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AL6-3/(16)

UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET
THIRD FLEET

Serial 0088

By OR Date: 1-67

NOV 13 1944

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From: The Commander THIRD Fleet.
To : The Commander in Chief, United States Fleet.
Via : The Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Fleet
and Pacific Ocean Areas.

Subject: Action Report — Period 23-26 October 1944, both dates
inclusive.

Reference: (a) Pacific Fleet Conf. Letter 2CL-44.
(b) CincPoa dispatch 251935 October.

Enclosure: (A) All messages pertaining to combat operations received or
originated by Commander THIRD Fleet during the period 23-
26 October 1944, both dates inclusive, ITEM times. -p.11
(B) Dispatches of Commanders THIRD and SEVENTH Fleet summar-
izing operations 24-26 October 1944. -p.80
(C) Track Chart. -p.85
(D) Composition of Own Forces 23-26 October 1944. -p.86
(E) Report of damage, Own Forces, 23-26 October 1944. -p.90
(F) Summary of statements of prisoners of war. -p.91

1. This Action Report covers the operations of the THIRD Fleet
against the Japanese Fleet during the period 23-26 October, 1944, inclusive.
In compliance with Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet dispatch 251935,
it contains copies of all messages pertaining to combat operations for this
period. It is written from the view-point of the Commander THIRD Fleet and
only deals with those aspects of the engagement that were of primary concern
to the Fleet Commander preliminary to, and during the time the forces were in
contact, and immediately after contact was lost.

2. Details reported by subordinate commanders in their Action Re-
ports will be the subject of appropriate comment by endorsement.

3. For purposes of identification, the enemy carrier force will be
called the Northern Force; the force that sortied through San Bernardino Straits,
the Center Force; and the force that entered Surigao Straits from the westward,
the Southern Force. All times are ITEM.

4. On 23 October 1944, from the multiplicity of sighting reports,
and intelligence reports from other sources, it was evident that the landings
on Leyte had provoked a violent reaction and that the enemy was preparing to
make a major stand of some sort in the Philippines. The enemy intent was not
clear, but his reported naval movements on the 23rd definitely constituted an

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immediate threat. Commander THIRD Fleet decided to initiate carrier searches to obtain earliest information of any enemy movement toward Leyte.

5. After nearly two weeks of intensive operations against Okinawa, Formosa and Luzon, all of the carrier groups needed rearming except for torpedoes and for the AP and SAP bombs habitually reserved for use against combatant ships. One group, Task Group 38.1, had been started toward Ulithi on 23 October; Task Groups 38.2, 38.3 and 38.4 were immediately available.

6. On the night 23-24 October Task Groups 38.2, 38.3 and 38.4 were moved in close to the Philippine coast preliminary to launching searches. Task Group 38.3 was placed east of Polillo Island to cover the West Coast of Luzon; Task Group 38.2 was placed close to San Bernardino Straits; and Task Group 38.4 was sent to the vicinity of Surigao Straits.

7. At dawn 24 October search teams each consisting of Hellcats and Helldivers were launched to cover the West Coast of Luzon and the Sulu Sea and its approaches. The sectors were as shown on Track Chart (Enclosure (C)). The weather was favorable for search and strike operations. At 0846 (24) Task Group 38.1 was ordered to put about and proceed toward a fueling rendezvous with Task Units 30.8.4 and 30.8.8 in Latitude 15N, Longitude 130E at 0700 (25).

8. At 0810 24th, search planes from Task Group 38.2 sighted the Center Force in Latitude 12-14 N Longitude 121-32 E on course 015, speed 18. This force was in two groups. The composition of the first group was reported as 2 BB, 3 or 4 CA or CL and 6 DD. The second group was reported to contain 2 BB, 3 or 4 CA or CL and 7 DD. The Commander THIRD Fleet intercepted the search plane report on VHF search frequency and at 0822 originated an urgent dispatch (232322) to CTF 38, CTG 38.3 and CTG 38.4 and the usual information addressees, giving the contact, composition, course and speed. This was followed at 0827 by urgent dispatch instructing Task Group 38.3 and Task Group 38.4 to concentrate toward Task Group 38.2 at best speed and to strike this force.

