the island. This was in grim contrast to the heavy resistance faced across the channel by their fellow Marines on Tulagi and Gatuva. Enemy contact ashore aside, the greatest challenge faced by Turner was the landing of sufficient supplies to the Marines ashore, in an expeditious manner, to fulfill the planning assumption of a rapid offload and retirement of TF 62 transports. The logistical aspect of the landings were complicated by the Japanese air raid of the 7th and by poor movement of supplies inland from the beach. Although the air raid temporarily hampered shipping supplies ashore, the landing beaches were quickly becoming clogged with stores from the ships. The Marines had failed to assign an appropriate number of troops to offload these supplies and move them inland. Troops still awaiting their equipment chose to sit idly by, shooting coconuts out of trees or swimming, instead of helping move supplies inland. As a result, many supplies off-loaded below the high water mark were wrecked when the tide came in.⁴⁷ The transport *Hunter Liggett* recorded in her log book that "despite the quiet night [7 August], the Marines had failed to clear the beach and very little cargo was worked prior to the air alarm at 1043 [on 8 August]."⁴⁸ This failure to work cargo early on 8 August and subsequent air raids would have the second order effect of hampering the expeditious landing of vital supplies to the invasion forces ashore and the third order effect of delaying the departure of the transport ships.

In spite of these challenges, as operations wrapped up on D day, it appeared that Watchtower was on schedule. The Marines were poised to take the airfield on Guadalcanal and, despite stiff resistance, expected to conquer Tulagi and Gatuva on the eighth. As a result, Turner reported at 2130, 7 August, that “Early morning 8th expect to send out Santa Cruz occupation force less *President Jackson, Wilson, plus McCawley, Heywood, Trever, Mugford*, some other APs later in day.” The historian John B. Lundstrom notes, “This was in line with previously discussed plans to withdraw most of TF 62 on D+1.” Unfortunately for all involved, this was about to change.

Shortly after sending this report, Turner learned from Vandergrift that Marines ashore on Tulagi and Gatuva had suffered higher casualties than expected. In response, Turner independently revised his plans and reinforced Tulagi. He informed TF 61 and COMSOPAC without further amplification, via the following message, “Owing to reinforcements Florida area will not commence retirement as planned.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately for all involved, this cryptic communication was sent from *McCawley* at 0217, 8 August, and went unrecorded by some recipients until as late as 11 August.⁵⁰ This may have been caused by the fact that *McCawley* did not have the most effective communications facilities in the amphibious force.⁵¹

As TF 62 was executing its mission of landing the Marines ashore, TF 63 attempted to ensure the cards it was responsible for in the operation were stacked in the right places. Aerial reconnaissance by TF 63 aircraft as well as by SWPA based U.S. Army and Australian planes on 7 August failed to detect any Japanese forces approaching Guadalcanal. Army Air Force B-17s of the 19th Bombardment Group executed the

required bombing of Rabaul on 7 August, however, poor timing and intelligence failures would degrade the effectiveness of the mission flown by the brave aircrew.

At 1220 on 7 August, B-17s arrived over Rabaul without the benefit of fighter escort, due to the long ranges involved in the mission. Intercepted by land-based Japanese fighters that rose to meet them, they resolutely pressed the attack and reported bombing revetments and runways, and claimed 7 Zeros. Unfortunately, the raid was less than effective because there had been no substantial force on the ground for the bombers to attack. The Japanese had departed at 1000 that morning to attack the Guadalcanal invasion force. The effectiveness of the suppression effort was unknowingly exaggerated when Allied intelligence decoded a Japanese message stating 30 aircraft available for 8 August. Believing there were approximately 150 airplanes based there, intelligence deduced that about one hundred or so planes had been destroyed. In fact, the land-based air threat had not been suppressed. This would come back to plague TF 61 and 62 on 8 August in the form of an air raid originating from the supposedly “suppressed” bases.⁵² This attack would inflict mortal wounds to the transport *George Fox Elliott* and the destroyer *Jarvis*.

