

HEADQUARTERS
U.S. STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY
(PACIFIC)
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INTERROGATION NO: (USSBS NO. 205)
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PLACE: TOKYO
DATE: 1 NOVEMBER 1945
TIME: 1600-1745

Division of Origin: Naval Analysis.

SUBJECT: Transports at the Battle of the KOMANDORSKIIs, 26 March 1943 - Aleutian Campaign.

Personnel interrogated and background of each:

Commander Tadao KUWAHARA, I.J.N.R. (Retired) was a wartime officer with three years, one month of service. He was a captain with the N.Y.K. lines in the Merchant Marine. After joining the Navy he served as Chief Navigator of the seaplane carrier CHUYO from August, 1942, until February 1943, when he became the Chief Navigator of the ASAKA MARU, a converted cruiser. In January 1944 he went to the Anti-Submarine School at KURIHAMA, where he taught attack methods. In April 1944 he took command of the SC #33; in July, 1944, the escort vessel UKURU. From February until August 1945 he was attached to the office of Military Affairs, TOKYO.

Where interviewed: Room 618, MEIJI Building, TOKYO.

Interrogator: Captain J. S. RUSSELL, U.S. Navy.

Interpreter: D. BARTLETT, Lieutenant Commander, U.S.N.R.

Other Allied Officers Present: None other than the above.

SUMMARY

(All dates and times are those of TOKYO, zone minus 9.)

The ASAKA MARU, of which Commander KUWAHARA was navigator, was a 7100 ton, 17 knot, converted cruiser. She had four 14cm. main battery guns and an anti-aircraft battery of four 25mm AA machine guns and six 7mm AA machine guns. Aft on the starboard side she carried a deck torpedo tube and on the port side a catapult and two seaplanes: twin float, three-seat monoplanes, type zero. (Neither of her planes was launched during the KOMANDORSKI action)

At KATAOKA, PARAMUSHIRO, the ASAKA MARU embarked Colonel YAMAZAKI, his staff of about 50 persons, some 10cm. army guns and ammunition. She carried no cargo in any amount because of her military commission. Colonel YAMAZAKI was on his way to take command of the ATTU garrison. At the same time the SAKITO MARU, a 7800 ton, 18 knot, merchantman loaded six to eight 7.6cm. army AA guns, some four or more 25mm AA machine guns, much ammunition, food stuffs, other supplies and equipment for ATTU. She carried also a few troops, about 200 to 300, and some lumber. They were to make their third attempt to get supplies to ATTU.

On 23 March a small cargo ship of about 3000 tons, and 10 knots speed (whose name Commander KUWAHARA could not remember) sailed in company with one destroyer, the USUGUMO. This ship was also loaded with supplies for ATTU, but, due to her slow speed, was sent on ahead to rendezvous with the main convoy at a point about 60 miles south of the KOMANDORSKI ISLANDS.

On 24 March the ASAKA MARU and SAKITO MARU sailed from KATAOKA, escorted by the FIRST Destroyer Squadron (less the USUGUMO, assigned as above, and the HIBIKI, away on overhaul.) The escorting ships were: 1 CL - ABUKUMA, flagship of ComDesRon ONE; and four DD's - IKAZUCHI, INAZUMA, WAKABA, and one DD whose name Commander KUWAHARA could not remember.

On 25 March the cruiser force sortied, with ships as follows: two CA - NACHI, with Com FIFTH Fleet embarked, MAYA; one CL - TAMA.

All three of these groups were to rendezvous south of the KOMANDORSKIIs, thence to proceed in force to ATTU with the objective of driving through any surface resistance the Americans might offer. The NACHI carried three seaplanes. The MAYA was equipped to carry three, but Commander KUWAHARA was not sure whether or not she carried any on this particular voyage. The MAYA was on loan to the FIFTH Fleet from another fleet and was not too conversant with the doctrines extant in the FIFTH Fleet, hence was not considered top-notch in readiness for the task in hand.

The second group, of which the ASAKA MARU was a part, ran into a violent storm on 25 March and had to slow down. It became apparent that they would not, therefore, make the appointed rendezvous on 26 March because they calculated that the cruisers would also have to slow. The second group, however, sighted the KOMANDORSKIIs on the morning of 26 March, and, turning south they made contact with the cruisers at about noon. The slow merchantman and the USUGUMO had not yet joined so the dash for ATTU was postponed until 27 March. Meanwhile they steamed north and south along a meridian through the SE tip of BERING ISLAND.

