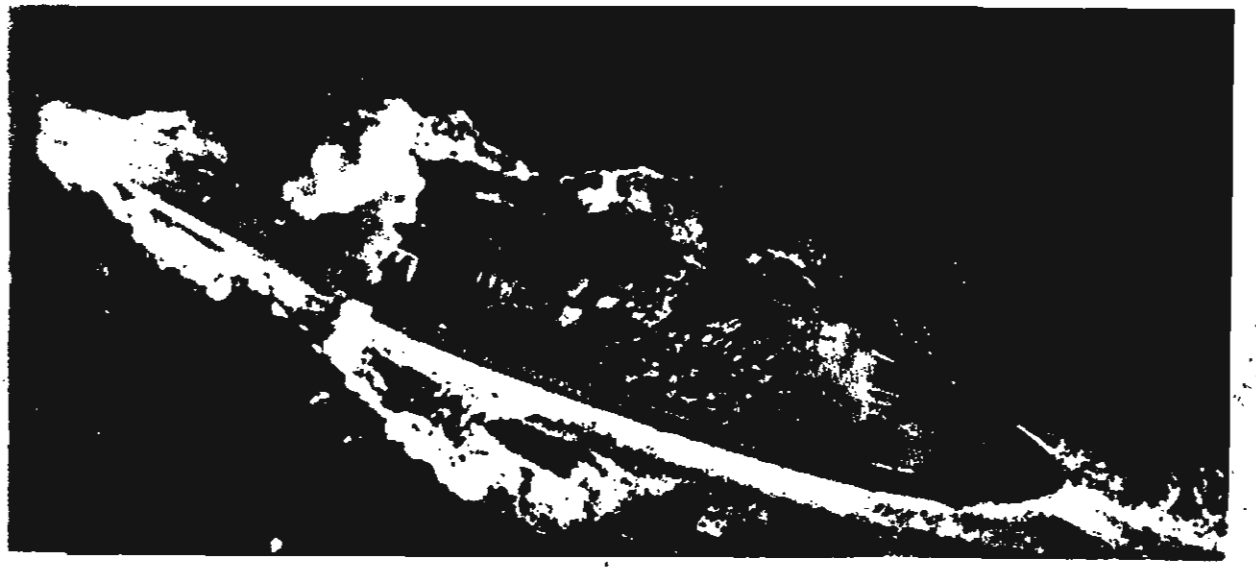
DOCID: 3949745

Rear Admiral L. R. Schulz, USN, Ret.

Comint and the Sinking of the Battleship *Yamato*



The *Yamato* under attack

Early in 1944 the giant Japanese battleship *Yamato*,[1] following repairs for torpedo damage,[2] joined the fleet at Lingga Roads south of Singapore. She then moved to Tawitawi in the Sulu Archipelago near the northeast coast of Borneo. In June 1944 she participated in the Battle of the Philippine Sea, although she played no significant role.