It is important to note the distinct nature of the two different air raids faced by Fletcher and Turner’s forces on 7 and 8 August. The 7 August Japanese raid had originally been loaded out to strike land-based targets in Australia. Upon receiving reports of the invasion at Guadalcanal, the Japanese attacked the ships reported in the area without a change in ordnance. As a result, their bombing was largely ineffective. The strike on 8 August, however, was loaded out with ship killing torpedoes and claimed *Jarvis* and *George Fox Elliott*. At Coral Sea, *Lexington* had taken two torpedoes and been

sunk, while *Yorktown* survived her bomb hits. At Midway, *Yorktown* had taken two torpedoes and, while limping back to port, had been sent to the bottom along with one of her escorts by torpedoes from a submarine.⁵³ Torpedoes held the reputation as the most lethal antiship weapon around--the influence of their arrival upon Fletcher had to be significant. Additionally, the aerial reconnaissance mission, or lack thereof, by TF 63 would prove critical on 8 August. Turner, recognizing more holes in TF 63's search plan, requested additional searches in the northern Solomons and their approaches on 8 August. Unfortunately, poor weather hampered the day's missions and they were never made. The fact that only limited air searches were made was not reported to Turner or Fletcher that day until 2333.⁵⁴ Without being informed, both commanders assumed that the mission was being executed. Fletcher, Turner, and McCain had agreed upon a contingency to overcome any air search deficiencies by sending carrier based aircraft out, but due to the late nature of the report, these searches were never conducted. Reports of "Three cruisers, two destroyers, and two seaplane tenders" by SWPA based Australian Hudson reconnaissance aircraft were delayed by over 8 hours due to inefficient reporting processes within SWPA. As a result, as evening fell on 8 August, Fletcher and Turner steamed unaware that Vice Admiral Mikawa Gunichi was leading a force of Japanese surface combatants at high speed down the Solomons for a night attack on the American forces there (figure 5).

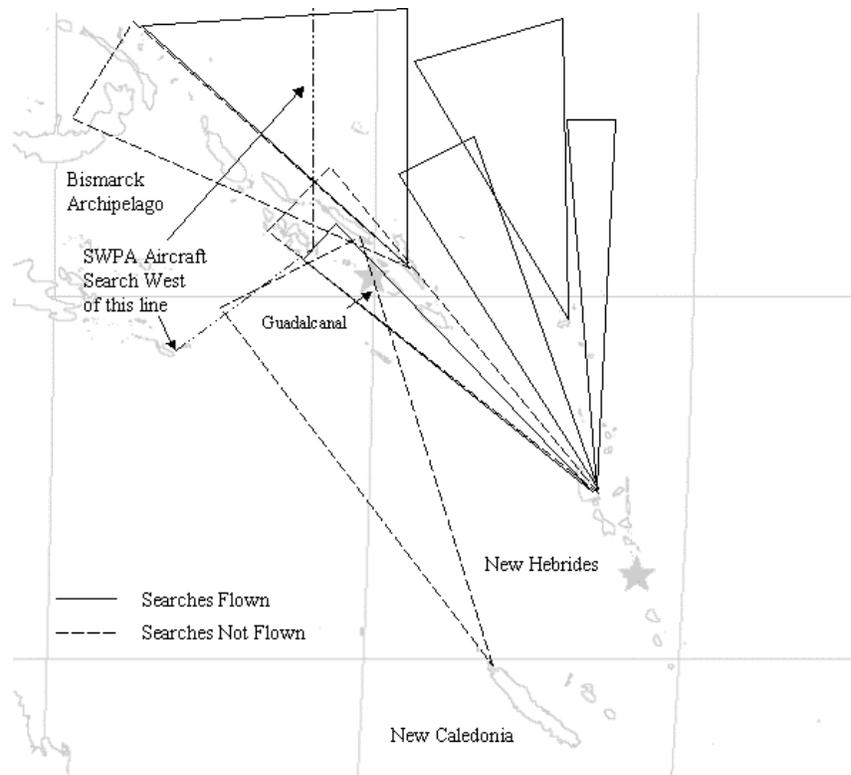


Figure 5. 8 August Air Searches. *Source: Samuel Eliot Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II: vol. 4, Coral Sea and Midway, vol. 5, The Struggle for Guadalcanal* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1949.), 24.

Poor command, control and communication (C3), unfulfilled missions, and a backlog of supplies ashore; had any of these challenges been foreseen and addressed prior to D day, Watchtower may have been executed much more smoothly. If C3 measures had been adequate and if Fletcher had copied Turner's message about reinforcing Tulagi, the carriers could have stayed in position and possibly sent planes to sink Mikawa's surface action group. Mikawa led the Japanese in the greatest defeat in the history of the United States Navy. In less than one hour his forces dealt a stunning blow to the surface forces of TF-44. Four cruisers were sunk and two destroyers badly

damaged. It is critical to note, however, that Mikawa failed in his primary mission of sinking the transports. He withdrew before issuing the *coup de grace* because he was without air cover of any sort and feared a daylight strike from the carriers. Mikawa thought the American carriers were still in the area. He had no idea they had retired.⁵⁵

The B-17 aircrew that bombed Rabaul thought they had successfully suppressed the land based air threat, when in fact they had not. This allowed land based Japanese aircraft to harass Marines ashore and shipping in the adjacent sea-lanes for weeks. McCain's responsibility for reconnaissance was unfulfilled. Had he notified Fletcher that he had failed to fulfill his search requirements, Fletcher could have augmented with carrier based aircraft and perhaps detected Mikawa before his night attack.