They were steaming south in column, order from the van NACHI, MAYA, TAMA, then ABUKUMA, WAKADA, 1 DD name unknown, IKAZUCHI, then ASAKA MARU, SAKITO MARU, and INAZUMA. At 0200 a column left through 180 degrees, to a true course of north, was begun. Sunrise was about 0350, although there was a long morning twilight. Just as the ASAKA MARU was executing her turn to the north, and the SAKITO MARU and INAZUMA had yet to turn, the mast of one ship was sighted on the horizon on the starboard quarter, range 25,000 meters, (about 13½ miles). (Commander KUWAHARA was a little confused on the true bearing of the contact. His sketch would put it about due west. The time, he could only estimate based on the four cruisers and three destroyers having already made their successive turns in column, ahead of him in the movement beginning at 0200.)

The sea and wind were almost calm, the visibility excellent. The initial contact was thought to be the slow merchantmen and the USUGUMO. However, when the ASAKA MARU could count the masts of more than two ships, she forthwith sent a "red Morse urgent" signal to the ABUKUMA saying that the enemy was in sight. (This was a spelled out red searchlight signal.) The ABUKUMA could not seem to understand the message and after several repetitions the ABUKUMA finally acknowledged for it after about 15 minutes. During this time the range closed rapidly. The NACHI meanwhile had intercepted the message and was the first to turn toward the enemy. (Commander KUWAHARA had the NACHI swinging SW then S with the enemy bearing approximately SW. In the enemy formation, on a southeasterly course, he had a DD leading, then in column a CA, two OMAHA CL's and a DD.)

The MAYA and TAMA seemed very late to turn. The leading American ship, a destroyer, opened fire with bursts directly above the NACHI. The NACHI opened fire simultaneously. There was damage to the NACHI in the first five minutes of action. Something set fire to the leading American cruiser (the CA) after about thirty minutes and just as the TAMA was getting into action. The smoke from this fire drifted off to the SW. About this time the ASAKA MARU and the SAKITO MARU were ordered to get clear by withdrawing to the NE. The DD, INAZUMA, which had been following them in column, was directed to stay with the forces in action. After this the course of the battle was obscured by smoke. As they proceeded to the NE in calm sea and wind, and a clear sky, the visibility was excellent. The KOMANDORSKIIs were in sight after 0600. Smoke was made out on the starboard bow as they headed northeasterly. This turned out to be the USUGUMO, who had left her slow merchantman to the eastward and was coming in at maximum speed to determine if the ASAKA MARU might be enemy. The USUGUMO continued on to join the action, but was ordered by the NACHI by radio to return to the escort of her merchantman. The ASAKA and SAKITO MARUs altered course to the west and passed through an oil slick, which they later learned was from a damaged American cruiser.

They received word that two groups of bombing planes were on their way from ADAK. Three PB2Y's (he insisted on the type) shadowed the group. Once one came close enough for the ASAKA MARU to open with her anti-aircraft guns. After this the shadowers stayed at a greater distance.

Shortly after 1000 they received orders from the NACHI to return to PARAMUSHIRO and that the ABUKUMA and two DD's would be sent to join them. The fleet arrived at PARAMUSHIRO on the morning of 29 March, while the ASAKA MARU arrived on the evening of 29 March. There were no submarine contacts en route, although warnings of the presence of submarines were received. The slow merchantman and the USUGUMO arrived on 30 March.

In the battle, the NACHI had received much damage about her superstructure and weather decks, with many topside personnel killed. The TAMA had light damage, the MAYA no damage, while the ABUKUMA hardly even fired her guns. Commander KUNAHARA learned from discussions among the officers at the base that both the cruisers and destroyers had fired their torpedoes, set at slow speed, for maximum range, and had made no hits. He heard also that one American light cruiser (OMAHA class) had received some damage, was listing and trailing oil, but had managed to control her damage. He understood also that the Japanese shooting was not very successful due to the erratic courses of the targets and the thick smoke. The loss of power on the NACHI after the opening salvo was known to him; for the resulting confusion he blamed the engineer officer for cutting in a cold boiler, rather than the gunnery officer who failed to get the word to his guns to go into local control.

After the action on 27 March no cargo ships reached ATTU. However, many trips were made by submarine, and the destroyers KAMIKAZE and NUMAKASE each made about two trips. Colonel YAMAZAKI reached ATTU in April, 1943, by submarine, and took over command of the Army defense force on that island from Lieutenant Colonel YONEYAMA, who had had command there up to this time.

There were two converted cruisers in ALEUTIAN service, his own ship, the ASAKA MARU, and also the AWATA MARU. Lately these had been assigned to running in cargo to ATTU and KISKA and to escorting fast merchantmen for the same purpose because of the shipping losses sustained in the Northern Area. The AWATA MARU left the Northern Area shortly after the evacuation of KISKA; the ASAKA MARU stayed on until November, 1943.

Commander KUNAHARA said that shortly before he reported to the ASAKA MARU in February, 1943, an Army supply ship, the KOMPIRA (KOTOHIRA is the same name) MARU had left PARAMUSHIRO for ATTU and had not been heard from. She carried supplies and material for the garrison, possibly a few troops.