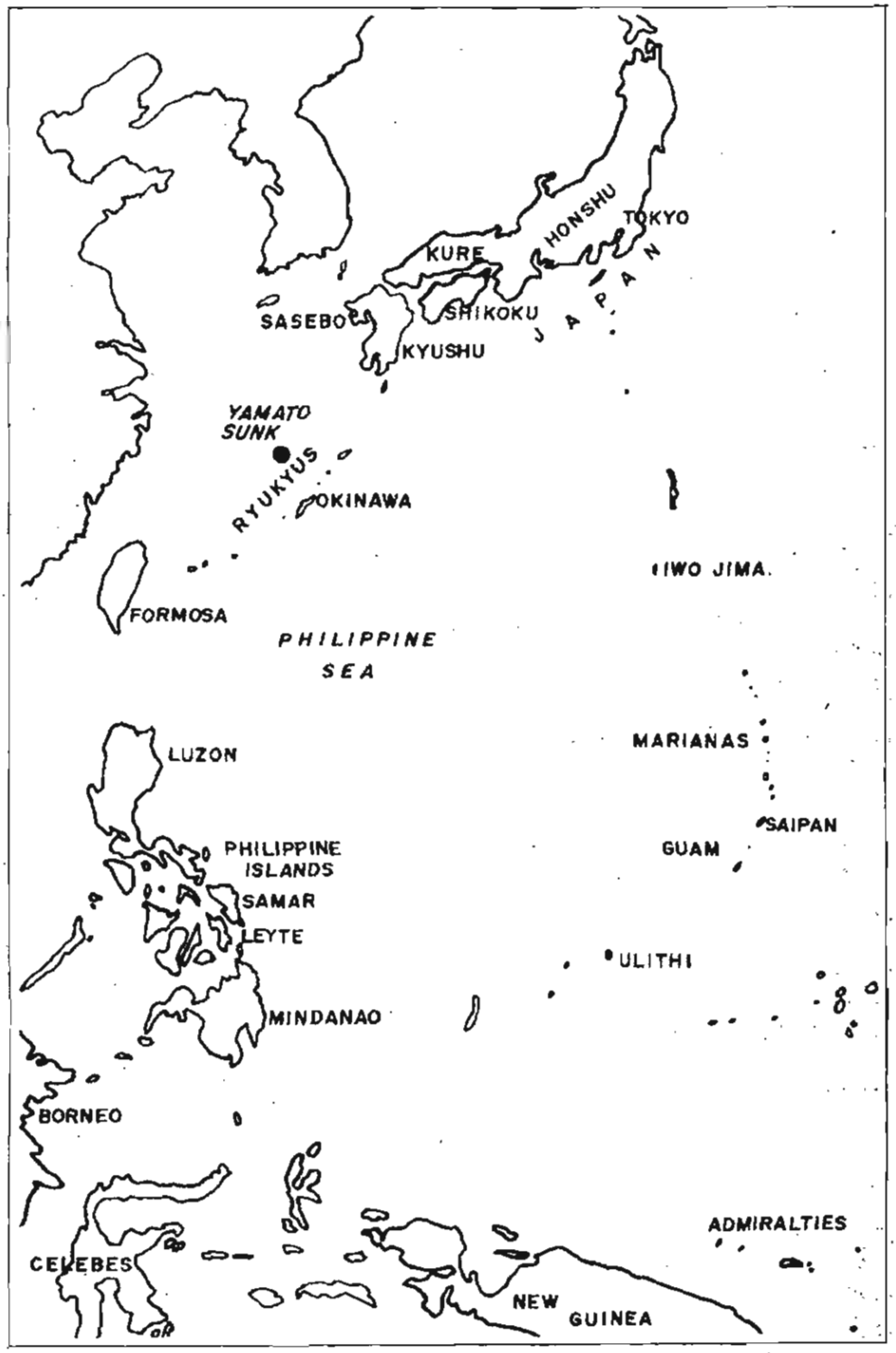
Later, in October 1944, *Yamato* was involved in the Battle for Leyte Gulf in the Philippines, as part of the Center Force (Force "A") of the First Striking Force. This Force was subjected to heavy air attack, and *Yamato* received several bomb hits. Nevertheless, its ships later broke out into the Philippine Sea and proceeded south along the east coast of Samar, attacking the lightly built aircraft carriers of the amphibious support forces and threatening U.S. ships supporting the Leyte Gulf landing area. One American escort carrier and three destroyers were sunk, and several others were damaged by gunfire from the Japanese force, which in turn was deterred by bomb and torpedo attacks and withdrew before breaking through to the landing area. Following this action, *Yamato* returned to Kure Navy Yard on 11 November 1944 for repairs. She spent most her remaining days in the Inland Sea.

Early in January 1945, ship-to-shore communications between *Yamato* and the Kure Naval Radio Station were

[1] In addition to Comint, the main source of information for this article is the book entitled *Campaigns of the Pacific War*, compiled by the Navy from data of the Strategic Bombing Survey and published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1946. The CTF 58 Action Report of 31 May 1945 has been most valuable from the standpoint of what was happening on the American side. There is also an element of recollection on the part of the author, who at the time of the event was occupying a radio-intelligence billet on the staff of CINCPAC.

[2] See the Spring 1977 issue of *Spectrum* for descriptions of *Yamato*, and of the role Comint played in her torpedoing by a U.S. submarine on Christmas Day 1943.