If the Navy and Marines had been more familiar with the logistical challenges of large-scale amphibious operations, appropriate numbers of support troops could have prevented the inefficient off load of the transports. Supplies would have run smoothly in from the beaches and the First Marine Division would not have experienced the logistical challenges it suffered.

Unfortunately, these planned events did not occur. As a result, the great controversy surrounds Fletcher to this day. Was Fletcher's decision a wise one? The next chapter will address this questions within the context of a modern strategic decision making test.

¹George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, U.S. Navy Department, 1972), 303.

²Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Earnest J. King* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 179.

³*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴Stephen D. Regan, *In Bitter Tempest* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 104.

⁵Buell, *Master of Sea Power*, 197.

⁶E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 77.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Regan, *In Bitter Tempest*, 104.

⁹Buell, *Master of Sea Power*, 200.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 200.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 202.

¹²Potter, *Nimitz*, 21.

¹³*Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁵Buell, *Master of Sea Power*, 197.

¹⁶Potter, *Nimitz*, 86.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 87.

²¹George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer* (Washington, DC: United States Navy Department: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 302.

²²Regan, *In Bitter Tempest*, 65.

²³Buell, *Master of Sea Power*, 198.

²⁴Potter *Nimitz*, 47.

²⁵Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 186.

²⁶George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 304.

²⁷Ibid., 303.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Potter, *Nimitz*, 199.

³⁰Ibid., 222.

³¹ Buell, *Master of Sea Power*, 218.

³²Ibid., 218.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 18.

³⁶Ibid., 22.

³⁷Ibid., 28.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., 29.

⁴⁰Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 300.

⁴¹Ibid., 301.

⁴²Bruce Loxton, *The Shame of Savo Island* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 33.

⁴³Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 298.

⁴⁴Loxton, *The Shame of Savo Island*, 34.

⁴⁵Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 371.

⁴⁶Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, 18.

⁴⁷Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 352.

⁴⁸Ibid., 352.

⁴⁹Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, 71.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Regan, *In Bitter Tempest*, 189.

⁵²Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, 72.

⁵³Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 162.

⁵⁴Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 368.

⁵⁵Loxton, *The Shame of Savo Island*, 238.

CHAPTER 5

THE METRICS, THE TEST, AND THE VERDICT

“The feeling of expendability is difficult to define. It is loneliness, it is a feeling of being abandoned, and it is something more, too: it is as if events over which you have no control have put a ridiculously low price tag on your life.”¹ This sentiment was articulated in the “*Old Breed: A History of the First Marine Division In World War II*” and summarized the feelings of Marines ashore on Guadalcanal shortly after the transports of Turner’s TF 62 departed on 9 August 1942. However, it was also an opinion of the environment viewed from the tactical level. Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher’s decision to withdraw the carriers of TF 61 was an operational level decision framed by the strategic environment. Fletcher headed south a little more than twelve hours earlier than expected. The traditionalist view of the historical record would have a reader believe Fletcher faced a benign operating environment and therefore made this decision out of excessive caution or a lack of intestinal fortitude. What influenced Fletcher to withdraw carrier based aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal Invasion? Did this course of action measure up to ADM Nimitz’s metric of “calculated risk”? Finally, in the terms of strategic operations, did the decision measure up to Nimitz’s “three questions” and pass the modern doctrinal FAS (Feasibility, Acceptability, and Suitability) test? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions and offer some conclusions about Fletcher’s course of action on 8 August 1942.