9. At 0905 24th, the Task Group 38.4 search intercepted and attacked a force of 2 BB, 1 CA, 4 DD at Latitude 08-55 N Longitude 121-50 E southwest of Negros. The search team reported 2 bomb hits in each BB, rocket hits on CA and 2 DD and heavy strafing of other 2 DD. It was decided to adhere to the decision to have TG 38.4 close TG 38.2 and to shift target to the Center Force on the assumption that SEVENTH Fleet forces could take care of the smaller Southern Force.

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10. Analysis subsequent to the operation, and statements of POWs recovered from the water, indicate that the Center Force contained 5 BB (YAMATO, MUSASHI, NAGATO, KONGO, HARUNA), 7 CA (CHOKAI, HAGURO, MYOKO, KUMANO, SUZUYA, TONE, CHIKUMA), 1 CL (NOSHIRO), 13 DD. Reports of 2-3 additional CL cannot be reconciled. See enclosure (F) for information concerning composition of Southern Force. See enclosure (F) concerning fate of ATAGO and MAYA. The probable movements of TAKAO are mentioned in paragraph 40 of this report.

11. The enemy reacted by launching a vicious air attack against Task Group 38.3. Prior to the enemy attack our forces shot down 40 planes. About 110 planes were shot down around Task Group 38.3 but the PRINCETON was hit hard. Task Group 38.3 was delayed in complying with the order to concentrate by recovery of search and attack groups and by efforts to assist the burning PRINCETON. BIRMINGHAM, MORRISON and IRWIN, while assisting PRINCETON, were badly damaged when the PRINCETON's after magazines blew up. Later in the day, in order to be free to move toward the enemy Northern Force, PRINCETON was sunk and BIRMINGHAM, MORRISON, GATLING and IRWIN were sent to Ulithi for repairs and for hospitalization of the wounded.

12. At this time it was evident that the Japanese Navy was making a major effort, whether for direct attack or transporting troops, or both, was not apparent. If this was to be an all-out attack by the Japanese Fleet, there was one piece missing in the puzzle - the carriers. They were believed to have been in the Empire; and there had been sightings and intelligence reports which indicated that replenishment measures might have been taken for some important movement from Empire waters. Although our submarines stationed in Empire waters had not reported a carrier force, it was felt that they were sure to be employed in some manner in any operation as great as that revealed on the morning of the 24th. Consequently a search to the north by our carrier planes was ordered; and at 1640 Item a search plane from Task Group 38.3 reported a force at Latitude 18-10 N Longitude 125-30 E, course 210, speed 15. (The Northern Force.)

13. Amplifying reports of this Northern Force varied. In his 240817, CTF 38 listed this force as 3 CV, 3-4 heavy cruisers and 6 DD at Latitude 18-10 N Longitude 125-30 E, course 210, speed 15, and stated that one of the enemy carriers was an ISE class. CTF 38's 240942 dispatch stated that pilots who had had a good look reported 2 SHOKAKU CV, 1 CVL, 3 CL and 3 DD on course 270, speed 15 at Latitude 18-25 N Longitude 125-28 E at 1640 Item, while at Latitude 18-10 N Longitude 125-30 E were 4 BB or CA, 5 cruisers, 6 DD on course 210, speed 15 at 1540 Item. One of the BB was reported to have a flight deck aft. At 1600 Item 2 DD were reported by a carrier search plane at Latitude 19-40 N Longitude 123-00 E, course 240, speed 12. Commander THIRD Fleet concluded that the Northern Force

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was disposed in two groups, estimated to contain a total of at least 17 ships and possibly as many as 24 ships.

