

**WERE THE HUDSONS TO BE BLAMED
FOR THE
NAVAL DISASTER AT GUADALCANAL ?**

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The first battle of Savo Island fought in the dead of night 8-9 August 1942 following the successful landing on Guadalcanal on 7 August, was the worst defeat the US Navy had ever suffered in battle. A powerful Allied covering force, including an Australian Cruiser, were surprised and reduced to a shambles by Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa with five heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and a destroyer.

Samuel Elliot Morison, Richard Newcomb and other writers have placed the blame for the disaster on the pilot and crew of an Australian Hudson plane that sighted Mikawa's force at 10:26 on the morning of 8th August. These writers stated, sometimes naming the pilot, William J Stutt, that the pilot did not break radio silence to make his contact report, spent most of the afternoon completing his search mission, came down at his Milne Bay Base, had tea and apple pie and then leisurely reported the contact about sundown on the eighth. Similarly blame was placed on a second Hudson, piloted by Lloyd Milne.

Knowing that these statements were untrue, the pilot of the first Hudson, William J Stutt and his crew, Eric Geddes, Wilbur Curtis and John Bell all sergeants at the time, have lived under this cloud of disgrace for over forty years. In addition Stutt has been rankled over the mention of tea, contrary to Australian custom, he disliked tea, not having had ten cups of tea in his entire life.

In all the enquiries that followed concerning the disaster, including the official Australian enquiry into the loss of the HMAS Canberra, these four were never interrogated.

A few Australians, among them W F Martin Clemens, who is a Companion of the Naval Order of the United States and the coast watcher hero on Guadalcanal, Mrs Lloyd Milne, the wife of the pilot of the second Hudson that sighted Mikawa 35 minutes after Stutt's sighting; G. Herman Gill who prepared the Official History of the Royal Australian Navy 1942-45 (published in 1969) and A J Sweeting, General Editor of Official War History, became interested in clearing away the unjustified cloud that hung over the men. The documents which proved that the crew of Hudson A16-218 of the 32nd Squadron did a proper job on their mission on 8th August 1942. A recountal of the flight follows.

In the early hours of 8th of August 1942 at the RAAF Fall River Base Milne Bay, New Guinea, a Hudson A16-218 of 32 Squadron was being readied for an armed reconnaissance mission over Bougainville Island, the Japanese controlled waters and the islands to the east. The Fall River Base was part of the Allied Southwest Pacific Command of General Douglas MacArthur. The Hudson crew of four, were Sergeant William J Stutt, pilot in command, Sergeant Wilbur Curtis, Navigator, Sergeant Eric Geddes, Radio Operator, and Sergeant John Bell, Gunner, all just graduated from Advanced Training School in Australia. The four were briefed in the Operations Room located in a native style thatched hut near the air strip. In the briefing they were given their search pattern, the mission "to search for Japanese submarines and surface craft activity" and received the identifying code letter of the day. During the short briefing there was a mention about the possibility of encountering Allied shipping at sea in the waters over which they would fly. They received no information on the large scale landings made on Guadalcanal and Tulagi. This information was deliberately withheld as it would have been a great liability and strain if they were forced down and captured. They would know nothing if they were interrogated and tortured. As it turned out, it would have been better if they had been informed as they might have been able to take more time and give a more accurate identification of the ships they sighted in Mikawa's force.

The Hudson A16-218 being ready, the four crewmen took off at 6:15 am local time as per the Fall River log. The lumbering Lockheed Hudson searched the sea west of Bougainville Island, the largest island in the Solomon's chain, and climbed for altitude to overfly the mountains on Bougainville. As they were breaking through the cloud cover on the descent about 30 miles east of Kieta, they were startled to see a striking force of eight ships. Because of the briefing about Allied shipping, they thought it was possible that the ships were friendly.

Stutt took the plane down and flew briefly on a parallel course of 120 degrees. Geddes flashed the Aldis Lamp requesting the "letter of the day" There were a couple of flashes from the ships which Geddes at first thought were flashes from an Aldis Lamp in reply to his challenge. But Geddes quickly decided they were gun flashes and not the signal from an Aldis Lamp. At the same time, two float planes were seen being launched from the ships and heading toward them. Stutt recognised them as Zero float planes which left no doubt in his mind that the ships were Japanese.

With the anti-aircraft bursts appearing as puffs of black smoke around the plane and the Zero float planes trying to gain altitude and heading toward them, Stutt knew he had to get away. His mission was basically reconnaissance not combat. He had to get off a message. He climbed and headed for which little cloud cover there was over Bougainville. When Stutt thought he was out of sight in a cloud, he decided it was time to break radio silence and report to Fall River.