Approved for Release by NSA on 05-11-2009, FOIA Case # 51553


HONSHU
TOKYO
KURE
JAPAN
SASEBO
SHIKOKU
KYUSHU
YAMATO
SUNK
RYUKYUS
OKINAWA
IWO JIMA
FORMOSA
PHILIPPINE
SEA
MARIANAS
LUZON
SAIPAN
GUAM
PHILIPPINE
ISLANDS
SAMAR
LEYTE
ULITHI
MINDANAO
BORNEO
ADMIRALTIES
CELEBES
NEW
GUINEA

intercepted. On several occasions single radio-direction-finding line bearings on the ship were also obtained. Most of the messages were for, or from, the Commander-in-Chief, Second Fleet, and it later became apparent that this officer was also the commander of what became known as the "Surface Special Attack Force," also referred to as the "First Diversion Attack Force."

CINCPAC, on the basis of information derived from Comint, on 13 February issued an estimate of Japanese fleet locations, noting that *Yamato*, two other battleships, three aircraft carriers, four cruisers, and about twenty-eight destroyers were then believed to be located in the Kure-Hashirajima-Iwakuni area of the Inland Sea. All except the destroyers were listed by name, and all were believed to be operational.

On 14 March an American Carrier Task Force, TF 58, departed Ulithi Atoll, located about 360 miles southwest of Guam. Commanded by Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, TF 58 was to conduct strikes against Japan to hamper Japanese reactions to the invasion of Okinawa, scheduled to begin on 1 April. Task Force 58's carrier planes first struck Kyushu at dawn on 18 March, and on the 19th its planes hit Kure and nearby locations. *Yamato* was hit by a bomb in these attacks, as were several other large ships. (Incidentally, photos taken by Task Force 58's aircraft showed that the ships present were essentially those listed in the CINCPAC estimate, as well as an additional 22 submarines.)

Commander-in-Chief, Second Fleet, continued to appear in intercepts as being on *Yamato* at or near Kure every day through 28 March. On the 28th, an Operation Order (OPORD), issued by Commander-in-Chief, Second Fleet, was intercepted which revealed that *Yamato*, an unidentified ship, and 12 destroyers would get underway at 1400[3] and proceed to Sasebo, on the northwest coast of Kyushu. Times and positions were given for the trip, and arrival at Sasebo was scheduled for 1115 on the 30th. The sortie, however, was apparently delayed. And it was "postponed" at 1939 on the 28th by an OPORD from Commander-in-Chief, Combined Fleet, who at the same time predicted that an American strike force would approach Kyushu on the 29th.

On 29, 30, and 31 March the usual pattern of transmissions continued to reveal probable locations of Japanese ships. Also, intercepted communications of the 31st revealed that *Yamato* was "unable to proceed." Whatever the problem with *Yamato*, it was evidently remedied a few days later.

[3] Japan times and dates are used in this article unless otherwise noted.

Earlier, on 26 March, U.S. Army troops landed in the Ryukyu Islands at Kerama Retto, a group of islands some 17 miles to the west of the southern tip of the main island of Okinawa. From then until 1 April Okinawa was under bombardment daily, and Task Force 58 was interdicting aircraft and destroying facilities in Japan, as well as attacking various ships. Too, B-29 raids on the main Japanese island of Honshu were heavy during this period.

On 1 April the U.S. Tenth Army, under the command of Lt. General Simon B. Buckner, Jr., landed on Okinawa, supported by heavy naval gunfire and air attack from the U.S. Fifth Fleet. During the invasion, Task Force 58 augmented the air capability of the amphibious support force by providing day and night air cover of the Fleet and close support of the Marine and Army troops ashore. But as soon as American aircraft began operating from Okinawa itself, some planes from TF 58 again attacked Kyushu airfields, reducing to a degree the severity of subsequent Japanese air attacks against Okinawa, although they remained heavy indeed.

