'It Was Murder' For Japs' Fleet

Reporter Sees Amazing Gunnery of U.S. Warships Blast Enemy Out of Water at Kula Bay.

(B. J. McQuaid, Chicago Daily News writer, who was the only newspaper correspondent to accompany the U.S. task force that sent a Japanese flotilla to destruction in Kula Bay in 55 minutes, here tells of the battle.)

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Aboard a Light Cruiser in New Georgia Waters, July 6. — (Delayed.) — It will go down in naval textbooks as a classic. It was the most devastating, the most murderous night sea battle of the Pacific War. It was a thing of utter and incredible perfection. It was a slaughter. It was an execution.

American naval gunnery, long the envy of all of the world's fleets, proved itself again. It proved beyond question that it has solved difficult and uncertain problems in these toe-to-toe slugfests in the darkness and has become as effective by night as ever it was by day, if not a bit more so.

'Couldn't Trust My Eyes.'

Through all those tense 55 minutes of the battle of Kula Gulf I stood on the bridge of the flagship and I could not trust my eyes, nor the reports coming in over the TBS (talk between ships) short wave speaker. It seemed unbelievable that, outnumbered and outgunned as we were, we could wipe this big Japanese flotilla from the face of the sea while losing only one of our own ships.

In the five-minute opening phase of the battle we silenced or sank or blew to bits three of the Japs' destroyers and two of their light cruisers. In less than 10 minutes in the second phase, we crippled one of their heavy cruisers and set the other afire. And for the rest of the hour-long interlude in the hell of that shell-shattered midnight we sat there coldly, calmly and almost leisurely, and pasted away at their cripples and their wrecks; exploding them, pumping up their [illegible] and blow[illegible] ments of their dying hulks all over Kolombangara Island.

We sustained a tragic loss—the sinking of the U.S.S. Helena, a vessel with as gallant a crew and as proud a record as any ship in our history. But by the cold mathematics of naval warfare we paid a cheap, almost negligible price for the complete destruction of all those Japanese men of war and the collapse of Japan's first desperate major effort to retain its faltering clutch on the northern Solomons.

The Japanese Dilemma.

At the moment all of us are still elated and inspired, with the fever of battle raging in our veins, but it is possible already to reflect that this may well have been the turning point of this new war in the South Seas. At any rate, Japan is now confronted with a hard decision. We have shown it, as well as we showed it at Guadalcanal, that it cannot bring units of its fleet—not even heavy units—into the New Georgia area. We demonstrated today that the price of such an attempt is more than merely prohibitive. It is 100 per cent.

Japan's dilemma is simply this: We shall surely take New Georgia and Kolombangara, and after that Bougainville (to the northwest), if Japan does not support

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IN THE DAILY NEWS TODAY

Daily News Writer Tells Slaughter of Jap Fleet

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its troops and its faltering air power with heavy naval strength. There seems to be only one alternative to Japan letting the Solomons go almost by default. That is to bring down the main Jap fleet and force a showdown to decide the Pacific War right here and now.

I can guarantee that the issue will not take any "forcing" so far as we are concerned. Our entire Navy is praying for it and all I ask, personally, is to be in on the show.

This was my first night sea battle. It was an experience I had long coveted.

I had participated in the first landing on Rendova Island, leaving there after two days because I wished to be in on the Rice Anchorage landing coming up a little later, and the only correspondent to cover both our major offensive assaults.

Task Force Assignment.

During the ride back from Rendova I found myself in position to board this cruiser of the task force. The mission of the task force was to support the Rice Anchorage landing, which exactly fitted my plans. The admiral readily agreed to my coming aboard his flagship and was most hospitable.

Our support mission came off on schedule and our bombardment, of which I have written previously, was brilliantly successful.

ENEMY IS SIGHTED

But my good luck was only just commencing. I had intended to leave the cruiser immediately after the bombardment and rejoin the amphibious force. I nearly did just that. About noon on the day after the bombardment an SOC (Scout) pilot offered to fly me from the cruiser catapult to a point from where I could rejoin the amphibious force. An incredibly fortunate hunch caused me to reject the offer, though no one knew at that time that within 14 hours this ship would be in the greatest night battle of the Pacific war.

Our first inkling of what was in store came shortly afterward. One of our aircraft reconnaissance missions from Guadalcanal sighted a powerful Jap naval concentration in Shortland Harbor. The airmen reported two of the biggest and newest of Japan's eight-inch-gun cruisers, two light cruisers and six destroyers.

Kombangara's southern shore from Arundel Island.