What influenced Fletcher to withdraw carrier based aviation from direct support of the Guadalcanal Invasion? His reasons for withdrawing the forces are not a mystery;

they have simply not been widely published. Several years after the event Fletcher shared the following reasons for his withdrawal:

- a. United States over-all carrier strength was at a low ebb-four [for the entire Pacific Theater].
- b. No carrier replacements were in sight for another nine months.
- c. The Japanese Navy could put more carriers in the area than TF 61 had in the area (four versus three).
- d. Japanese land based air (high level bombers, dive bombers and torpedo planes) was present and offensively active.
- e. CTF 61's instructions from CINCPAC were positive and limiting in regard to risking the carriers in the command.
- f. COMSOPAC had informed CTF 61 on 16 July that (sic)'captured documents,' that the early arrival of a submarine division in the New Britain Area was predicted. 'Captured documents' was the euphemism used to obviate the non-permitted words 'decoded radio dispatches.' The COMSOPAC submarine information of 16 July in regard to submarines in the general area had been followed up by a warning from CINCPAC of submarines moving south closer to the carrier operating area on 7 August: Enemy subs are on move to attack Tulagi occupation forces at Tulagi.²

Research for this paper supports these factors. Three of the issues cited by Fletcher are strategic concerns: a, b, and e. They reflect Fletcher's understanding of the strategic environment in which he operated and the role that the carriers would ultimately play after the invasion. The carriers performed as multipurpose platforms capable not only of projecting power ashore, but also playing the decisive role in war at sea. Fletcher knew this from his experiences since 7 December 1941.

The other three concerns articulated by Fletcher are tactical in nature: c, d, and f. The mismatch in carriers was far more significant in August 1942 than at Midway because the change to the Japanese Naval code, JN-25, prevented signals intelligence from determining the disposition of Japanese carriers. Fletcher didn't know where the carriers were, but he did know that deadly torpedo planes were actively attacking

American ships and that enemy submarines were also expected in the area. These factors presented a direct threat to the carriers that he was clearly expected to preserve.

It is also important to point out that Fletcher did not retire until he received permission from Ghormley at 0330, 9 August. In fact at 0100, 9 August--36 minutes before Crutchley's TF 44 would be slaughtered at the Battle of Savo Island--TF 61 set a northwesterly course "for the previous day's operating area. This would enable Fletcher to support TF-62 (*sic*) for the final day should Ghormley decline his request [to withdraw]."³ Only after receiving approval from COMSOPAC for a refueling on 10 August did Fletcher head southeast. The Battle of Savo Island ended at 0215 when the Japanese commander Mikawa--fearing air strikes from the U.S. carriers--wheeled around in retreat and sped north, away from the perceived threat (figure 6).⁴

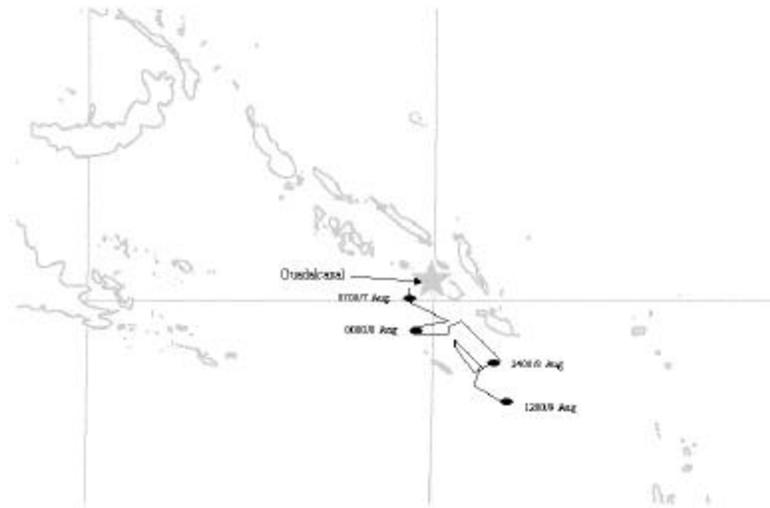


Figure 6. TF-61 Track, 7-9 August. *Source:* John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 66.

The traditionalist school would have us believe that Fletcher possessed an overly cautious character obsessed with fueling his ships at the expense of the Marines ashore. Fletcher pointed out that, “My dispatch didn’t say anything about needing to fuel. If my recommendation to withdraw was approved, then I wanted to fuel as soon as tankers could reach me, as my staff had told me fuel was running low on some of the shortlegged (sic) destroyers and Task Force Sixty One had never been belly full since its formation.”⁵

Fletcher analyzed his environment and, unaware of any change, executed what he believed to be a sensible course of action; yet was widely criticized for it. In order to objectively evaluate the decision, it will be reviewed in both the context of existing strategic guidance as well as a modern strategic decision-making model.