At 2250 on 4 April an OPORD was intercepted which outlined a joint "Navy-Army #1 Kikusui Operation," for which X-Day was to be 6 April. This was to be the first of ten major operations by suicide aircraft. The action was scheduled to begin at 0500 on the 6th with attacks on the "anchorage" at Okinawa. At the same time an additional unit was to strafe enemy troops; still another was to locate and attack American surface ships. Another air group was ordered to organize its fighter planes into three suicide units to be dispatched at 1330, 1400, and 1500. Another group would attack between 1600 and 1800. Four other air groups were ordered to stand by to attack on short notice.

According to intercepted communications, *Yamato* and Commander, Second Fleet, were at Kure on 2 April. On the 4th, however, Comint reports read a little differently, noting that they were probably in the Kure Communication Zone and that there was some slight suggestion that a sortie was about to begin. On 5 April the suggestion became a certainty, when a message of that date, issued at 1446, revealed that a Japanese force[4] would exit Bungo Suido, the strait separating Kyushu and Shikoku, at 0530 on 7 April. The message further requested that the ships be fueled at Tokuyama on the morning of the 6th, and that a water barge be provided to *Yamato* at noon the same day. Further, this force was scheduled to arrive in an area east of Okinawa at dawn on

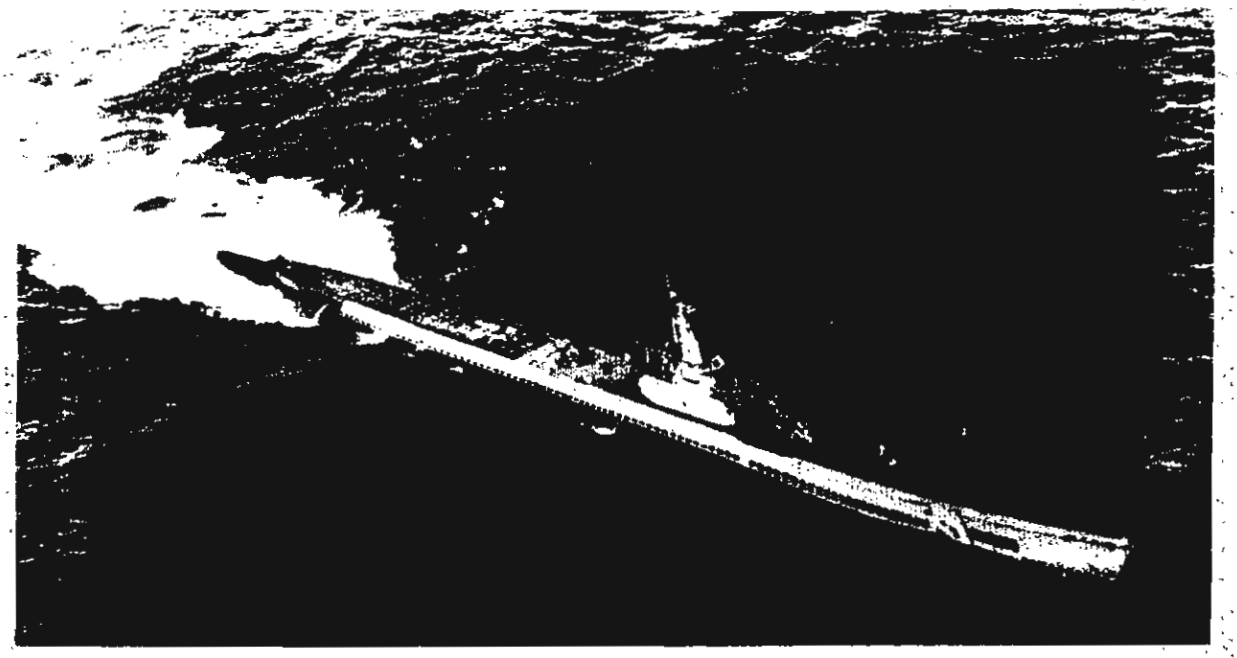
[4] This was the "Surface Special Attack Force," or "First Diversion Attack Force," mentioned earlier in this article. As noted previously, Commander, Second Fleet, on board *Yamato*, also commanded this Force.

the 8th, according to a message from Commander-in-Chief, Second Fleet, sent at 2203 on 5 April. Two addressees were asked in this message to establish direct communications beginning at 1200 on the 7th, and to provide information concerning the American situation, particularly in regard to the transports. Comint concerning this message was published with an accompanying comment that this was the "Surface Suicide Attack Unit." Given this information, Admiral Raymond Spruance, commanding the Fifth Fleet, told TF 58 to ". . .take them." But at 0956 a Japanese Combined Fleet message changed the time and date of the sortie to 1800 on the 6th. The trap had already been set, however, and 1800 on the 6th is about the time the Japanese force was sighted exiting the strait.

