



HEADQUARTERS
U.S. STRATEGIC BOMBING SURVEY
(PACIFIC)
C/O POSTMASTER, SAN FRANCISCO

INTERROGATION NO.

PLACE: Tokyo
DATE: 10 December 1945
TIME: 1030

Division of Origin: Military Analysis Division

Personnel interrogated: Col Ichiji Sugita

Where interviewed: Meiji Building Room 722

Interrogator: General Jarred V Crabb

Interpreter: Mister Taji

Stenographer: Sergeant James D Schneider

SUMMARY

Colonel Sugita was aboard a destroyer which was escorting the transports sunk in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea (3 March 1943). He gives his best recollection as to the composition of the convoy and its purpose.

RESTRICTED

- Q. (Gen Crabb) What were your duties during your Lae supply convoy activities, what we call the Bismarck Sea operations?
- A. (Mr. Taji) He was an intelligence officer during the time he was in Rabaul, but during the time of the Lae transportation he was liaison officer between the 8th Area Army and the 18th Army. The 8th Area Army was situated in Rabaul.
- Q. As such, would he have information regarding the planning of the Lae operation?
- A. He understood the general situation at the time.
- Q. Would he know how many merchant ships and how many escort ships were in the operation?
- A. There were 8 commercial ships and 8 destroyers in the group. In the commercial ships there were 1 or 2 cargo boats, not in addition to the 8.
- Q. Do you know of any other ships, merchant or military, vessels in the Bismarck sea or Solomon Sea area within 100 miles or VITIAZ Straits from 24 February to 5 March 1943?
- A. The colonel said that there were none in the Huon Gulf area. He also doesn't think there were any in the Bismarck Sea. He does not remember clearly, but he knows there were some ships in Rabaul, some in Kavieng, and also in Wewak, but there were none in Manus.
- Q. Tell him I have records of sightings in that area. If I gave him those sightings, he could possibly verify them.
- A. He said he has no records on shipping, so he couldn't confirm your sightings on shipping.
- Q. Does he know anything about Japanese submarine activity in Huon Gulf area?
- A. Do you mean the period between 24 February and 5 March?
- Q. Yes.
- A. He said that a submarine transported food supplies from Rabaul to Mubo or somewhere near Mubo, and then transported wounded from Mubo region back to Rabaul, but he does not remember whether that was in the period between 24 February and 5 March.
- Q. Here are some of our submarine sightings during that period. Can you verify any of those?
- A. The colonel thinks that the submarine sighted on 28 February may be a submarine carrying food supplies to Dona or Salamaua, where Jap troops from Buna were deployed with very little supplies.
- Q. Does he know of any of the Japanese submarines being sunk in that general area in the period of which we spoke?
- A. He does not remember any being sunk during that period but there was a submarine that was reported missing in the end of January.
- Q. Does he know of any Japanese shipping on the southern coast of New Britain during that period?
- A. There was a battalion at Gasmata and 1 or 2 destroyers may have carried supplies from Rabaul there, but that he thinks was only once. Excluding those destroyers he does not think there was any shipping there at all.