First, did Fletcher’s course of action measure up to ADM Nimitz’s metric of “calculated risk”? Both Nimitz and King realized the critical role that carriers would play in the struggle for the Pacific. As mentioned earlier, after the loss of the *Lexington*, King became very concerned about their employment. As a result of the CNO’s apprehension, Nimitz ordered Fletcher and Spruance, prior to Midway, to conduct operations in the following manner:

You will be governed by the principle of *calculated risk* which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of your force to attack by superior force without good prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage to the enemy. This applies to a landing phase as well as during preliminary air attacks.⁶

This guidance was still in effect at the initiation of Watchtower. The landing forces had been attacked several times by land based aviation, although Fletcher’s carriers had not yet come under direct attack. The short operational range of the *Wildcat* fighter forced Fletcher to cruise in a general location south of Guadalcanal. This mitigated the greatest advantage a carrier has in combat--mobility. It was only a matter of time until they were

discovered. When discovered, Rabaul-based aircraft could conceivably have sunk three carriers without the Japanese suffering greater losses. This would have clearly violated Nimitz's guidance. As referenced earlier, Fletcher was painfully aware of the limited numbers of carriers and conducted his operations in a prudent manner as a result. The United States could ill afford to lose a carrier to the Japanese without having the prospect of inflicting greater damage, during that phase of the war.⁷ Fletcher understood his commander's concerns framed within the context of calculated risk and conducted his mission accordingly.

Fletcher's decision to withdraw carried strategic level ramifications: whether to husband carrier assets for follow-on operations against the Imperial Japanese Fleet or hazard them to land-based air in support of what was believed by Fletcher to be a successful landing. As such, Fletcher's decision must be evaluated at the strategic level. In the terms of strategic operations, did the decision measure up to Nimitz's "three questions" and pass the modern doctrinal FAS test?

Nimitz kept on his wall at CINCPAC headquarters three questions which "he expected his subordinates to answer in connection with any proposal they put forward:

1. Is the proposed mission likely to succeed?
2. What might be the consequences of failure?
3. Is it in the realm of practicability of materials and supplies?"⁸

These questions formed the strategic metrics that Nimitz applied to operations in the Pacific. It is important to understand the vernacular that Nimitz used with his subordinate commanders because these questions had to form the basis of the decisions they made-- Nimitz would refer to them when evaluating the operation. Second, although Nimitz articulated the questions differently, they are equivalent to the modern doctrinal FAS test.

The FAS test asks the following questions within the process of evaluating the validity of a possible course of action:

Feasibility: Can the action be accomplished by the means available? Feasibility is an assessment of the concept (ways) given the resources available (means). Determining feasibility involves art and science.⁹

Acceptability: Are the consequences of cost justified by the importance of the effect desired? Acceptability is determined by comparing the resources required (means) and the benefits to be achieved (ends). Understanding these costs is both art and science, because not all costs are tangible.¹⁰

Suitability: Will the attainment of the objective accomplish the desired effect? A military objective is suitable if, when achieved, it leads to a desired objective. A similar concept is reflected in the term 'adequacy'. Adequacy is defined as in Joint Pub 1-02 as: the determination whether scope and concept of a planned operation are sufficient to accomplish the task assigned.¹¹

Feasibility deals with the *means* of the decision; this is the same as Nimitz's third question. *Acceptability* deals with the *consequences* of the mission, which is Nimitz's second question. The modern decision making model points out that determining these variables is not simply science, it also must take into account the art of decision making, or the "gut feel". Joint Pub 1-02 defines *suitability* as "the determination whether scope and concept of a planned operation are sufficient to accomplish the task assigned." More simply put: is the proposed mission likely to succeed, or Nimitz's first question. Thus, it is possible to reformat Nimitz's three questions into the FAS test priority:

F-Is it in the realm of practicability of materials and supplies?
A-What might be the consequences of failure?
S-Is the proposed mission likely to succeed?

A possible course of action satisfies the FAS test by passing all three criteria. If it fails one of the variables, the entire course of action is invalid. Two courses of action were available to Fletcher on 8 August. The historian Morison implied the first: stay and support the Marines until all the transports were unloaded-three more days minimum.¹²

The second option was the one executed: retire south in order to preserve assets for follow on operations against the Japanese Fleet. Taking into consideration Fletcher's reasons for withdrawing the carriers of TF 61, and the FAS test in the form of Nimitz's three questions, it is possible to judge each course of action by modern doctrinal metrics, but within the vernacular of 1942.

