

HEADQUARTERS
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INTERROGATION NO. (USSES 170)
NAV NO. 41

PLACE: TOKYO
DATE: 26 October 1945.

Division of Origin: Naval Analysis Division.

Subject: Battle off SAMAR, 23 - 26 October 1944.

Personnel interrogated and background of each:

Commander OTANO, Tonosuke, I.J.N.

Commander OTANO is a Naval Officer of 17 years service. During this war he held a succession of staff posts, principally in Communications. In the Battle of LEYTE Gulf he was Operations Officer on the Staff of Vice Admiral KURITA, Cinc Second Fleet.

Where interviewed: MEIJI Building, Room 748.

Interrogator: Lt. Commander James A. FIELD, USNR.

Interpreter: Lt. Commander D. BATTLETT, USNR.

Allied Officer present: NONE

SUMMARY

The interrogation of Commander OTANI supplements and confirms those of Vice Admiral KURITA and Rear Admiral KOY-ANAGI.

1. Little new material is brought forth. It is of interest primarily to those concerned with the details of the Naval Battles of October 1944.

TRANSCRIPT

Q. What was your position and duty on Admiral KURITA's Staff?

A. I was Staff Operation Officer. I would originally make the Operation Plans and submit them to the Senior Staff Officer and then to the Chief of Staff; we three made up the plans and submitted them to the Admiral for his approval.

Q. What type of duty did you have with the 12th and 5th Air Squadron?

A. I specialized in communication while I was with the 5th Air Squadron, I was Staff Communication Officer, and same when I was with the 12th.

Q. Did you have any connection with communication while with Admiral KURITA?

A. No, but naturally I was generally familiar with the communication plans.

Q. Do you feel that the torpedoing of ATAGO and the fact that you had to change flagships inconvenienced the operation?

A. It did not interfere much with the operation because the transfer was completed before the battle. It had been my opinion that flagships should be battleships; so we had made some preparation on YAMATO beforehand. The Second Fleet in this operation had planned to conduct a night battle and it was my view that a modern battleship is preferable as a flagship for such operations. It had satisfactory speed, gun power, communications, etc. The opinion of the senior officers, based largely on tradition, was that cruisers should be used for flagships, and although I did not agree I was unable to change their minds until it happened that the ATAGO was sunk.

Q. In the transfer of the staff from the ATAGO were any personnel lost, or any papers lost which interfered with the operation?

A. The YAMATO already had the important papers before they started. As for personnel the main body of the staff was almost all saved and on the YAMATO. They had already the second in command, the Commander of the First (Battleship) Squadron, and his staff aboard; so it went on very satisfactorily.

Q. On the 24th of October, you were attacked several times by our aircraft. What damage was inflicted on the various ships?

A. We expected that in the beginning of the combat about 50% would be lost; but actually it was less than 50% on the 24th, so we could proceed with the mission to LEXTE. YAMATO received two bomb hits and two near misses. The two near misses made a big hole in the bow. The hole was much larger than we thought at the time. The two hits were forward on deck and not much damage to speak of, only the anchor windlass was put out of commission. MUSASHI received 15 torpedo hit which exploded and three which did not, and 40 dive bombs. I did not see, but that is according to reports. Casualties are as follows: The Captain was killed and about 1/2 or 2/3 of the crew lost. The speed dropped to 12 knots, she had to fall out of formation and receive continuous attacks. As for MYOKO the extent of the damage is still unknown to me, but they had to return to BRUNEI. Most of her damage was caused by bombs, I think.

Q. Were any of the other battleships hit at all?

A. I am not quite certain. At sometime during the operation, I think NAGATO and KONGO and HARUNA each received one bomb hit. NAGATO was hit in the communications room, I think this was on the 24th and they had some trouble with communications thereafter. I am quite sure this damage to NAGATO occurred on the 24th; but I do not know about the damage to other ships, nor

TRANSCRIPT ON INTERROGATION OF (Commander OTANO, Tonosuke, IJN).

the dates when they were damaged.