Other Comint became available as events evolved. Intended use of Army as well as Navy aircraft became apparent from a message at 1500 on the 5th, when a Combined Fleet OPORD noted that the Sixth Air Army would use all available strength to attack shipping in the Okinawa area and that the Army defenders on Okinawa would make a heavy attack on 7 April against the American troops. Additionally, at 1606 on the 5th, Commander-in-Chief, Combined Fleet, designated Kanoya Air Base as his "#2 Command Post."

Japanese traffic on 6 April was especially heavy, resulting in a Comint report which noted that Commander-in-Chief, Second Fleet, was involved in an unusual amount of traffic, revealing, among other things, that he would transit Bungo Suido, possibly with air cover from Saeki Air Base. Another message prescribed radio frequencies for Saeki Air Group air operations and for communications with surface ships. Three additional messages sent on 6 April between 0750 and 1300, and promptly read, revealed that the surface force would consist of *Yamato* and Destroyer Squadron 2 (DESRON 2), comprising one light cruiser (believed to be *Yahagi*) and eight destroyers. Anti-submarine protection was to be provided ahead of the force. Arrival time at its destination east of Okinawa was scheduled for 0500 on the 8th. Also, at 1241 on the 6th a Japanese Army report noted that about 20 American ships, including a battleship, had entered Nakagusuki Wan (Buckner Bay), Okinawa, and were shelling Japanese Army installations. Some 15 messages were also intercepted on 6 April regarding air operations, which were consistent with the "#1 Kikusui Operation" outlined earlier. And at 2356 on the 6th, fighter cover for the Surface Attack Force was ordered from 0600 to 1000 on the 7th. But a postwar report showed that Japanese air cover was afforded by only three to five planes. And none was noted by TF 58 when the attacks on the Japanese ships began.

True to the Comint prediction, the first of ten major attacks by Japanese Army and Navy suicide planes began on 6 April. Task Force 58, meanwhile, had moved to the east of the northern coast of Okinawa to interdict the expected Japanese planes. It was also noted in Comint that this suicide sortie of *Yamato* was purposely