Feasibility is continuing support to the ground forces in the realm of practicability of materials and supplies? Fletcher was in a tenuous situation on 8 August. His destroyer escorts reported low on fuel, he had lost nearly a quarter of his fighter aircraft in two days of operations, and he could only muster three aircraft carriers to face a possible four Japanese carriers. Traditionalists like Morison contend that his destroyer escorts had enough fuel aboard to conduct operations for several more days. This, however, is an over-simplification of ship operations. The logs of the escorts may reflect the potential to operate for several more days, but that assumes a steady cruising speed of 15 knots. Carriers turning into the wind to launch aircraft and running downwind to create sea space for flight operations all eat up precious fuel. Additionally, high-speed combat operations consume fuel at a higher rate than a steady 15 knots. It is relevant to note that "at full speed they [destroyers] guzzled over three times that amount. At 25 knots, the minimum speed during flight operations, the destroyers ranged from .8 to 2.5 days worth of fuel."¹³ Clearly Fletcher's escorts were not capable of screening the carriers for another three days. Without screening destroyers Fletcher clearly would be gambling the safety of his carriers in face of the submarine threat.

Additionally, Fletcher had lost 21 fighters in two days of operations. At that rate of attrition, he would have ceased to have a viable fighter capability in less than a week.

The losses were incurred both operationally and in combat. Of the fighters launched on the first day of operations nine were shot down, and six were lost to operational factors; ditching, hard landing, or jettison. Five planes were badly damaged and twelve pilots failed to return.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Japanese held numerical superiority over the United States in numbers of carriers available. Outnumbered four to three, Fletcher was at the same numerical disadvantage in large deck carriers faced at Midway; however, without accurate radio intelligence from the recently changed JN-25 code, he did not have the crucial force multiplier enjoyed earlier.

Was it prudent for Fletcher to continue to expose his ships to land-based attack and further drive down their operational reserve of fuel? No, it was not. The Navy wanted to conserve its assets in order to battle the Japanese fleet at sea--*calculated risk* left no question to that priority. Although the ability to maintain support was present, it was declining at a steady rate with the passage of time. In terms of feasibility, Morison's course of action passes, but only for a short period of time-until the escorts ran completely out of fuel. Conversely, Fletcher's course of action also passes the feasibility test.

Acceptability--what might be the consequences of failure (when staying to support the invasion)? The risks to continued operations were substantial. It is entirely plausible that by remaining in the same position, Fletcher's carriers would have been discovered by the Japanese and subjected to air attack. Halsey commented on the vulnerability of carriers to land based aviation in 1943:

While overcaution [*sic*] is to be avoided, it should still be borne in mind that Midway remains the classic example of what can happen to a large powerful

invasion force bent on carrying out its mission without the benefit of land based air support.¹⁵

MacArthur's land based air support had reported great successes, but follow-on attacks indicated otherwise. Additionally, instead of the bombers that attacked on 7 August, TF 62 had come under attack on 8 August from a far deadlier weapon: the aerial version of the *Long Lance* torpedo. As noted earlier, this was considered the greatest threat to ships at that time. When making his decision to withdraw Fletcher asked about the aircraft attacking--specifically, "Were planes actually carrying torpedoes?"¹⁶ Upon confirmation of this concern, Fletcher concluded that the threat to the carriers was substantial. He sent the following to Rear Admiral Noyes, commander of Wasp's battle group and the officer in tactical command (OTC) of the carriers:

In view of possibility of torpedo plane attack and reduction of our fighter strength I intend to recommend immediate withdrawal of carriers. Do you agree? In case we continue present operation I believe same area should be used tomorrow. What do you think?¹⁷

The message leaves no doubt that if directed by the strategic level commander, Ghormley, TF 61 would remain in direct support of the landing--Noyes concurred with Fletcher's recommendations. Clearly, when asked what the consequences of failure were, Fletcher thought that he could lose his carriers and not be able to inflict greater damage to the enemy's ships. In terms of *acceptability*, Fletcher's course of action passes, while Morison's fails--this was borne out by subsequent events.

Fletcher had to be prepared to repulse the enemy--surely they would attempt to retake the strategic islands. However, he expected to battle against Japanese aircraft carriers, not surface ships. This was evident two weeks later at the Battle of the Eastern Solomons and also at the Battle of Santa Cruz Island in October. In light of all the harsh

criticism, it is significant to point out that by 14 September, all three of the aircraft carriers that took part in the initial support of the invasion of Guadalcanal were out of action. *Enterprise* took three bombs at the Battle of the Eastern Solomons and limped away, out of action for three months.¹⁸ A similar fate befell *Saratoga*. On 31 August, the Japanese submarine *I-26* put a deadly *Long Lance* torpedo into her starboard side near the bridge, actually wounding Fletcher as a result. The powerful *Sara* was taken under tow and returned to Pearl Harbor for repairs.¹⁹ *Wasp* fell victim to three submarine launched *Long Lances* on 15 September. This left the *Hornet* as the only operational carrier in the Pacific theater.²⁰ Fortunately, by 20 August supplies were making their way in, and most significantly, Henderson Field was operational with nineteen F-4F Wildcat fighters and 12 SBD-3 Dauntless dive bombers adding to the fight.²¹