- Q. On 6 March we sank a ship near Gasmata. Ask him if he remembers that?
- A. He does not think that there was any such boat near Gasmata, but if you did sink one, it was probably a barge used for transferring cargo from transport ships to the shore.
- Q. Does he know the location of the ships that were in this convoy by date, starting on the 24th of February and ending on the 6th of March?
- A. He knows the rough locations but not very accurate ones.
- Q. Ask him if any of them could have been at Ubili on the 26th.
- A. No, because they left Rabaul on the evening of the 28th, and they maneuvered so as to seem as if they were going to Truk. When it became dark they moved west towards Vitu Islands, and on the 1st of March they were between Vitu and Umboi Islands. On 3 March they were east of Finschhafen. At 8 o'clock in the morning on the 3rd about 100 U. S. planes attacked them. In about 20 minutes about all the commercial vessels (transports) caught fire, some were sinking and some were about to sink. This was on 8 o'clock, 3 March.
- Q. Ask him if he remembers any other sinkings prior to that in that same convoy.
- A. On 2 March, 1 transport was sunk from bombs (aerial bombardment). The men on the sunken transport were picked up by a destroyer and preceded the convoy to Lae.
- Q. How many commercial vessels and how many escort vessels came down through Vitiaz Straits?
- A. 7 transports and 8 destroyers, one of which preceded the convoy, making a total of 14 excluding the destroyer that went ahead.
- Q. Could there have been some of the vessels sunk near Umboi Island or Long Island on the 2nd in addition to the one he previously mentioned?
- A. No, he does not think so.
- Q. How many of the escort vessels were sunk?
- A. He remembers 4 sunk.
- Q. Could there have been some others damaged or probably sunk?
- A. 2 others were damaged and Japanese planes went afterwards to sink them, so that might be 6 destroyers possibly destroyed. He thinks 6 were sunk, but he is not sure that the 2 damaged destroyers were sunk by the Japanese or not.
- Q. Does he remember the names of the 2 that were damaged?
- A. No, he does not remember the names.
- Q. Ask if he remembers the names of the merchant vessels in the convoy.
- A. He does not remember those, either.
He thinks you can get those names from naval officers concerned.
- Q. Ask him on which ship was he?
- A. He was on a destroyer, but he does not remember the name of the ship. It was not sunk but it received a torpedo.

- Q. How does he know it was a torpedo?
- A. The destroyer was rocked by this torpedo which did not explode, and the captain of the destroyer told him it was a dud torpedo, during which time the destroyer stopped from the damage caused by that torpedo.
- Q. Was it sunk later?
- A. It was one of the ships that he thinks was sunk later by Japanese planes. He was transferred to another destroyer at that time.
- Q. I had informal information that he had to swim ashore. Is that correct?
- A. No, that is incorrect. He was transferred to another destroyer. The reason for this was the commander in chief of the 18th Army and his staff were on the destroyer that the colonel was on and he was rescued together with the staff.
- Q. After he was rescued and put on this other destroyer did they then have any further attacks or did they come back to Rabaul in that ship?
- A. They were not attacked again. They spent 3 hours picking up survivors around the area of combat where they were attacked, and then returned to a point north of Long Island, where he was transferred to another destroyer which took him back to Rabaul.
- Q. Did that destroyer go direct to Rabaul or via Kavieng?
- A. It returned direct.
- Q. Does he remember the name of that destroyer?
- A. He does not remember.
- Q. Can he get that information?
- A. He cannot give you the name but he thinks naval officers in that area would be able to give you that information.
- Q. I would like for the colonel to summarize again the losses and probable losses of Japanese shipping during this action. As I understand now, he states that there were 8 merchant vessels sunk, 4 destroyers sunk, and 2 other destroyers possibly sunk. Ask him if that is correct.
- A. He thinks that is correct, but he also is of the opinion that you should confirm this from naval officers concerned situated in Rabaul at that time. He is definitely certain that all the merchant vessels were sunk.
- Q. I have information of possible additions to the convoy while it was en route. Does he have any information on that?
- A. The first plan was 4 or 5 transports, but cargo increased so that they had to add 2 or 3 more vessels, but these vessels were added at Rabaul and not added en route.
- Q. Japanese document refers to the KAMO MARU and the KEMBU MARU. Does he know whether this is 2 ships, or whether it is a typographical error and is only 1 ship?
- A. He does not remember the names of the transports very clearly, but he thinks there was a KAMO MARU in the convoy, but not a KEMBU MARU in the convoy.