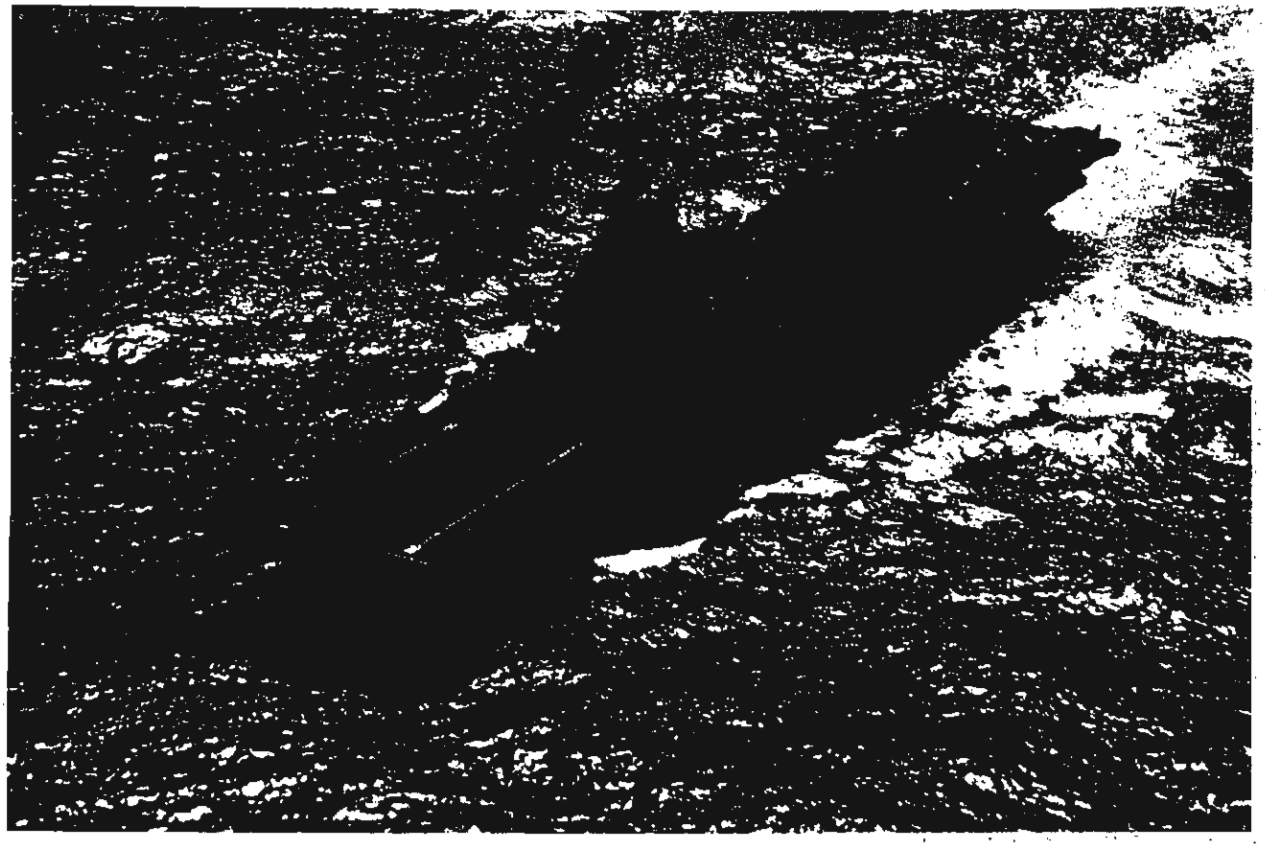
The U.S.S. Hackleback

coordinated with the air operations. In a message of 6 April, for example, the Sixth Air Army was given the schedule and composition of the Japanese surface force, along with recognition characteristics, so that Japanese aircraft would not attack it by mistake. Another message, to an unknown addressee, directed "the strictest attention to the friendly markings." In the attack itself, the suicide aircraft caused considerable damage to U.S. ships, but at the cost of heavy losses. Task Force 58 destroyed 248 airborne planes on the 6th, while itself losing only two planes in combat.

The sortie of the Surface Special Attack Force took place as scheduled and, probably not by coincidence, was sighted at 1600 on 6 April by B–29s over the Inland Sea, and at 1745 by the submarine *Threadfin* near the entrance of Bungo Suido. Later, at 2020, the submarine *Hackleback* reported that the ships were proceeding south along the east coast of Kyushu. When south of Kyushu the formation turned west for a distance (as a diversionary move), where it was sighted by a U.S. patrol plane operating out of Kerama Retto. Two such planes subsequently shadowed the force for five hours. Meanwhile, Admiral Mitscher moved his ships slightly to the north, although still to the east of Okinawa.

At 0823 on 7 April the Japanese force was sighted by a search plane from USS *Essex*. Seven minutes later, the Japanese ships reported sighting seven American carrier planes at a distance of 25 miles. And at 1000 *Yamato* opened fire on one of the shadowing patrol planes at the very long range of 23 miles. The plane was not hit.

The contact report from the *Essex's* search plane was relayed back to TF 58's flagship via two VHF transponder units, airborne at 100- and 200-mile distances from the flagship. TF 58 subsequently launched a "tracking force" of 16 fighter planes at 0915, and at 1000 the launch of strike units began. In all, 386 planes were launched. But 51 planes failed to locate the targets because of poor visibility, raising the possibility that *Yamato* might have gotten much closer to her objective had the weather deteriorated further, especially if Comint had not revealed the details of her mission in advance.



