THE BATTLE OF SAVO ISLAND: A FAILURE OF ISR

In the finest tradition of the Japanese Navy, we shall engage the enemy in night battle. Every man is expected to do his utmost.

Vice-Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, Commander of the 8th Fleet, Savo Island, 8 August 1942

During the Allied assault on Guadalcanal (Operation Watchtower), seven cruisers and a destroyer of the Japanese 8th Fleet under the command of Vice-Admiral Gunichi Mikawa, attacked and defeated a superior force of Allied ships (eight cruisers and 15 destroyers) at Savo Island. On the night of 8 August 1942, the Allies’ warships were positioned to defend the supply and transport ships assembled to support the ground force that had landed at Guadalcanal the day before. The Japanese attack in the early hours of 9 August was a masterful demonstration of superior night fighting tactics that reduced four heavy cruisers, including HMAS Canberra, and two destroyers to sinking wrecks, and only narrowly missed the opportunity to destroy the Allies’ vulnerable support ships. At the heart of Mikawa’s success was the complete surprise he achieved by being able to transit over 1000 km from Rabaul to Guadalcanal without arousing any suspicion as to his destination or intent. That Mikawa’s strike force was sighted en route on no less than five occasions by Allied units, indicates that the element of surprise was as much due to a failure of the Allies’ Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance system (ISR) as it was to Mikawa’s skill.

When the Allies were planning Operation Watchtower, the threat posed by the major Japanese bases north of the landing area was well appreciated. Possessed of a strong force of both air and maritime units, the Japanese were more than capable of gathering significant force in response to any landings within the Solomon Island group. To provide early warning of any Japanese counter-offensive, the Allies established a surveillance and reporting network around existing ISR capability within the region. Included in the network were elements of the RAAF, such as No 32 Squadron—then operating a detachment of Lockheed Hudson aircraft out of Milne Bay. While the Operation Watchtower amphibious force commander, Admiral Richmond Turner, was concerned about the schedule of some flights, the surveillance plan itself appeared to be adequate.

There were in fact several flaws within the ISR system that had a serious impact on the Allies’ ability to appreciate the movements and intentions of Mikawa’s strike force. Central to the systemic failures was how air power was employed as part of the surveillance capability. In particular, the performance of two RAAF Hudson crews from No 32 Squadron have often been unfairly criticised for failing to properly identify, report and track the Japanese strike force while still well north of Savo Island. In reality, the aircrew of the RAAF aircraft were as much victims of the systemic shortfalls of the Allied ISR system, which had contributed to the overall failure.

The first major flaw was that the surveillance and reporting network was not integrated under one command. For example, No 32 Squadron fell under General Douglas MacArthur’s South West Pacific Area Command, while surveillance aircraft operating out of Espiritu Santo and New Caledonia fell under Rear Admiral Robert Ghormley’s South Pacific Command, which itself was a sub command of Admiral Chester Nimitz’s Pacific
Area Ocean Command. Each headquarters had its own reporting chains, intelligence cells and communication networks. These command and control (C2) arrangements caused significant problems for the Operation Watchtower task force. For example, when Admiral Turner noted that no surveillance flights were scheduled to be conducted to his immediate north during late afternoon of 8 August, his request for additional flights was lost in the complex C2 arrangements of the three different regional structures.

Another result of the inadequate C2 arrangements was poor information sharing. When No 32 Squadron aircrew conducted their surveillance flights on 8 August, a full 24 hours after the Guadalcanal landings had occurred, the unit had still not been briefed on Operation Watchtower, so it was unaware that Allied landings had taken place in the southern end of the Solomon Islands group. Without an appreciation of the change in operational circumstances within the area, the aircrew had no appreciation of the significance of the Japanese warships operating within striking distance of Guadalcanal.

The complexity of the structure also slowed the reporting of the intelligence gathered by the surveillance flights. Two different sighting reports from No 32 Squadron took in excess of six hours to reach the Operation Watchtower commanders, having first to be relayed through five different headquarters and finally transmitted from Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal. Furthermore, at some point in the long relay, the wording of one of the sighting reports was changed, leading to inaccurate intelligence assessments by Admiral Turner.

Had No 32 Squadron been briefed on Operation Watchtower and had it been properly integrated into a direct reporting system, they could have relayed their sighting reports directly to the Allied task force. In fact, a direct reporting structure had been established for some elements of the ISR system, but not all. The Australian Coastwatchers in the region had all been properly briefed and were successfully reporting incoming air raids throughout the Guadalcanal landings. The exclusion of the wider ISR capability from the direct reporting system denied the Allied commanders valuable and timely intelligence.

The final flaw in the ISR system apparent from the experience of No 32 Squadron was one of poor training. The aircrews were not well trained in the art of ship recognition or the technical aspects of assessing a ship’s course and speed. For example, the first sighting report made by No 32 Squadron crews detailed that the Japanese force was four cruisers, one destroyer and two seaplane tenders or gunboats. It also detailed the estimated speed and course. Both the force composition and course was wrong, as the aircrew were not sufficiently trained to differentiate ship characteristics that would enable correct identification. In addition, while the aircrew noted aircraft being launched from at least one ship, they did not appreciate that ships at sea may change course when launching or recovering aircraft. Hence, the course reported was not the actual heading the ships were maintaining. Both these errors led Admiral Turner at Guadalcanal to believe that the sighting report indicated that the Japanese were establishing a seaplane base to the north and were not moving to attack his ships.

Secure in the belief that there was no threat coming from their north, and mistaken in thinking that any such threat would be identified well before being in a position to attack, the Allied ships at Savo Island were truly surprised by the Japanese strike force. Had the ISR system been properly established and fully integrated, it is arguable that the defeat at the Battle of Savo Island may not have occurred on the scale that it did.

- A fundamental tenet for the employment of air power is centralised command and de-centralised execution.
- ISR is an enabler that provides battlespace awareness and information superiority.
- ISR is an activity that synchronises and integrates the planning and operation of sensors, assets and processing, exploitation and dissemination systems in direct support of current and future operations.