- Q. The same Japanese document referring to the loading of the vessels states that one of these ships was to pick up some boats which were shut out on the loading of the 24th, and I want to know if it was then possible to have sailed after the rest of the convoy sailed.
- A. He thinks it is possible that it may have sailed later, but he is of the opinion that all of the convoy left Rabaul together.
- Q. Another Japanese document shows the UMITORA in the convoy. This ship was listed in a 51st Division Operations Order A-60 at Dabakaul. The sister ship was sunk. Did the Umitora sail later?
- Q. Where is Kabakaul?
- A. It is at Rabaul.
- Q. Does the order say that the Umitora sailed?
- A. No, it used the Umitora on one order but in the information on the convoy that the Japanese have given us that ship is not listed.
- A. The colonel could not say whether it sailed or not because he does not remember the names.
- Q. Can he tell me from what bases the troops on the northern coast of New Britain were re-supplied?
- A. The colonel says that there was 1/2 to 1 battalion at Cape Gloucester, and these were supplied by small coastal ships that hugged the coast during transport from Rabaul, moving only at night and hiding during the day, and also once or twice a destroyer carried supplies from Rabaul. Besides that method a fast transport ship from Kavieng carried supplies to depot on Garove Island. From Garove Island small ships carried the supplies along the coast of New Britain to Cape Gloucester.
- Q. Can he give me a possible explanation of our 2 sightings, 1 on 26 February 1943 at Ubili, and another convoy west of St Mathias group on 27 February 1943?
- A. He cannot confirm the sightings but he repeats that naval officers would be able to give you more information. He thinks the sightings off Ubili were these small transport ships that traveled by night and hid by day to Cape Gloucester, and that the sighting west of St Mathias was of ships traveling between Rabaul and Palau. He is not sure about this at all.
- Q. Does he know of any shipping between Rabaul and Wewak?
- A. He says Wewak was supplied directly from Palau and he thinks that the only supplies from Rabaul to Wewak were equipment for making airfield in Wewak. Otherwise, it was supplied directly.
- Q. Could some of that movement have taken place between 26 February 1943 and 6 March 1943?
- A. He does not remember the date that this Rabaul--Wewak work was done.
- Q. Does he remember approximate dates when they were constructing fields at Wewak?
- A. Airfield construction was between February and March and the colonel thinks that the equipment was sent before that date sometime in January but it is also possible that it was sent between February and March.

- Q. Does the colonel have information on the Army troops other than this convoy moving possibly by small vessels from New Britain to Lae area?
- A. After the aforementioned convoy was sunk some troops were transported from Cape Gloucester to Finschhafen by motor barges and from Finschhafen they were transported overland and by sea also to Lae. Motor barges operated only during night. He thinks total number transported was about 2000 over a long period.
- Q. Did they lose many of those barges?
- A. Not very many losses, although some were sunk.
- Q. Does the colonel consider this sinking a critical incident in the Japanese situation? In other words, was it a turning point in the war for them or not?
- Q. You mean in the campaign for this area?
- A. That area primarily, and over-all. Would they consider it a turning point in the Solomons--New Guinea campaign?
- A. The colonel says that this is his own opinion, but a group of staff officers in Rabaul were of the opinion that transportation to New Britain was very difficult, and when the convoy was sunk here it was a great shock to the navy officers and army staff in Rabaul and also to the Imperial Headquarters in Japan. As a result the Chief of Staff, 8th Area Army went back to Tokyo to report and to confer on future transportation and it was decided not to use convoys as a result, and to use small barges from Cape Gloucester, as the colonel related.
- Q. What does the colonel think was our greatest threat to his operations throughout that campaign?
- A. The colonel said that the American mastery of the air of this region of the Vitiav Straits was the greatest threat to the Japanese region. The Japanese intended to have a line between Lae, Gasmata, and Munda, but because of American air activities they had to give up their plans, making it very difficult for them to send troops to Lae, and the colonel is of the opinion that this was one of the turning points in this area.
- Q. Can he tell us from which bases the Japanese air escort operated to cover this specific convoy?
- A. The planes flew from Rabaul, using Gasmata and Cape Gloucester as staging bases.
- Q. Did any of the airplanes from Wewak join in the escort?
- A. It was planned that the planes from Wewak would fly to Madang and escort the convoy after March 3 into Lae, also using the airfield at Lae, but because the convoy was sunk they did not do it.
- Q. What effect on the Japanese campaign did our occupation of the NADZAB area have?
- A. The Japanese plan was to have 2 wings with their center at Rabaul, and the occupation of NADZAB meant that one of these wings was crumbled, like taking one wing off a bird.
- Q. Did the colonel assist in the planning and have extensive knowledge of the plans for the re-supply of Lae?
- A. The colonel made the plans for the convoy that was sunk on 3 March. The officer responsible was ill at the time, and so the colonel planned on his behalf.