

War History Office of the National Defense College of Japan. (Edited and translated by Willem Rummelink) The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal. Leiden, the Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2018

ISBN 9789-0-87-282806

xxxiv + 749 pages

Editor's Note; About the Senshi Soshō; Foreword; Preface; Explanatory Notes; photos; maps; tables; diagrams; Conclusion; List of Abbreviations and Symbols; Notes; Glossary; Index of Personal Names; Index of Ship Names; Index of Place Names

See review online at: <http://books.stonebooks.com/reviews/181118/>

This book travelled a long and circuitous route in order to reach the hands of readers in 2018. Originally published in Japanese in 1969. Translated into English under the auspices of the Corts Foundation, which is dedicated to preserving the history of the former Dutch East Indies. Published by Leiden University Press in the Netherlands.

Given the importance of the semi-official Japanese history of World War II, the Senshi Soshō, it seems all the more remarkable that it took so long, and such an indirect path, for this volume to appear in an English translation. The same can be said of the first installment in this trilogy—The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies—and the upcoming third volume—The Struggle in Sumatra and the Air Campaign. And where are the English translations of the other 100+ volumes of the Senshi Soshō? Outside of Japanese Army Operations in the South Pacific Area: New Britain and Papua Campaigns, 1942-43 (extracts from two volumes, published in Australia in 2007), published editions seem to be nonexistent. That's a huge black hole for anyone who wants to undertake serious study of the war in Asia and the Pacific, especially from the Japanese perspective, and we hope it can be remedied.

In the meantime we can be thankful for this important addition to the literature of WWII operations in the Indies. (In particular, many thanks to Willem Rummelink, the Corts Foundation, and Leiden UP for putting in the hard work to produce this volume.) Some histories of the naval campaign in the NEI have utilized research in the original Japanese version, but this excellent translation finally makes all that important Imperial Japanese Navy data on the subject widely available to anyone who can read English. Because many files failed to survive the war and the surrender, the information in the original volume 26—and, of course, as presented here in this edition—is not absolutely perfect, but it's the closest we'll ever come to a complete view inside the IJN in this theater.

The complete view commences with a very brief synopsis of relations between Japan and the United States beginning with the end of the Russo-Japanese war, when the interests of Tokyo and Washington gradually started to diverge. Those developments are treated very lightly, with pages mainly devoted to the situation with regard to the supply of and demand for petroleum. Some detailed tables illustrate the dire situation for the Japanese economy in general and the IJN in particular should the flow of oil from the Indies be interrupted. That's not news, but the numbers here prove very enlightening. The book continues to an interesting chapter about the topography and meteorological conditions in the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Malaya, and the Indies. The same chapter summarizes airbases, naval bases and ports, and the distribution of armed forces throughout the southern region.

With that background, Chapter III notes how in 1940 the first planning began for the possibility of Japan simultaneously conducting war against China, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. However, not until April 1941 did the joint Army-Navy planners begin to construct detailed appreciations for striking south. Some fifty pages study the evolution of the planning. All of this material especially underlines the necessity for negotiations and agreement between the Army and the Navy, as neither could conduct such operations without cooperation from the other, but each insisted on retaining its own prerogatives.

The next chapter examines the actual step-by-step preparations for operations. With the successful tempo of events in the conquest of the Philippines, approval of the invasion of the Netherlands East Indies was confirmed. However, it wasn't until holding Army-Navy conferences at Cam Ranh Bay in Indochina on 29 December 1941 and 1 January 1942 that a final joint agreement could be produced, specifying the exact dates and locations of loading troops, assembling vessels, sailing routes, conducting landings, etc. Those detailed schedules are presented in multiple tables throughout the chapter. These movements were all carefully orchestrated, with very exacting instructions for naval, air, and ground forces not unlike the precise planning for the conduct of Operation Overlord in 1944. Approximately forty pages are devoted to explaining all this with text, tables, diagrams, and maps.

The actual conduct of operations begins with Chapter V, approximately 120 pages into *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal*. The chapter runs well over 100 pages. It's titled "The Forward Push of the Air Bases," and makes the point that these were all preliminary operations designed to capture a few key locales, advance land-based airpower within range of Java, and protect the flanks of the push south toward the decisive battle for control of the main oilfields.