Q. Were any cruisers aside from MYOKO or any destroyers damaged on the 24th?

A. I do not think so.

Q. On the 24th did you expect to have protective fighter cover furnished from shore bases?

A. We did not plan to have any protection from the fighters because we never thought we would need any. There were no plans; therefore, there was no protection from the fighters. However, we heard that your attacks on the MANILA Area were intermittent and not very severe; therefore, we sent a message requesting fighter coverage. However, none appeared.

Q. Did you have a special radio channel for the purpose of requesting fighter cover?

A. We had two or three radio channels setup especially for communication between ourselves and MANILA and the Task Force (Admiral OZAWA) and the shore based planes, and also Combined Fleet Headquarters. The communication plan was very carefully made at the start of the operation, since we were aware of the importance of maintaining accurate coordination.

Q. Did you ever see any Japanese planes on the 24th?

A. No planes were sighted.

Q. What information did you receive on the 24th from Admirals OZAWA, NISHIMURA, and SHIMA?

A. No information from OZAWA'S Force and we thought their force was doing what they should have done. We received a message from NISHIMURA'S Force to the effect that they had been attacked by 20 aeroplanes, but we thought that this force was also proceeding according to plans. We received no report from SHIMA'S Force and never paid much attention to him. We received a message from Admiral NISHIMURA that they were going to make their approach about 2 o'clock on the morning on the 25th although the plan was carefully set up in the beginning of the operation that they would approach one hour before day-break on the 25th at the earliest, and from this we thought that Admiral NISHIMURA was taking the manner too lightly. We received this message late in the afternoon on the 24th at which time it was too late to order him to conform to the original plan.

Q. On the 24th, in the afternoon, your force turned west and then again east; what time did you turn west?

A. We turned west about five, although we had considered it first at about one or two o'clock and it was less than 30 minutes before we again turned to the eastward. The message was sent to Admiral TOYODA that we were reversing course temporarily a little after five. Before Admiral TOYODA could have received the message that Admiral KURITA was moving westward temporarily, we received a message from Admiral TOYODA to proceed with the eastward operation. We on the staff were sure at that time that Admiral TOYODA could not have our original message.

Q. Did you turn eastward in response to the order?

A. We turned eastward immediately upon receipt of TOYODA'S message.

Q. Before this message arrived from TOYODA, what had been your plans?

A. Admiral KURITA'S intention was not to abandon the battle,

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but just to avoid the immediate action. The land-based aeroplanes would not give much protection and, by sending that message to the effect that it was necessary to avoid the attack by turning to the westward, we thought that this message might bring protection from land-based planes. The same message ~~was~~ ~~was~~ sent to Admiral TOYODA was also sent to Admirals FUKUDOME and ONISHI at MANILA.

Q. What information did you have of the location of our forces on the afternoon of the 24th?

A. No intelligence came in through the land-based planes because, as we thought, the weather east of LUZON was poor. We thought that there were a total strength of one large Task Force distributed in three groups, with two very close to shore off LALON BAY (LUZON) and one off the entrance of SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. This information, I remember, did not come from the land-based planes on LUZON, since we suggested to the land-based air headquarters that the enemy might be in the position just described and that they should attack.

Q. No information from Admiral ONISHI?

A. No.

Q. By the time the force reached SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT was fatigue becoming evident among your personnel?

A. They were very tired, but they were excited by the anticipation of the battle against the American Force and overcame their fatigue.

Q. Did you expect to have to fight your way out of the Straits?

A. We expected it and it was a matter of grave concern.

Q. What forces were expected there?

A. We feared before we made any formation that there would be submarines and also we might be caught by U.S. surface force which would give us a hard time in night action. To make it worse, we had no information on this area from scout planes.

Q. What conclusion did you draw from the fact that you came through unopposed from the lack of American Forces?

A. We thought we would meet your forces before we reached the southern end of SAMAR.

Q. What size of type of force did they expect to meet?

A. We could not judge. We thought that all your carriers would withdraw to the eastward and support your surface force; and so we thought that they would meet your surface strength, but not so much superior to ours.

