

Low on the horizon off the starboard bow of the *Repulse* appeared more incoming aircraft. These were from the **Kanoya Air Group**, 26 torpedo-carrying Mitsubishi G4Ms under the command of Lieutenant Miyauchi Shichizo.¹⁵² Miyauchi had almost missed Force Z entirely. They had trouble following Ensign Hoashi's beacon and were enclosed by clouds. Fuel running dangerously low, Miyauchi was about to give up and head back to base when the *Repulse's* biplane was spotted on its antisubmarine patrol. Petty Officer Crozer had not found any submarines, but had spotted the tug they had seen earlier – again – and, because he had been ordered to not use his radio, was flying back to make a report. The Mitsubishi's followed the Walrus, which was slow and lightly armed and thus of no use in combat, right back to Force Z.¹⁵³ This would not be the last time in the Pacific War that an antisubmarine patrol would actually lead an enemy airstrike to its target.¹⁵⁴

The deadly Bettys of the **Kanoya Air Group** were divided into three squadrons under the command of Lieutenants Nabeta Yoshikichi, Iki Haruki, and Higashi Moritaka.¹⁵⁵ Lieutenant Commander Miyauchi was in one of Nabeta's aircraft. These aircraft were carrying an upgraded model of the Type 91 aerial torpedo, the Model 2 with a 205kg (450lb) warhead.¹⁵⁶

About 3 miles away from the Force Z, they split into two formations: one with 17 Bettys from the squadrons of Lieutenants Nabeta and Higashi, which made for the *Prince of Wales*, the other with nine of Lieutenant Iki's aircraft seeming to hold back behind the first group. The approach of the Betty bombers in this attack was somewhat haphazard, although this lack of coordination proved to be effective. The fuel situation of Commander Miyauchi's pilots was so desperate that he may have ordered them simply to drop their torpedoes at will. The Mitsubishi's of Nabeta's and Higashi's squadrons rocketed in towards the flagship's exposed starboard side.

The nine Mitsubishi G4Ms of Lieutenant Iki remained to enter the fray. He had planned to attack the *Prince of Wales*, but since he noticed she had been hit by more torpedoes, he decided to target the plucky *Repulse*. He ordered his squadron to split up to make a pincer attack; he had not originally planned to make such an attack, but the battlecruiser's movements had forced him to change sides.¹⁶¹ Six would work their way around to the starboard side, approaching in two groups of three aircraft each, each group approaching at a different angle, while Iki would lead three to attack the port side.¹⁶²

While her crew had resented the publicity surrounding the *Prince of Wales* – sullenly dubbing their ship the “HMS Anonymous” – and equally resented playing second fiddle everywhere to this “Jonah,” the *Repulse* was an unusually proud and happy ship.¹⁶³ They knew each other and they knew their ship. They had complete confidence in their captain and he in them. They firmly believed that, despite the age of the *Repulse*, they had the better ship and the better crew. In fact, they believed they had the best ship in the fleet. And now, in the last hour, the last minutes of her life and the lives of many of her crew, the *Repulse* and her crew would get their chance to prove it.

The *Repulse* was magnificent, running like a well-oiled, well-designed machine that belied her age. Spotters picked out the aircraft. Antiaircraft fire control called out the distance, range, and altitude to the battlecruiser's gunners. In a perfectly executed variation of the anvil attack, the six of Lieutenant Iki's pilots that had made for the *Repulse's* starboard side dropped at about 2,500yd and left, while Lieutenant Iki himself and his two wingmates made their high-speed torpedo run on the port side, closing to 600yd before dropping their deadly tin fish. The ancient 4in antiaircraft guns and the close-range 40mm pom-poms (and one particular 20mm Oerlikon manned with gusto by Australian Midshipman Robert Ian Davies) of the *Repulse* roared in defiance.¹⁶⁴ And they exacted a price. Iki was able to turn away from the battlecruiser after dropping his torpedo, but his wingmates tried to fly over the ship – and over the No. 2 pom-pom, an 8-barrelled gun near the stern commanded by Sub-Lieutenant R. A. W. Pool.¹⁶⁵ The aircraft of one, Petty Officer Momoi Stoshi, simply exploded. The gunners observed the pilot of the other, Petty Officer Taue Ryochi, with an astonished look on his face when he realized he had a fire in the rear of the fuselage – a preview of the Betty's later nickname, the “Lit Cigar,” because of her propensity to catch fire.¹⁶⁶ The bomber crashed shortly thereafter.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the *Repulse*, spotters pointed out the incoming torpedo wakes, six from starboard, three from port. The wily Captain Tennant, with the help of his navigation officer Lieutenant Commander H. B. C. Gill, used every maneuvering trick he had to avoid them. “I found dodging the torpedoes quite interesting and entertaining until in the end they started to come in from all directions and they were too much for me,” Tennant would later say.¹⁶⁷ The *Repulse*, the old lady, pirouetted like a prima ballerina.

The loss of his wingmates had not been in vain for Lieutenant Iki. At least two of his flight's torpedoes struck. One hit near the engine room and one, believed to have been dropped by Lieutenant Iki himself, near the stern. Iki's torpedo was especially bad, jamming the rudder while the *Repulse* was in a starboard turn. The battlecruiser's damage control was efficient and she could still make 20 knots but was only able to steam in circles; she wasn't going anywhere. Almost as an afterthought, one torpedo struck the starboard side near Boiler Room “E.”¹⁶⁸

Very few ships can survive four torpedo hits. The *Repulse* was at an additional disadvantage because her aging design was lacking in watertight compartmentalization. She was disemboweled, quickly developing a 12-degree list to port that showed no signs of abating. No amount of pumping, no damage control, efficient or otherwise, could save her now. In five minutes, the *Repulse* had gone from dancing to dying.



Rising Sun, Falling Skies: The disastrous Java Sea Campaign of World War II

By Jeffrey Cox