14. A curious point was apparent from the contact reports of the three forces: they were all proceeding at deliberate speed and it was inferred that there was a predetermined focus of geographical location and time. The movements indicated that a carefully worked-out coordinated Japanese plan was in motion with 25 October as the earliest date of planned concerted action.

15. Throughout the day (24th) carrier strikes had been launched against the Center Force and all reports indicated that the Center Force was being effectively and heavily damaged. In the face of these continued strikes the Center Force kept coming with a determination that commanded respect. By dusk the following damage had been reported: At least 4 and probably 5 BB torpedoed and bombed, one probably sunk; a minimum of 3 heavy cruisers torpedoed and others bombed; 1 CL sunk; 1 DD sunk; 1 DD probably sunk and 4 damaged.

16. Task Group 38.2 made a total of 146 sorties, dropped 23 tons of bombs and 23 torpedoes, reporting the BB YAMATO damaged by 3 torpedo hits; another YAMATO BB (possibly same one) by 1 torpedo hit and 2 bombs; 1 NAGATO BB hit by 1 torpedo and 1 bomb; 1 KONGO BB by 2 torpedoes and 6 bombs; 1 CA, MOGAMI, possibly sunk by torpedo hit; 1 CA, NACHI, hit by 1 torpedo; 1 CA, TONE, hit by 1 torpedo. Task Group 38.3 reported 1 BB badly hit, damaging 2 others, and 4 CA and 2 CL damaged in the Center Force. Task Group 38.4 reported 1 BB (MUSASHI?) hit by torpedo, afire, down at bow and probably sunk; 1 YAMATO BB, 1 to 3 torpedoes, 2 bomb hits; 1 KONGO BB, 1 bomb hit; 1 cruiser damaged; 1 CL sunk; 1 DD sunk; 1 DD probably sunk; 4 DD damaged. Some details of the foregoing information were not available at dusk but flash reports indicated beyond doubt that the Center Force had been badly mauled with all of its BB and most of its CA tremendously reduced in fighting power and life.

17. Although the Center Force continued to move forward, the Commander THIRD Fleet decided that this enemy force must be blindly obeying an Imperial command to do or die, but with battle efficiency greatly impaired by torpedo hits, bomb hits, topside damage, fires, and casualties. From long experience with the Japs, their blind adherence to plan, and their inability to readjust disturbed plans, the Commander THIRD Fleet had long ago adopted a policy of attacking first. The Southern and Center Forces had been under heavy and persistent air attack while proceeding through inland waters in daylight. Jap doggedness was admitted, and Commander THIRD Fleet recognized the possibility that the Center Force might plod through San Bernardino Straits and on to attack Leyte forces, a la Guadalcanal, but Commander THIRD Fleet was convinced that the Center Force was so

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heavily damaged that it could not win a decision, while the possible maximum strength of the Northern Force as reported by CTF 38 240942 constituted a fresh and powerful threat. It was decided that earliest possible attack on the powerful Northern (carrier) Force was essential for breaking up the enemy plan and retaining the initiative.

18. The alternatives were to

(a) Divide the forces leaving TF 34 to block San Bernardino Straits while the carriers with light screen attacked the Northern Force;

(b) Maintain integrity of our own entire striking strength, concentrated off San Bernardino Straits;

(c) Strike the Northern Force with all of our own striking strength concentrated, and leave San Bernardino Straits unguarded.

(a) was rejected; the potential strength of the undamaged Northern Force was too great to leave unmolested, and requiring TF 34 to engage the Center Force while at the same time exposed to attack by land-based and possibly carrier-based air attack was not sound. This alternative spread our strength and risked unprofitable damage in detail.

(b) was rejected because it permitted the Northern Force to function as planned unmolested, and because destruction of Japan's carrier force would mean much to future operations.