Q. What was your own opinion of your chances of success when you were off SAMAR heading south to enter the Gulf?

A. My personal opinion was that we would be completely destroyed before finishing with LEYTE GULF, but would do some damage.

Q. Was the original plan, after the battle inside of the Gulf, to retire the way you came or by SURIGAO STRAIT?

A. Through SURIGAO.

Q. When did you first sight U.S. forces?

A. It was about 0645. It was before we had completed the execution of order to change from night formation to ring formation, that the sighting occurred. The order to change the formation had been given at 0530.

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At first, we thought it was a Task Force of five or six carriers, four or five heavy cruisers, and appropriate screen and that there were no battleships; but we received a report from the look-outs that there was one battleship in the disposition.

Q. What type of carriers did you believe they were?

A. We gave that question much consideration, but never fully made up our minds. We found ourselves perplexed by your carriers because they did not correspond to their photographs, and first we thought that they were regular carriers; but after the battle, we decided that they were auxiliary or converted carriers. Also we received word from the tops that there was another formation, and at that time we wondered if we were not confronted by 12 or 13 carriers in all; but this was not ascertained on the bridge.

Q. Was there any attempt to engage in battle with the second group?

A. First, we would encounter the first group, and then take on the second.

Q. What damage did you inflict upon the first group you engaged?

A. One carrier sunk, one light cruiser, one heavy cruiser and one destroyer. There was some confusion between the high gunnery control platform and the bridge. There may have been a repeat report which was understood as two carriers sunk; the bridge concluded that one carrier was sunk. Again from later reports which may have contained duplication, we concluded that we had sunk four carriers, two or three cruisers and two or three destroyers. That was the total result of the day. I now think this is rather accurate, and from a report of search planes at about 1100, we received information that one battleship was severely damaged and dead in the water.

Q. In this action against the first Task Force, did you have any assistance from land-based planes?

A. Nothing.

Q. Did you know that your shore-based planes attacked the surviving units of that force shortly after you broke off the action?

A. No, I never knew that.

Q. Why did you let any of that Task Force escape?

A. First, fuel; second, we had poor communication with our cruisers and couldn't see what they were doing; third, we intercepted a message which called for reinforcements and the reply indicating reinforcement of planes not before one or two hours.

Q. What speed did you estimate our Task Force was making in the retirement?

A. 30 knots or more, and we could not close the range.

Q. Did they find the use of smoke by our force a serious hindrance?

A. Yes, very effective. The smoke was made very quickly and the use of smoke was very skillful.

Q. Did the Japanese Force sustain serious damage from our counter attack that morning?

A. Nothing serious from surface ships, 102 MM dud in the rice locker of YAMATO.

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Q. Were any of your ships hit by torpedoes from our destroyers?

A. No, but the attack was very effective in that it caused confusion in our disposition and delayed our advance.

Q. What damage from aircraft attack?

A. One aerial torpedo in the SUZUYA and one bomb in her torpedo mount. She was heavily damaged all over and became unable to navigate and was sunk by JAPANESE torpedoes. The cruiser CHOKAI was so damaged from air attack and perhaps also by gunfire as to be stopped and I believe that it was later sunk by JAPANESE torpedo. The CHIKUMA was also sunk, her maneuvering ability having been damaged by bombs or torpedoes during the battle. The KURIANO, I remember, was the first to be damaged. She reported that she could navigate, but could not fire, and was early detached from the formation and sent to MANILA in company with one destroyer.

Q. Were any of the battleships damaged by air attacks?

A. I don't remember whether it was this day or not, but I remember seeing one issuing a great deal of smoke. The ship that received the least damage was HAGURO; all others received more or less damage.

Q. What is your opinion of our air attack that morning, well executed or otherwise?

A. The attack was almost incessant, but the number of planes at any one instant was few. The bombers and torpedo planes were very aggressive and skillful and the coordination was impressive; even in comparison with the great experience of ~~American~~ attack that we already had, this was the most skillful work of your planes.

Q. About 9:30 this engagement was ended. What did you do between this time and the time you started north?

A. Right after the battle we proceeded west for 30 minutes while discussing whether to go into the GULF as planned or what to do. After the discussion we decided to go north and engage the other force.