Chapter V covers these landings: Tarakan, Manado, Balikpapan, Kendari, Ambon, Makassar, Banjarmasin, Southern Sumatra, Bali, Timor. Each of those sections contains far more material about Japanese plans and operations than any account previously published in English. The Tarakan landings provide a good example. The first volume in this trilogy, *The Invasion of the Dutch East Indies*, contains ten pages on that invasion, focusing on ground operations. (See also our review of that book and comparison of the Japanese and Dutch histories of the brief Tarakan battle.) To the accumulation of details about the Tarakan landings, *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal* adds roughly twenty-five pages of new and expanded information. It should also be kept in mind that the third title in the set, *The Struggle in Sumatra and the Air Campaign*, upon publication will almost certainly add further particulars.

How does the Japanese perspective compare to Allied accounts of the campaign in the Indies? Probably the closest match to this book is *The Rising Sun in the Pacific, 1931 - April 1942* (originally published in 1948, with a 1953 edition updated to include corrections from Japanese sources) by Samuel Eliot Morison from his *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* series. The night engagement off Balikpapan on 24 January 1942 makes a good point of comparison. Here's most of what Morison writes about that battle in his revised edition:

Since Ford had now passed beyond the anchored convoy, Commander Talbot at 0300 led his ships south for another crack. At that moment Parrott, still parallel to the enemy ships, fired three torpedoes at a target on her port bow. Two minutes later, as she rounded the turn, she heard a mighty explosion. *Sumanoura Maru*, a 3500-ton transport, went up like a powder keg.

The transports and their escorts were now thrown into confusion. Some Japanese commanding officers thought that they were under submarine attack and so ordered the wrong kind of protective action. Others grasped what was going on, but, unable to distinguish friend from foe, fired at both.

Admiral Nishimura—who, judging from his actions here and at the Battle for Leyte Gulf in 1944, must have been one of the least competent Japanese flag officers—led his destroyer squadron right out into the strait, where he circled aimlessly searching for nonexistent submarines, leaving his transports to the mercy of the Americans. On her reverse course Pope at 0306 fired a spread of her last five torpedoes at a transport. A minute or two later her three consorts straightened out on their southerly course, and began launching a succession of "fish." One hit Tatsukami Maru, which blew up and sank. Two transports were now accounted for, but the destroyers had few torpedoes left.

Commander Talbot at 0314, ascertaining that he was opening range on the anchored ships, ordered his column to execute a 90-degree turn and head for the southern end of the anchorage. Five minutes later, when well along on the new course, Pope and Parrott fired two and three torpedoes respectively at PC-37, patrolling on their port beam, believing it to be a destroyer. It was, in fact, a converted 750-ton torpedo boat. Three of the torpedoes hit and PC-37 went down. A transport appeared to port, silhouetted in the weird light. Ford and Paul Jones, the only destroyers with torpedoes left, each fired one. This transport, already under way, turned and avoided both; Paul Jones got her with a third, making a neat hit on her starboard bow. The 5000-ton Kuretake Maru blew up and sank.

The destroyers now made a wide turn to port. As the column doubled back upon itself all ships opened gunfire and the few remaining torpedoes were launched at targets which offered themselves on both sides. By this time the enemy was shooting very wild. It was now 0335. The many violent turns made by the leader had so far been closely followed by the other three; but now they became separated. Commander Talbot in Ford turned northwestward; Pope followed for a space, but Parrott, with Paul Jones close behind, lost sight of the others and retired independently to the southward. That took them out of the fight, and Pope soon followed.

Ford continued the fight alone. As no fresh targets immediately presented themselves, Commander Talbot turned again toward the burning shore. At 0346 he fired his last torpedo at a transport that appeared close aboard and to port. The explosion was heard, a flash was seen and the ship was observed listing rapidly; but apparently it floated, as the Japanese have no record of a sinking at that stage of the battle. At that moment, when Ford was about to double back in order to avoid running aground, she received her only battle damage, from a shell hit that wounded four men and started a fire which was quickly extinguished. The destroyer turned southwesterly and fired at several targets. According to Commander Talbot, every shot found its mark. Several transports, including Asahi Maru, received superficial damage at this juncture. The 7000-ton Tsuruga Maru had already been eliminated, by Netherlands submarine K-18 before midnight.

With torpedoes expended there was not much more that Talbot and his flag captain, Lieutenant Commander Cooper, could do. So Ford turned up 28 knots and set a course for the planned rendezvous with Marblehead. At break of day the other three destroyers found their division commander, formed column on him, and a few minutes after the end of the morning watch they raised the Marblehead.

For comparison, here's what The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal says about the same engagement. (The Senshi Sosho uses Japanese Standard Time (Tokyo Time) while Morison uses "Javanese (Zone minus 7 1/2) time." Thus, Morison's 0300 equals the Japanese 0430. NEI clocks were changed to Tokyo Time on 23 March 1942.)