ENEMY IS CONTACTED

Though I had slept hardly at all in the preceding five nights the report which came over the TBS speaker was as stimulating as an electric shock. It gave the position of the Jap ships, their speed, bearing and direction. It was apparent that they were coming out of the gulf to head up north along the Kolombangara shore. Two light cruisers, shielded by three destroyers, were in standard formation some 1,000 yards in advance of two heavy cruisers.

We were then running west on a course which would have taken us past Kolombangara's north shore two or three miles from the circular coast.

But just as the Japs came up past Waugh Rock, off Kolombangara's densely wooded shoulder hill, we executed, there in the darkness, the most fateful and significant of all the list of our naval maneuvers —we crossed the Japs' T!

That is to say, as their column came north to begin its westward turn around Kolombangara, we, still on our westward course, ran the full broadside of our formation across the head of their column at right angles. Not only were we crossing their T, we were pinning them inextricably against the anvil of the Kolombangara shore. It was what every sea warrior dreams about. And right there is where we let them have it.

DARKNESS RENT BY FURY

I personally saw little of the tactical situation which I have just been describing. Except for information relayed from advance units of our formation via the TBS, this is a reconstruction from a subsequent analysis of the situation by the task force authorities. However, I will vouch for its accuracy.

What I saw myself was only an awful, hellish, soul-shaking pageant of darkness rent by sound and fury and the screaming red arch of tracer shells and instants of blinding light from the muzzle bursts.

I saw the golden fingers of our tracers reach out across the night and claw catlike at the steel sides of the Jap ships. Where each claw struck one there would be a short, white stab of fire. These were friction flashes.

I saw burning ships bloom into great red sunsets of flame and burn for what seemed hours be-

Minutes after this report flashed over the short waves the commander of the South Pacific radioed orders from his base.

We were to turn in our tracks, run back to Kula Gulf at top speed, find the enemy, and engage him.

WHAT WILL THE JAPS DO?

We approached our uncertain rendezvous without much hope of finding our quarry. It was only speculation that the Japs were intending to bring down their forces to the region for which we were heading. Even if they did so their mission probably would be to bombard our newly-landed troops around Rice Anchorage, or put ashore reinforcements of their own to attack our newly-won beachheads.

In either case, we had started so late that it seemed probable that the enemy would run into Kula Gulf, complete their mission, and retire hours before our arrival. There was only one really hopeful possibility. We had been in the gulf only a few hours earlier, lambasting the Jap positions with our bombardment.

Perhaps this big Jap cruiser force came down to the Shortlands with specific orders to engage us if we came in again. Only in such an event could we be sure to find them.

It was 1 o'clock this morning (July 6) when I left the wardroom and groped my way up to the flag bridge. We were by that time approaching Visuvisu Point, New Georgia, northeast of the mouth of Kula Gulf. It was a pitch-black night. There was a heavy sea running and squalls of stinging, blinding rain. On inquiry, I was told that we had made no contacts as yet.

It was 1:38 a.m. before we could be sure that the Japs were coming out of Kula Gulf. They must have entered the gulf via narrow Blackett Strait, which separates

burn for what seemed hours be-

[illegible] cruiser exploded in [illegible] of towering flame, 1,000 feet high.

The great climax of the experience began when a voice came over the TBS, about 1:50 a.m., giving the admiral's order to close with the enemy.

"Prepare to attack. Use attack Plan A."

"We will take the big ships," the voice said—meaning that our cruisers would fire first at the two larger ships in the leading Jap formation—"and our destroyers will concentrate on their destroyers."

It seemed an age before the "stand by for firing" order was given. But almost immediately thereafter all five of our turrets opened upon the port side.

SHELLS SMASH JAPS

As far as I could judge the direction of the targets was off our port bow. However, it was minutes before I could orient myself sufficiently to see or comprehend anything that was taking place. Showers of sparks and bits of burnt cork choked and blinded me. I had forgotten to stuff cotton in my ears, and I was deafened.

Smoke from our forward turrets rolled back on the bridge, obscured the bright arcs of the tracers, and dulled the bright flashes of the guns.

Soon the smoke seemed to lift, and I walked over to the windscreen of the bridge and watched the arc of our tracers. One of the Jap ships already was afire.. Later our chief gunnery officer told me we had hit her on our third salvo.

We shifted fire to the second target—either a light cruiser or a big destroyer. My ship hit her on the first salvo, and then the others began plastering her, including the Helena, which was directly behind us in the formation.

The sixth or seventh time the Jap ship was hit she blew up.

It was a terrible sight. The fire of the other Jap ship, still burning, was dull red, but the flash of this explosion was an electric white, and there were three phases of it. They succeeded each other at fraction-of-a-second intervals.