The U.S.S. Hancock

Of the 335 planes which took part in the attack, 156 were fighters, 119 torpedo planes, and 60 dive bombers. Launched 240 miles from the Japanese ships, the attacking aircraft were guided by radar in a dive bomber, which located the enemy at a distance of 32 miles. And while the strike force was airborne, TF 58 itself was attacked by four Japanese aircraft. Three were shot down while approaching the ships, but the other crashed into *Hancock*, resulting in 135 casualties and considerable damage. By early evening, however, *Hancock* had been repaired sufficiently to land her own aircraft.

The attack on the Japanese ships began at 1232 in poor visibility. *Yamato* received two bomb hits from the initial attack, and both the attack and the antiaircraft fire were described as "furious." Fortunately, the antiaircraft fire was not overly effective, for American losses in the entire attack amounted to just ten planes, four pilots, and eight other crewmen. The rest were rescued.

Early in the attack the destroyer *Hamakaze* was hit by a torpedo and a bomb and quickly sank. The light cruiser *Yahagi* was also hit by a torpedo and a bomb and went dead in the water. By 1344 *Yamato* had sustained six torpedo hits on her port side, and, listing heavily to port, lost forward speed rapidly. Between 1402 and 1417 the slowly moving, almost helpless ship was hit by three more torpedoes on the port side and one on the starboard side. More bomb hits followed, and at 1423 *Yamato*, wracked by internal explosions, capsized and sank. Vice Admiral Seiichi Ito, Commander, Second Fleet/Surface Special Attack Force, and *Yamato's* Captain, Rear Admiral Kosaku Ariga, went down with her, along with 2,496 of the ship's company. Only 269 survived. *Yahagi*, proving almost as difficult to sink as *Yamato*, received at least twelve bomb and seven torpedo hits before going down. Three additional destroyers were sunk; four others, damaged to varying degrees, remained to pick up survivors and return to Japan.

Several Comint items concerned this final event. One reported a message from Commander, Surface Special Attack Force. Sent at 1350 on 7 April, the message reported being engaged by over 200 carrier-based planes. It stated that *Yahagi* had sustained two torpedo hits and was dead in the water, that *Yamato* had taken a large number of torpedo and bomb hits, and that, except for two destroyers, all ships in the formation had been either damaged or sunk. Also, at 1500, Commander, Destroyer Division 17, located on one of the destroyers, gave his position and provided additional information concerning the outcome of the battle. And COMDESRON 11 sent a message at 1512 on 7 April directing two of his destroyers to proceed south and help the returning remnants of the Japanese force. Still another message on the 7th, from Commander-in-Chief, Combined Fleet, at 1639 cancelled the Surface Special Attack Force operation, ordering the remaining ships to pick up survivors and return to Sasebo.

On the 8th, Commander, DESRON 2 (Rear Admiral Keizo Komura, who survived the battle despite being on *Yahagi*) sent an account of Japanese and American losses in his action summary. Promptly published as Comint, it claimed that 19 American planes had been destroyed and listed the Japanese ships lost as *Yamato, Yahagi, Hamakaze, Isokaze*, and *Kasumi*. It also noted that *Asashimo* had left the formation early in the battle and had not been heard from since. The next day it was further noted in Comint that Kure Radio had called *Yamato* at 0215 to deliver a message to Commander, Second Fleet, as so often had been done in the past. Apparently the Kure operator had not been kept up to date on the events of 7 April.

Admiral Mitscher made his preliminary report of the operation on 7 April. Admiral Nimitz' headquarters on Guam issued a "Blue Flash" which read much the same, noting, among other things, that there had been no air opposition over the target and that *Yamato* had sustained at least eight torpedo and eight half-ton bomb hits.

Admiral Schulz, a graduate of the Naval Academy and a veteran of almost 35 years of Naval service, has held a number of senior positions in the cryptologic community, including Head, Naval Security Group; Chief, NSA Pacific; and Assistant Director, NSA, for the National Cryptologic Staff. During World War II, he served in the Map Room at the White House, and as a communications officer on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet. He served in a number of positions afloat and ashore, including Executive and Commanding Officer of the battleship *USS Indiana*. Since his retirement in 1971 Admiral Schulz has worked part-time in the history program of the National Cryptologic School, researching and writing a history depicting the role Comint played in the Central Pacific campaigns of World War II.