As the [transport] ships had finished anchoring, all ships of the 1st Escort Unit were about to shift to [the task of] guarding the anchorage. However, the 2d Destroyer Division, which had been in charge of sweeping the anchorage of mines, was still retrieving its minesweeping cables at a point several nautical miles to the south of the anchorage. Just about that time, a submarine chaser, which was positioned to the southwest of the convoy, spotted a suspicious small vessel, but soon lost sight of it. At 0030, the Naka, which had temporarily anchored at a point about one kilometer to the southwest of the Tsuruga-maru, the 1st ship of the 1st Section, spotted a vessel, which looked like an [enemy] torpedo boat, at a distance of about three kilometers, 2800 [W], and immediately started raising anchor, while giving an order to Submarine chaser No. 12 nearby to look into the matter. Following that, at 0040, [the Naka] spotted the trail of a torpedo heading for her port bow, evaded it, and gave order(s) to submarine chaser(s) to attack [the enemy], while evacuating to the east. The [spotted] ship was considered to be a torpedo boat or a surfaced submarine. Soon around 0045, torpedo(es) hit the Tsuruga-maru, and she sent out a signal that all hands were evacuating. First Escort Unit Commander Rear Admiral Nishimura ordered the 30th Minesweeper Division (Minesweepers Nos. 17 and 18) to go to the rescue. He also decided to newly divide the guarding tasks of the anchorage: he ordered the 9th Destroyer Division to guard an area about three kilometers east of the convoy, the 31st Subchaser Division the area west of the convoy, the patrol boats the area south of the convoy, and the 11th Minesweeper Division the area north of the convoy.

The Naka continued sailing eastward and directed the subsequent operations while operating in an area five kilometers east of the anchorage. At 0140, the 1st Escort Unit commander ordered the 9th Destroyer Division to continue [its current task]. Around that time, the 2d Destroyer Division was patrolling the periphery [of the area covered by the 9th Destroyer Division].

At 0140, the first landing unit departed, and the second landing unit was preparing for departure. Around 0400, the Naka shifted its position from the patrol area of the 9th Destroyer Division to the peripheral area covered by the 2d Destroyer Division but reversed course around 0430. Just about that time, Minesweeper No. 15, sailing at slow speed on a southeastern course while patrolling the area to the northeast of the convoy, suddenly spotted a suspicious silhouette on her starboard bow. The silhouette approached in no time. Visibly confirming four funnels, the minesweeper at first thought that it could be the Naka, but after spotting more than one vessel, she judged that they were enemy [vessels]. But it was too late. At 0425, the enemy passed her at high speed and disappeared astern. Three minutes later, she spotted the trails of torpedoes on her port quarter and evaded them. At 0432, the minesweeper spotted a huge explosion in the northern part of the convoy; from the circumstances of the explosion, it was judged that the Sumanaura-maru, which carried antisubmarine depth charges as well as mines, had been instantly sunk. When Minesweeper No. 16, which was positioned to the north of the convoy, was changing course to rush to the rescue of the Sumanaura-maru, she spotted to her north one enemy vessel heading southwestward at high speed, but promptly lost sight of her. At 0437 the minesweeper reached the site where the Sumanaura-maru had sunk, but not an object was spotted on the waters around.

The Kumagawa-maru (an auxiliary personnel transport ship), which was anchored next to the Sumanaura-maru, had raised anchor at the report of the enemy's appearance and headed for shallow waters near the coast. After a while, when changing course southwestward, she spotted an enemy vessel closing in on her at high speed on starboard quarter. The enemy vessel fired at her at close range, and about ten shells hit her. [Then the enemy] crossed her bow 200 meters ahead, switched to her port side and was gone in an instant. The Kumagawa-maru also made a counterattack and one of her shells hit the stern of the enemy vessel. The enemy vessel threaded between [the ships of] the convoy at high speed, fired at the Asahi[san?]-maru and the Toei-maru

[B], cut through the line to the eastern side of the convoy and lastly launched a torpedo at the Kuretake-maru (which hit at 0445); after strafing her stern, she disappeared southwestward.