(c) was adopted; it maintained the integrity of the Blue striking fleet; it offered best possibility of surprise and destruction of enemy carrier force. It was particularly sound and necessary if the strength of the Northern Force proved to be the maximum reported. It was recognized that the Center Force might sortie and inflict some damage, but its fighting power was considered too seriously impaired to win a decision. Finally, it was calculated that the Third Fleet forces could return in time to reverse any advantage that the Center Force might gain and Commander THIRD Fleet was firmly convinced that (c) would contribute most to the over-all Philippines campaign even if a temporarily tight situation existed at Leyte.

19. It was a hard decision to make, and having made it, Commander

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THIRD Fleet was gravely concerned until he received word that the Center Force had given up in the face of the valiant efforts of the SEVENTH Fleet CVE groups.

20. At 2022 Task Groups 38.2, 38.3 and 38.4 were given orders to assemble and make night run toward Northern Force preparatory to dawn attack. The Jap knows how to shuttle from carrier-to-target-to-airfield and all of Commander THIRD Fleet plans had for weeks been predicated on denying the enemy that advantage, by closing promptly.

21. At 2030 and 2145 (24th) the Center Force was snooped by an INDEPENDENCE VF(N) north of Masbate on various courses and trailing much oil.

22. During the run north care was taken not to overrun the daylight circle of the Northern Force, as to do so would place the Northern Force between Task Force 33 and Leyte. By daylight Task Force 34 was formed up ahead of the carrier groups, to provide for coordinated air and surface attack on the Northern Force.

23. Dawn searches were launched and strike groups put in the air ready to hit as soon as contact was made. The Northern Force was located in Latitude 18-37 N Longitude 126-45 E at 0730 Item on course 180, speed 20, and the first strikes proceeded at once.

24. In the meantime, Task Group 38.1 had put about and at 0700 (25) was in Latitude 15 N Longitude 130 E ready to fuel from Task Units 30.8.4 and 30.8.8. Task Group 38.1 was ordered to augment the searches from Task Groups 38.2, 38.3 and 38.4 to assist in locating the Northern Force and to obtain positive or negative information concerning any enemy forces to the eastward.

25. The Northern Force was caught by surprise, but Commander THIRD Fleet was puzzled by the fact that there were scarcely any planes on the decks of, or in the air near, the enemy force, and no sign of bogies around our own force. Later in the morning large bogies were picked up on the screen approaching from the south; they did not attack, and it is believed that they were planes of the enemy carrier groups ferrying out to the carriers unarmed and arriving too late.

26. The first strike on the Northern Force resulted in the following reported damage: 1 CV hit by a torpedo and 3 bombs; 1 CVL exploded and sunk; 1 CA afire from bomb hits; 1 DD hit. Task Force 34 was advanced for the kill.

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27. In his dispatches 242225, 242227, 242230 and 242329, Commander SEVENTH Fleet made urgent appeals for help; the SEVENTH Fleet CVEs were under gunfire attack from the Center Force and under an attack from persistent and suicidal shore-based air forces. Although Task Force 34 was within 42 miles of the crippled Northern Force, Commander THIRD Fleet at 1115 turned Task Group 38.2 plus WASHINGTON, ALABAMA, MASSACHUSETTS and SOUTH DAKOTA south and dispatched Task Group 34.5, Rear Admiral Badger in IOWA, NEW JERSEY, VINCENTES, MIAMI, BILOKI, and DesRon 52, ahead at high speed to the assistance of the SEVENTH Fleet forces.