It was 10:26 am when radio operator Geddes sent a message to their RAAF Fall River Base at Milne Bay. The message reported the sighting and gave composition of the force as they believed it to be.

The Message:

- Sighted Japanese force
- Three Cruisers
- Three Destroyers
- Two Seaplane Tenders or Gunboats
- Latitude 0549S - Longitude 156-07E
- Course 120 degrees – Speed 15 Knots

Sergeant Geddes who sent the message received no response from Fall River. The Base was blacked out by violent electric storms in the area and could not receive it.

Martin Clemens, while coast watching on Guadalcanal, says he had similar problems trying to transmit to Townsville, Australia. Sergeant HG Holland on flight A16-157- 32 Squadron tried to raise Fall River about the same time without success. He called the radio phenomenon "skip distance and area"

Others did copy the message, however, not the least being Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa himself.

Mrs N Milne, Wife of Lloyd Milne, pilot of Hudson A16-185, who sighted some of Mikawa's ships 35 minutes after Stutt's sighting, wrote in 1984 to Sadao Seno who had been in Mikawa's fleet and who had aided Dennis and Peggy Warner in writing their book "Kamikase, The Sacred Warrior" asking whether he could verify any of these facts on the Hudson's sighting. Seno replied on 15 September 1984 that he had found the account in

the Detailed Action Report of Admiral Gunichi Mikawa's flagship Chokai, which is preserved in the Library of War History, Department of the National Defence College, where all remaining war documents are preserved.

Sado Seno reported that Mikawa had logged the following:

"At 0903: Recognised the plane which had kept following us and drove it off by main battery fire. The plane found our fleet. Intercepted its report as follows: At 0927- three cruisers, three destroyers, two seaplane tenders or gunboats, 0549S, 156-07E, course 120 degrees at 15 knots."

Mikawa listed the time of the interception of the message on Tokyo time, which was the time used by the Japanese fleet. Converting the time to local time, it was the exact time that Geddes said he radioed his message to his Fall River Base.

The cruiser USS ASTORIA probably intercepted the message. The Captain, Lt. Cmdr. Walter B Davidson said he had a report in the morning which he believed came from Coast Watchers, but no Coast Watchers sent such a message. Jack Reid was on the northern coast of Bougainville and saw nothing of the ships. Paul Mason was on the southern coast of Bougainville. Mason on Malaita Hill, had done a priceless job in reporting the flight of enemy aircraft but Mikawa's force had passed 40 miles to the east and out of his range of vision. There were no Coast Watcher reports

A Melbourne radio station copied the message but it being addressed to Fall River, they presumed that any action required would originate from there.

Admiral Hepburn's investigative report mentions that Captain Reifkohl of the USS VINCENNES "became aware of the contact during the afternoon." Captain Reifkohl made mention of it in his Orders.

In the Australian enquiry into the sinking of HMAS CANBERRA the survivor Cmdr. E. J. Wright, Intelligence Officer and Control Officer of the aft 8" guns, stated that when he came off watch at sunset they already had the report of 3 cruisers, 3 destroyers and 2 aircraft tenders, but he said they thought the ships were operating between Rabaul and Buka Passage.

Admiral Crutchly wrote that he had the report during the day. Naval Order Companion, Captain Elias B Mott ESN (Retired), then a Lieutenant and Assistant Gunnery Officer and Anti- Aircraft Officer on the USS ENTERPRISE, said they had the report in the early afternoon of the 8th and put it on their Status Board. From the position given, they had plotted it and estimated that if the force continued on to Guadalcanal, it could be expected around 1am on the 9th.

Meanwhile Sergeant Stutt in the Hudson, having sent the message but not getting any acknowledgement, decided he had to get back to Milne Bay as quickly as possible. He climbed over the mountains on Bougainville and at his top cruising speed of 180 knots set a bee- line course for the Base, expecting a return flight of two hours

After leaving Bougainville behind, Stutt had not gone far over the water when Sergeant Wilbur Courtis through his binoculars sighted two large vessels which he could not identify. Stutt circled and brought the plane lower, took the binoculars and recognised

them as submarines on the surface. The Rising Sun on the conning towers told him they were Japanese.

As the submarines attempted to dive, Sergeant Stutt or Courtis opened the bomb bay doors and Stutt released a stick of bombs on the first submarine which were near misses. Stutt continued on the next diving submarine and dropped another stick. One bomb appeared to be a direct hit.

As the bombs were being dropped, Sergeant Geddes reported that there was a lot of Japanese radio traffic (RT) originating nearby. He said it was probably from the submarines but added that aircraft might also be nearby.