Suitability-is the proposed mission (the invasion) likely to succeed? The Marines were ashore on Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and Gatuva. They controlled Henderson field and had, as far as Fletcher knew, almost completed the off-loading of their supplies. Put into the context of phased operations, it can be reasonably argued that he considered his phase of the operation complete. Fletcher had received no indication of enemy surface forces approaching from the north, at least none from McCain and TF 63. He had sent out late afternoon patrols in order to double check, but they failed to detect any ships advancing towards Guadalcanal. (One search plane from *Enterprise* missed detecting Mikawa's force by a mere 30 miles--this would have altered the entire course of action.) It appeared at the time that the situation was well in control; besides, aircraft carriers in 1942 did not have the robust night fighting capability they enjoy today. Heading south early would better prepare his forces to meet to the enemy than delaying the inevitable withdrawal.

Clearly Fletcher's course of action is suitable given the apparent satisfaction of this objective, where Morison's is unnecessary.

In summary, vis-à-vis the FAS test, it was *feasible* to either withdraw or continue direct support of the landings for a brief period of time. However, the low fuel state of escorts and the high attrition of fighter aircraft were rapidly changing this facet of the FAS test from a positive to a negative. The *acceptability*-or what might be the consequences of failure-of continuing to support the operation was clear. The loss of the carriers would put the Marines ashore on Guadalcanal not only at the mercy of land-based strikes from Rabaul, but also from the veteran air wings of four Japanese carriers operating with impunity off the beaches. Continued direct support in the face of torpedo bombers and submarines was clearly *unacceptable*, especially when *calculated risk* is considered. Although the *suitability* of the mission appeared positive, the fact that it was *unacceptable* made continued support of the landings strategically *infeasible*. Given the information available, and the guidance of his senior officers, Fletcher made the correct strategic decision. Table 1 summarizes the FAS analysis.

Table 1. FAS Analysis			
	<i>Feasibility</i>	<i>Acceptability</i>	<i>Suitability</i>
Morison	+	-	+
Fletcher	+	+	+

In conclusion, Fletcher was the most experienced carrier Admiral of 1942. He had fought the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. Fletcher did not enjoy Halsey's cult of personality and public flair, but he had been effective--at extremely long odds when considering the forces that he faced. His service prior to World War II proved that he was no coward--he demonstrated the aggressive traits of a warrior in both Mexico and in the Atlantic. Fletcher had a strong character and demonstrated an intellect similar to Spruance--a careful and cautious strategic thinker. Was Fletcher tired? It is very likely that he was tired. The effects of combat on Fletcher are difficult to address, but one fact is certain--he had been on the bridge commanding fast carrier operations since 7 December 1941. However, there is no record of him acting in an irrational manner and he applied the lessons learned from each battle to subsequent operations. This demonstrates rational, reflective thought. The traditionalist school denigrates Fletcher by ignoring these significant character traits as well as his strategic and tactical achievements. The decision to withdraw the carriers from direct support of the operation was a prudent one. The lack of resources available to Watchtower, in the form of land-based tactical air support accessible to Guadalcanal, and unforeseen challenges in amphibious operations--specifically logistics--served to magnify the carrier's absence after the defeat of Savo Island.

The spokesman for the traditionalist school, Samuel Eliot Morison, states in his history, *The Two Ocean War* that the "main factor" in the successful defense of Guadalcanal "was the Marines. When the transports and surviving naval vessels departed on 9 August, they had landed over 16,000 Marines, but less than half their supplies and weapons had been unloaded. The Leathernecks pulled in their belts and lived on two

meals a day, using the large stores of rice which the Japanese had obligingly left; but they could not continue to fight without naval support-witness what had happened at Wake.” Morison barely mentions the other facets of a successful amphibious operation: the control of the sea and air around the objective. Unlike Wake, Guadalcanal was a strategic position essential to operations in the South Pacific. The brave Marines ashore on Guadalcanal were fighting with the support of the Navy--three fully operational flat tops with courageous Naval Aviators struggling to wrest control of the oceans from a numerically superior enemy. They also unknowingly enjoyed the support of brave surface warriors and submariners who paid a terrible price in the waters around Guadalcanal. The Marines ashore had difficulty seeing these warriors, because they operated over the horizon. Unfortunately, readers of history have also been unable to see these facts for the last sixty years because of the tactical and literary prism through which the carrier withdrawal on 8 August 1942 has been characterized.