The first sheet of white flame shot up 200 feet; the second, sheathing the first, shot up 500 feet, and the third, flashing up through the center of the others, seemed at least 1,000 feet high. Then everything was darkness again, except the red glow of the burning ship.

But the enemy was shooting at us—plenty! Towers of shell splashes reared up in a danger-our straddle a few hundred feet in front of our bow. Another salvo was short of our beam. Many were landing astern between us and the Helena.

The five minutes of our first phase of firing seemed the longest part of the whole battle. Thereafter there was an interval when we ceased firing and stood about in an 180-degree turn which brought us parallel to our original course but on the opposite heading.

It was another masterpiece of maneuver. By this means it succeeded in recrossing the Jap T. By the time we had completed the turn the Jap heavy cruisers had come up to almost the position that the lighter elements had occupied when we first opened fire.

It took 10 minutes to kill them, and they shot at us a great deal. After a bit I saw one of the heavies burning.

THE JAPS QUIT FIRING

Then word came over the speaker that the last of the Jap ships had ceased firing.

We ceased firing, too, but only briefly, while we undertook maneuvers to give us better shots at the wrecks. The other Jap heavy cruiser and one of the two destroyers were reported to have beached. We fired starshells to illuminate the wrecks not already burning, and for half an hour we pumped shells into the wrecks and the fires.

After each salvo the fires would puff up a little and the round, red balls grow fatter until, finally, they sank and were snuffed out.

As we fired I was again impressed by the appearances which these light cruisers present during night action. They lose all of the tall, slim girlishness which characterizes their daytime appearance.

For minutes one of them was several thousand feet off our port bow, looping her tracers out across and ahead of our course. Blackly silhouetted by the lightning flashes of her muzzle blasts, she looked squat and broad, as tough as any battleship.

Once, near the end of the shooting, a yeoman telephone-talker [illegible] running low on ammunition, sir." We were, too. As a matter of fact we nearly ran out of it.

The admiral's voice in the darkness was brusque but whimsical.

"That's all right," he said. "Let's be generous. Let's give the Japs every bit we've got."

This was too much for another small yeoman — keeper of the navigation log—who contained himself about a minute. Then he burst out with:

"That, sir, is a remark which will go down in history."

Everyone laughed aloud.

But our laughter was soon turned to sadness. We discovered the loss of the Helena. None of us had seen her hit. It happened during the first phase of the battle, but it was many minutes after the second phase opened before we learned of her absence from the formation. Once she even was reported back in the formation. The battle was nearly over before we definitely ascertained that the Helena was missing.

A DANGEROUS HUNT

In the prolonged hunt for her the admiral pursued bold and dangerous measures. He stayed in the area for many minutes and he even went to the length of turning on our cruiser searchlights. All we could find of the Helena was her bow, sticking 50 feet of its sharp edge upward in a last, lonely defiant gesture as it floated on the surface of the rain-drenched sea.

The destroyers, however, reported a big mass of survivors on floating rafts and bits of wreckage.

At 3:30 a. m. we decided to leave the "cans" behind and pick them up while we started for home. We had been half an hour en route when the destroyers broke the silence to announce that more Jap ships were coming up from Kula Gulf. The admiral at once turned his cruisers about and sped back to the scene, eager for more good hunting. But the Japs somehow divined that we were returning. They turned back as we approached and sneaked off toward Blackett Strait. We set out for home again.

Now it was long after 4 a. m. In less than two hours it would be daylight and we would still be deep in enemy waters, completely exposed to dive-bombing attack. But the cloud-cover held on four hours and the Japs never found us.

TWO MORE JAPS SUNK

While we rejoiced, the two rescuing destroyers were having a brand-new battle on their own in which they sank a couple more Jap cruisers.

But that is a story in itself. I prefer to end this one with a message which the admiral has just now delivered over the loud-speaker system to all the crews of his ships.

In a voice vibrant with the emotion of a strong man and gallant sailor, he said:

"I only want to say to each [illegible] proud I am of all of you. [illegible] information may change the picture but I can say definitely now that at least six, probably seven, and possibly eight or nine Japanese warships will never give anyone any more trouble.

"There is no victory without its price and I can only hope that many of our comrades on the Helena—your friends as well as mine —will be reunited with us as soon as the rescuing destroyers rejoin us. They are now standing in at top speed and should heave in sight soon.

"Above all, I want to say that I think the magnificent achievements of this morning's work were the direct results of our long, hard training in the past six months. Let me say to all hands and with all my heart, well done."