Knowing that at least one of two Japanese planes had taken off in an attempt to get them, Stutt did not linger to see the results of their bombing but quickly regained altitude and again headed for base. Attacking the target of opportunity had taken only 16 minutes.

Without any mishaps, the Hudson touched down at 12:42 as the log book shows, which was 2 hours 16 minutes after the sighting. Their return was earlier than expected and there was quite a flurry of excitement. The armourers were told to reload the bombs and the excitement grew. But in minutes a jeep appeared and Stutt and the crew were whisked away to the Operations Hut. Stutt was debriefed and the navigation log was studied by the Officer. Stutt's full report. Sighted Japanese force- 3 cruisers, 3 destroyers, 2 seaplane tenders or gunboats – position 0459 S – 156-07E – course 120 degrees – at 15 knots, was immediately radioed to headquarters. The message also included: 2 submarines, course 150 degrees in position 0235S – 154E, 2 sticks of bombs dropped. Stutt could not verify that one submarine was hit.

The record of this report being received appears in the Operation Record Book of Headquarters North Eastern area of 8th August 1942. In listing the submarines sighted and attacked, it added "nil hits".

The sighting report also appears in MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area Headquarters Situation Report No. 330. This report lists the sighting of 3 cruisers, 3 destroyers and 2 possible seaplane tenders. The reference to possible gunboats was deleted in this Situation Report.

The second Hudson, A16-185 piloted by Lloyd Milne left Fall River at approximately the same time as A16-218 on a different search pattern. However it overlapped a portion of Stutt's flight in an area northeast of Kieta on Bougainville Island. At 11:01am Milne sighted five ships that were part of Mikawa's force. Evidently after intercepting Stutt's message and anticipating further reconnaissance Mikawa had split his force to confuse further sightings. Milne did not break radio silence but returned to Fall River at 2:04pm a little less than two hours after Stutt. He reported his sighting as 2 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers and an unidentified vessel at Latitude 0542S Longitude 156.05E, course 280, speed 25 knots. After being debriefed, Milne's report was immediately radioed by Operations at Fall River Base, Milne Bay.

The MacArthur COMSOWESPAC Situation report 330 of 8th August 1942 lists the message as above giving the time of sighting as 11:01 except it gives the speed as 12 knots. The Operations Record Book of Headquarters North Eastern Area of 8th August 1942 gives the speed of 25 knots but lists 2 destroyers instead of light cruisers.

For some reason, there seems to have been a delay of many hours before Crutchly and Turner received the Hudsons sighting reports though Crutchly stated later he had the reports in the afternoon.

Contrary to the historians, the record shows that the Hudsons wasted no time on their patrols. Stutt broke radio silence in trying to get out his message and both Hudsons returned promptly to base and immediately gave their verbal reports. The records show that Stutt and Milne did a proper, professional job in reporting their sightings. In fact the entire 32nd Squadron including the two Hudsons, received a "Letter of Commendation" from Major General Kenny on MacArthur's staff in recognition of "its excellent work in the Port Moresby area from 1st August 1942 to 5th September 1942." The only fault lay with Stutt's identification of two of Mikawa's ships as seaplane tenders which led to faulty conclusions but which could have been corrected later by further reconnaissance which did not take place. In fact Milne's sighting at 11:01am was the last sighting while Mikawa steamed boldly down the "Slot" without air cover.

The purpose of this writing is to lift the cloud of blame that hung over the heads of crews of the Australian Hudsons for over 40 Years. It is to present the account of the flights as stated by William J Stutt and other members of the crew and to reference the documentary evidence of their compatriots laboriously exhumed from old dusty files that confirmed the accounts. It is not to affix blame but it does raise questions:

- Would Stutt's identification of the ships in Mikawa's force have been more accurate if he had been briefed on the landings in progress on Guadalcanal and Tulagi?
- Why were there no follow up flights from Milne Bay or MacArthur's air force?
- What would have been different if Crutchly and Turner had received the reports much earlier?
- Would the situation have been changed if Rear Admiral McCain had sent word that his requested special flight had to be cancelled?
- What would have happened if Vice Admiral Fletcher had not pulled out his carriers earlier than originally planned?
- Would the action have been different if the covering force remained at Condition 1 and not set Condition 11 with only half the crew on station and half the guns manned?

We have to thank W F Martin Clemens, Mrs Lloyd Milne, G Herman Gill, A J Sweeting, Sadao Seno and others who diligently searched records to furnish the proof that the crews of the Hudsons were not to blame for that Savo Island disaster of 8/9 August 1942.

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