The Guadalcanal campaign remains relevant to the military because of both the joint and revolutionary nature of the expedition. Never before had the United States attempted a combined arms amphibious assault on an enemy-held territory. Platforms and systems were employed in combat for the very first time and included: close air support from aircraft carriers, amphibious assault from the sea, and ship-to-shore logistics onto an unimproved beachhead. Although amphibious doctrine had been refined by the Marine Corps and Navy during the interwar period, and tested in fleet exercises, the systems used in testing were not the ones actually employed. Command and control proved daunting across MacArthur’s SWPA and Ghormley’s SOPAC. Faulty planning assumptions, from the amount of time assumed to off-load assets to the number of troops to dedicate to

logistical efforts were unsatisfactory. As the military transforms and begins to deploy with new, unproven combat systems, it is essential they be realistically tested before employment. Some examples of such systems might include: Stryker combat vehicle, unmanned aerial vehicles, and the network centric current operating picture. Exercises need to stress the platforms and systems in a variety of contexts in order to fully comprehend capabilities and limits and ensure that planning assumptions are proved or disproved. Only through an honest understanding of capabilities and limits can operations be planned and executed accurately without unneeded loss of life.

Finally, there are several questions that merit further research. Land-based air pushed Fletcher's carriers away from Guadalcanal and contributed to the defeat of Yamamoto's fleet at Midway. Halsey commented on how vulnerable an invasion force was to land-based aviation. How effective was land-based aviation at both Guadalcanal and Midway? Did this capability play a decisive roll in the campaigns or did it create decisive effects through its presence?

Once established ashore, land-based aviation played an important role in the defense of Guadalcanal by the Marines, Navy, and Army Air Force. Japanese fighters and bombers out of Rabaul held a numerical advantage over the forces on Guadalcanal, yet the "Cactus Air Force"--robustly augmented by the surviving aircraft from *Saratoga*, *Hornet*, and *Wasp*--was able to hold off the determined enemy attacks, much like the Royal Air Force did against the German Air Force in the European Theater. How did the issues of sortie generation, mission range, and platform performance compare between the "Cactus Air Force" during Watchtower and Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain?

Finally, the numerous sea battles around Guadalcanal were very costly to the United States Navy in terms of men and material lost. The Navy did not control the sea-lanes in the Solomon Islands until after the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal in November 1942. Should the Navy and Marine Corps have conducted a sequential campaign--achieving control the sea-lanes and gaining air superiority, followed by the invasion of Guadalcanal--rather than the concurrent campaign for sea control and amphibious landing? Did the ambitious war plans of MacArthur and SWPA force King and Nimitz to fight a concurrent battle?

These questions are rich ground for future research as we continue to view the history of our past through the lens of the present. Frank Jack Fletcher faced many questions during Operation Watchtower. Essentially, it came down to what was more at risk; the Marines and transports of the invasion force or the carriers? Ultimately it was not a decision about right or wrong, but about the priorities. Fletcher's guidance was reflected in *calculated risk* and Nimitz's three questions. Fletcher's decision met the spirit and intent of Nimitz's guidance. Fletcher made the right call at the right time in the war.

¹George McMillan, *The Old Breed: A History of the First Marine Division in World War II* (Washington, DC: Infantry Journal Press, 1949), 45.

²George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians came to Conquer* (Washington, DC: U.S. Navy Department: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 391.

³John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 81.

⁴Bruce Loxton, *The Shame of Savo Island* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 238.

⁵Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer*, 391.

⁶Ibid., 384.

⁷Ernest J. King, *U.S. Navy at War 1941-1945. First Report to the Secretary of the Navy Covering our Peacetime Navy and our Wartime Navy and Including Combat Operations up to 1 March 1944* (Washington, DC: United States Navy Department: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 39.

⁸E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 221.

⁹Ted Davis, *Evaluating National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, ILE Common Core, Strategic Readings Book, August 2002)*, S2.4-1.

¹⁰Ibid., S2.4-1.

¹¹Ibid., S2.4-2.

¹²Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, 19.

¹³Stephen D. Regan, *In Bitter Tempest* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 192.

¹⁴Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, 80.

¹⁵Ibid., 85.

¹⁶Ibid., 80.

¹⁷Ibid., 81.

¹⁸Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1963), 182.

¹⁹Ibid., 182.

²⁰Ibid., 184.

²¹Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, 89.

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