In the meantime, the two [enemy] vessels, which had sunk the Sumanaura-maru, disappeared southward, after launching torpedoes at the Tatsugami-maru at the rear of the 2d Section [of the convoy] at 0435. At 0440, Patrol Boat No. 38, which was patrolling the area south of the convoy at slow speed, spotted two enemy destroyers to her north. The enemy shortly launched torpedoes at her, but she evaded them, and [the enemy vessels] passed westward at high speed. Then, Patrol Boat No. 37, which was to the west of Patrol Boat No. 36, spotted the same enemy vessels. Patrol Boat No. 37 [also] thought it was the Naka, but when she identified them as enemy [vessels] after having closed in, it was too late. One of three enemy torpedoes hit her at the stern. Despite the immediate order to fire, her guns did not move due to a power supply failure. Before she could turn a searchlight [on the enemy], the latter crossed her bow and switched to her port side again launching torpedoes, one of which hit her at her port bow and another at her stern at 0445.

At 0450, Patrol Boat No. 36, which was to the south of Patrol Boats Nos. 37 and 38, spotted a silhouette, which bore a close resemblance to the Naka, at about two kilometers northwest of her. In the time that she identified the silhouette as an enemy [vessel], the enemy sailed past her southeastward launching an illumination flare, and disappeared from sight. The patrol boat mistook both the enemy vessels and the friendly patrol boats behind them for enemy cruisers, and reported that she had spotted four enemy cruisers to the south of the convoy at 0500. The [whole] engagement lasted only thirty minutes, between 0420 when Minesweeper No. 15 first spotted the enemy and 0450 when Patrol Boat No. 36 lost sight of them.

The first report that the enemy had been spotted that reached 1st Escort Unit Commander Rear Admiral Nishimura was the report from Minesweeper No. 15 at 0440, which meant that Rear Admiral Nishimura should have seen the explosion of the Sumanoura-maru ([at] 0432) by that time. However, he was on board of the Naka, which was in the patrol area of the 2d Destroyer Division about thirteen kilometers away from the anchorage, and he did not confirm the detailed situation. Moreover, when the report that the enemy had been spotted reached him, he was in the course of moving from the patrol area of the 2d Destroyer Division to that of the 9th Destroyer Division, and was still as much as ten kilometers away from the convoy. Even after receiving the report of Minesweeper No. 15, the commander did not believe that a number of enemy destroyers were raiding the anchorage. At 0458, he issued an order to "Heighten the alert against enemy submarines and torpedo boats."

[Even] at the report from Patrol Boat No. 36 at 0500 in the patrol area south of the anchorage that she had spotted four enemy cruisers, 1st Escort Unit Commander Rear Admiral Nishimura was still skeptical about a raid by enemy surface vessels. At 0508, the commander inquired of the patrol boat: "Is it not possible that the [enemy] cruisers in the earlier [report] could [actually] have been the 2d Destroyer Division?" At 0512, he received a reply from the patrol boat: "The [enemy] cruisers in the earlier report were a mistake for destroyers with four funnels." Around 0520, while still operating in an area six to seven kilometers east of the convoy, he issued an order to the 9th Destroyer Division to attack the enemy to the north of the convoy, and he himself headed northward leading the Naka, but without knowledge about the enemy movements. However, because the 9th Destroyer Division, too, had no inkling about the enemy movements and was getting disorganized, the 1st Escort Unit commander ordered it at 0548 to resume [its previous task]. The commander [then] sailed toward the anchorage to ascertain the state of the convoy, but [in doing so] he got separated from the 9th Destroyer Division.

In the meantime at 0515, 1st Escort Unit Commander Rear Admiral Nishimura had wired the Teiryu-maru (note: with Detachment Commander Sakaguchi on board) to have the transport ships timely evacuate eastward. At 0553, he also wired the detached force, which was coming to join [the main force], to suspend the action until dawn. Around dawn at 0652, Submarine chaser No. 12 patrolling the area west of the convoy spotted [enemy] torpedoes passing under the ship. She immediately caught up with the enemy, sailed over the periscope, launched depth charge(s), and witnessed the enemy submarine sinking with its bow standing upright out of the water.

Around 0700, finally it became light at the anchorage. The situation at the anchorage was devastating, and it became clear that the following loss was sustained:

Army transport ships: The Tsuruga-maru and the Kuretake-maru, sunk by torpedoes (causing a loss of about thirty men in total)

Naval vessels: Patrol Boat No. 37, hit by three torpedoes at the bow and the stern, and too seriously damaged to sail (causing about thirty-five casualties); the Sumanoura-maru, hit by torpedoes and instantly sunk, leaving nine survivors; the Tatsugami-maru, hit by torpedoes and sunk thirty minutes later; the Kumagawa-maru, hit by about ten enemy shells (causing six casualties and minor damage to the hull); the Asahisan-maru, hit at the stern by several enemy shells (causing about fifty casualties)

Among the sunken Army transport ships, the Tsuruga-maru was hit by a torpedo around 0045 when the first landing unit was just about to depart and part of the unit had already shifted to the [landing] craft. Also, when the Kuretake-maru was hit by a torpedo around 0445, the first landing unit had already departed. It was fortunate that both ships sustained [only] a small loss of personnel. It was very much after the fact that 1st Escort Unit Commander Rear Nishimura confirmed that it had been a night raid by three or four enemy destroyers.