Q. What time did you start north?

A. About one hour after breaking off the battle, about 11 o'clock.

Q. What were your reasons for deciding to go north rather than to enter the GULF?

A. We had interpreted your message concerning reinforcement. We judged that your ships should have largely gotten out from the BAY, and we had heard at three or four in the morning that the supporting body of Admiral NISHIMURA had been about wiped out - the source of this message is not certain; it may have been from a surviving destroyer or from Admiral SHIMA'S Force, - so that the plan of cooperation had to be abandoned.

Q. Are you sure you heard that news as early as 0400?

A. It was before the meeting and battle and I am quite sure that it was about 0400. When we sighted your force off SAMAR, some of the men thought that it was our force; however, I knew that it could not be so because I had received the information about what had happened to Admiral NISHIMURA. Our main mission was to attack your Task Force and so there was no purpose to go into the BAY where we would be exposed to air attack in narrow waters and there was never a part of the plan which contemplated bombardment of the shore in the BAY.

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Q. Was it more important to attack the Task Force or the Transport Force?

A. The targets for this operation were in the following order of importance; First, Carriers; second, transports, and third, surface ships of war.

Q. Did you believe at that time that all transports had left the BAY?

A. We thought that only small landing boats remained inside and that the main body of transports had left the BAY. The fact that this was four or five days after the landing, reinforced this conclusion. We had no information on the status of shipping in the BAY from any aircraft. We had word that one of your forces was in about 17-30 N 125-30 E and we expected this force to come south to help; therefore, if we went north we would meet them in the open sea. Also, in order to deceive you since you expected us to enter LEYTE GULF, we concluded that this northern movement would surprise you and prevent a junction of your forces. Up to this point, fuel had not been a serious consideration, and since the distance to our tankers in the SULU SEA from a point east of LEYTE was about the same by whichever route we returned, it had no bearing on the decision to go north.

Q. Was the whole staff agreed that this decision was the best one?

A. There was no opposition.

Q. In the early afternoon while you were north, you were again attacked by our aircraft. What damage was done in these attacks?

A. I know of no specific damage that occurred in the afternoon - it is possible that some of the damage previously mentioned occurred in the afternoon, but I do not think so.

Q. When you reached the point east of SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT, what determined the decision to turn west through the Strait?

A. A dispatch request from OZAWA for assistance against your Task Force in the north was received but nevertheless we concluded to enter because our fuel was running low, and secondly we did not consider the SAN BERNARDINO Force ready for night action owing to damage received during the day. This request from Admiral OZAWA was received about 1700.

Q. On the next day you were again attacked by air in the SIBUYAN SEA. What damage was received?

A. The cruiser NOSHIRO received one torpedo and she became un navigable, and shortly after she received a bomb attack and sunk. I am not certain of the remainder, but it may be that a destroyer was also sunk then.

Q. These attacks that hit the NOSHIRO were from what type of planes?

A. Torpedo from carrier planes and bombs from carrier planes, - we believe that this attack was delivered at maximum range from your Task Force.

Q. Later in that day you were also attacked by four-engine bombers. What damage was done by them?

A. Only two very near misses at the bridge on both sides of the YAMATO which caused several casualties. No damage to any other ships.

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Q. How many four-engine bombers attacked you?

A. Twenty four in all: six the first time, six planes the second time and I think there were 12 in a group that were near by; those two near misses were done by the first six planes.

Q. Where do you think this whole operation broke down? Why did it fail?

A. I feel that from the very beginning that the operation between the Task Force (OZAWA) and the Surface Force (KURITA) and the Land-Based Air Force was bad from the beginning.

Q. What do you feel caused this poor coordination?

A. Coordination between the Surface Force and the (carrier) Task Force was almost impossible due to the restrictions on communication and the need for radio silence; therefore, the plans for cooperation were not carried out. This lack of information from OZAWA was one of the main factors in the failure of the operation, but perhaps the biggest factor was the lack of protection from our land-based air against your (Carrier) Task Force. I feel also that the original plan was too complex and inflexible to work properly.