28. CTG 38.1 was directed to strike the enemy Center Force and to proceed to assist SEVENTH Fleet forces.

29. Task Groups 38.3 and 38.4 (less detached elements) continued attacks on the Northern Force and ComSubPac ordered three packs of submarines to take position between 120 E and 128 E to cut off enemy retreat. Cruisers and destroyers of the carrier groups under Rear Admiral Du Bose including the SANTA FE, MOBILE, WICHITA, NEW ORLEANS, and a dozen destroyers went after the cripples. The Northern Force is now evaluated to have consisted of 1 CV (ZUIKAKU), 3 CVL (CHITOSE, CHIYODA and ZUIHO - or possibly RYUHO instead), 2 BB-ICV (ISE and HYUGA), 1 CA (possibly IBUKI or MOGAMI), 4 CL (OYODO or possibly YAHAGI, NAGATSU, ABUKUMA? and KISO?, 6 DD, including probably 3 TERUTSUKIS.

30. The Northern Force sustained the following losses and damage at the hands of THIRD Fleet forces: 1 CV (ZUIKAKU) sunk; 3 CVL (CHITOSE, CHIYODA and ZUIHO?) sunk; 1 CL or DD and 1 DD sunk; 1 CL possibly sunk; 2 BB-ICV (ISE and HYUGA) damaged, one by at least 2 and probably 4 torpedoes and bombs; 1 CA damaged by several bombs; 1 CL damaged by several bombs; 1 CL torpedoed, and later sunk by submarines; 2 DD heavily strafed.

31. Roache's Raiders and Clarey's Crushers had formed in two groups in Latitude 21 N Longitude 125-30 E - 126-30 E, and Latitude 21 N Longitude 127 E - 128 E respectively, and caused further damage to fleeing remnants of the Northern Force.

32. In the meantime, while Task Group 38.2 and Task Group 34.5 were moving to the southward at best speed to reinforce the SEVENTH Fleet, the enemy Center Force broke off the engagement with the SEVENTH Fleet CVEs and retired toward San Bernardino Straits. The reasons for movements of the Center Force between 0924 and 1310 are not clear. At 1046 JTF 77 reported the enemy retiring northeast, but according to later reports enemy was on course 150° at 1055 and 225° at 1145. When the strike from Task Group 38.1 reached the Center Force at 1310 he was on course 010, changed to 090 and then through 270° to the right to 009. At 1310 the Center Force was in Latitude 11-46 N Longitude 126-16 E, about 13 miles west of his reported 0722 position. During this period he had been milling around in the same general area; he failed to overwhelm the CVE groups

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by gunfire; he broke off the engagement just as he seemed closing for a kill. The only possible explanations are (1) CVE resistance was too tough for an already-damaged force; (2) superior authority had word of the fate of the Southern and Northern Forces and ordered retirement; (3) imminent approach of Task Group 34.5 and 38.2 and attack by Task Group 38.1 forced his withdrawal.

33. The strike from Task Group 38.1 attacked at 1310 and in addition to the damage inflicted on the enemy by the CVEs, CTG 38.1 reported that strikes from Task Group 38.1 further damaged the Center Force as follows: 4 BB (KONGO, YAMATO and MAGATO classes) hit heavily with bombs and 1 torpedo; 1 KURANO CA probably sunk by 2 torpedoes and many bombs; 1 CA probably sunk by 2 torpedoes; 3 CA hit by bombs; 1 NOSHURO CL sunk by 3 or 4 torpedoes; 1 DD hit by two torpedoes, bow blown off; at least 5 other DD damaged by bombs.

34. CTG 38.1 reports that photos of the Center Force taken east of Samar by the Task Group 38.1 strike revealed the presence of 4 BB (YAMATO, MAGATO, KONGO and HARUNA); 4 CA (2 KACHI class, 1 TONE class, 1 MOGAMI class).

35. Commander SEVENTH Fleet in his 251317 reported that 1 enemy BB, 1 CA and 1 DD had been left dead in the water east of Samar after air attacks.

36. The enemy Center Force re-entered San Bernardino Straits before Task Group 34.5 could intercept, so Task Group 34.5 made a sweep of the approaches to the Straits and thence along the Samar Coast. One straggler was encountered at 0110 I (26) and was sunk by cruisers and destroyers of Task Group 34.5; this straggler, inspected in the light of her own hotly-burning fires was variously identified as a cruiser or destroyer; probably cruiser.