The upshot? When describing the same events, the Japanese and American viewpoints—even when the USN account has been updated with IJN sources—are not identical. (The Japanese account cites *The Rising Sun in the Pacific* elsewhere, but not in the section on Balikpapan.) In this case, it seems like neither book gets it exactly right. Careful post-war examination of all the relevant records indicates Tsuruga Maru was sunk by Dutch submarine K-XVIII before the USN destroyers arrived. (The 2000 edition of *The Official Chronology of the U.S. Navy in World War*, among others, credits one of the destroyers.) That sub was heavily damaged, but not lost despite "bow standing upright out of the water." Kuretake Maru, Sumanoura (sometimes transliterated as Sumanaura) Maru, and Tatsugami (sometimes transliterated as Tatsukami) Maru were sunk by USN destroyers. Patrol Boat No. 37 is usually listed as sunk (per Morison) but subsequently raised, rather than damaged (per the Japanese account). As to Morison's indictment of Nishimura, the IJN admiral's conduct makes more sense given the fact that K-XVIII actually sank Tsuruga Maru and continued to prowl before being knocked out of action, while reports of enemy surface warships remained unconfirmed. All of this highlights the fact that it was a confusing night action, and some questions linger after more than seventy years. For an excellent account of the naval Battle of Balikpapan, utilizing Japanese, Dutch, and American sources, see *The Allied Defense of the Malay Barrier, 1941-1942* by Tom Womack. See also Rohwer and Cox and O'Hara for slightly different versions.

Following the chapter on "the forward push of the air bases," the book continues to chapters VI, VII, and VIII. These all treat the invasion of Java. In sum, this amounts to a solid 200 pages on the decisive engagements of the campaign. The chapters break down much like the preceding material, with sections on Allied strength and dispositions, the evolution of—as usual—a very complicated process of planning and Army-Navy agreements, and the actual conduct of operations. The latter

naturally focuses on naval warfare, but doesn't ignore ground or air combat. Probably the largest single section is the "sea engagement off Batavia," better known in English as the Battle of the Java Sea. Again, comparing the Japanese perspective with what Morison writes about the action produces major differences of emphasis and interpretation.

And that underscores the importance of this book. While it's true that some researchers have possessed language skills enabling access to Japanese records such as this and other volumes of the Senshi Soshō, that access utterly pales in comparison to Wehrmacht records utilized in histories of the campaigns in Europe. English translations such as *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal* not only make it possible to study the Japanese perspective, they also enable fuller comparison and synthesis with the records of other nations in the Pacific War, exactly as many histories already do for the war in Europe.

And we're not talking about just the campaign in the Indies. The final chapter in this volume carries the history into the Indian Ocean with landings in the Andaman Islands, naval transport to Burma, the capture of Christmas Island, and fleet operations around Ceylon, including air strikes on Colombo and Trincomalee, and the sinkings of RN heavy cruisers Cornwall and Dorsetshire.

In sum, this is a must-have book for every WWII bookshelf. Every historian of the Pacific war—amateur or professional—should be thankful for its publication.

Nevertheless, we can identify two minor issues. First, it must be remembered that in some cases the relevant IJN documents were missing, meaning the book was constructed without some of the best, most reliable sources. Second, the manner of translation and editing—commendable though it is—can be both blessing and curse. As the excerpt above demonstrates, the raw translation has been glossed with a considerable number of extra words and phrases inserted parenthetically and intended to clarify the meaning [like this]. That's very useful, but it can also interfere with speedy reading. It's a thick, dense book, difficult enough to chew through despite the excellent translation, and—important though it is—not likely to be devoured for sheer pleasure.

But don't be distracted by such minor issues. Anyone who wants authentic, undiluted, essential history of the Pacific War will want *The Operations of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies and the Bay of Bengal* and its two companions. And those readers will also want to help convince translators, editors, and publishers to bring us more—many more—English-language volumes from the Senshi Soshō. Only about a hundred to go....

Available from online booksellers and local bookshops, or directly from Leiden University Press.

Thanks to LUP for providing this review copy.

Read and submit feedback

Reviewed 18 November 2018

Copyright © 2018 by Bill Stone

May not be reproduced in any form without written permission of [Stone & Stone](#)