37. Six survivors claiming to be from SUZUYA were picked up off the coast of Samar and numerous other uncooperative swimmers were observed. One of the POWs was intelligent, observant, and cooperative. The information that he volunteered is set forth in enclosure (F).

38. At daylight 26th, Task Groups 38.1 and 38.2 resumed strikes on the retreating Center Force while Task Groups 38.3 and 38.4 fueled. Unremitting pressure was kept on the enemy throughout the day and the following additional damage was reported: 1 YAMATO BB hit by a 500 pound bomb; 1 MAGATO BB hit by 1 torpedo; 1 KONGO BB, 2 Torpedo hits; 1 KONGO BB, 3 1000 pound bomb hits.

39. The MUSASHI, reported by POW as heavily damaged on the 24th and not sortieing from San Bernardino Straits, was never sighted after 24th and was probably sunk.

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40. It is believed that the following ships of the Center Force finally escaped into the China Sea: 4 BB (YAMATO, NAGATO, KONGO and HARUNA) all heavily damaged, 4-5 CA some damaged, 1-2 CL, 7-9 DD. From the afternoon of the 26th, although BBs were sighted by Far Eastern Air Force planes no more than 3 BBs were reported together and it is possible that one KONGO may have dropped out and possibly sank. The POW stated that TAKAO had been torpedoed on 23 October (by Blue submarine) and had dropped back; analysis of subsequent sightings indicated that TAKAO may have rejoined via east of Palawan on the 26th, and may have been one of the 4-5 CA that finally escaped.

41. For the purposes of this report, the action with the Japanese Fleet is considered to have terminated at 2400 Item, 26 October 1944. I regretfully report the loss of the PRINCETON and of 40 planes in combat and 10 operationally (incomplete report), which can be replaced. With far deeper regret I have received the reports of the irreparable loss of the gallant officers and men who have given their lives to our cause.

42. This report does not include any attempt at detailed analysis; the demands of continuing operations preclude any such attempt here. That must be done by agencies having the necessary time, personnel and facilities. "Lessons learned" will be derived from the Action Reports of subordinate commanders or discussed in separate correspondence. Suffice it to say here that

(a) Communications were generally excellent considering the forces involved;

(b) Contact reports were well handled from the Fleet Commander's standpoint;

(c) The undetected departure of the Northern Force from the Empire and its unobserved approach to the Philippines was surprising; it is presumed that submarines stationed close to the Japanese Coast were pinned down by shore-based air;

(d) Results of air attacks on enemy combatant ships (other than enemy carriers) were disappointing. Aside from the ruggedness of Japanese ships, contributing factors may have been (1) pilot fatigue after prolonged operations, (2) tendency for pilots to go after cripples rather than undamaged ships, (3) poor torpedo performance or too shallow depth setting.

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(e) The Commander THIRD Fleet regrets the loss of a long-awaited opportunity to slug it out with guns against the guns of the enemy, but in his opinion more far-reaching considerations outweighed other factors on the two occasions when surface striking forces were withdrawn just before possible surface engagement.

(f) Replenishment forces were held reasonably close to the combat area and provided smart and faultless service.

(g) The inability of the Center Force to knock out by gunfire the CVEs and small fry standing up to them indicates serious internal disruption by battle damage within the Jap ships - this in no way detracting from the glory due the CVE groups.

(h) The employment of two separately commanded tactical fleets in this action had a happy ending but from the standpoint of command was unsound.

43. Finally, the Commander THIRD Fleet can confidently report that this action and the brilliant operations of the SEVENTH Fleet resulted in (a) utter failure of the Japanese plan to prevent the re-occupation of the Philippines, (b) the crushing defeat of the Japanese Fleet, and (c) the elimination of serious naval threat to our operations for many months, if not forever.

W. F. Halsey
W. F. HALSEY.

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