

## The Battle of the Yellow Sea

*"... the most critical minute of the war."*

Admiral G. A. Ballard -

*The Influence of the Sea on the Political History of Japan*

**Location:** The Yellow Sea, south of Encounter Rock, 10 August 1904, 1230 hours.

**Operational Situation:** Throughout late July and early August, as Japanese troops had closed in on Port Arthur, and as shells had started falling in the town, the correspondence between Viceroy Alexieff (commander of Port Arthur) and Admiral Vitgeft (Makaroff's replacement) had become more and more acrimonious. What was to become of the fleet? Alexieff favored a sortie so that the Port Arthur ships could link up with the Vladivostok Squadron, and create a force powerful enough to challenge the Japanese.

Admiral Vitgeft felt that just staying at anchor and contributing some of his armament to the land battle was the safest course to follow, and that's exactly what he proposed backed up by his flag officers and captains. In their view the risks of a sortie were too great to be hazarded.

Alexieff faced with what amounted to almost direct disobedience to his orders, appealed to St. Petersburg and the authority of the Tsar. Nicholas replied to the Viceroy as follows, 'I fully share your opinion concerning

the importance of the squadron making a speedy sortie from Port Arthur, and breaking through to Vladivostok.'

Alexieff, reinforced by the Imperial will, would have no more of Vitgeft's attempts to avoid battle and telegraphed on 7<sup>th</sup> August as follows:

"I again reiterate my inflexible determination that you are to take the squadron out of Port Arthur. I must recall to you and all serious officers the exploit of the *Varyag*. The failure of the squadron to proceed to sea regardless of the Imperial will, and of my command, and its extinction in the harbor in the event of the fall of the fortress will, in addition to the heavy legal responsibility, leave an indelible spot on the flag of St. Andrew and on the honor of the fleet. You are to make known this telegram to all admirals and commanding officers and are to report its receipt."

Faced with an order couched in these terms even Vitgeft could not hesitate any longer.

**Tactical Situation:** With the Japanese Army tightening its grip on Port Arthur, Admiral Togo expected a breakout by the Russian squadron and positioned his divisions accordingly. He wanted no mere transfer of the situation to Vladivostok, with a fleet-in-being up there and thus another stronghold to besiege. The Siberian port was less protected than Port Arthur and had no coal for the ships but from a military aspect a new campaign in that area would have overtaxed the resources of Field Marshal Oyama. Togo wanted to grab Vitgeft by the nape of the neck and drown him in the Yellow Sea.

The long-awaited sortie took place on 10 August 1904, when the tide permitted the exodus to commence at dawn. Togo had to let the enemy squadron emerge well into the clear and then grip it tightly. He would have available only whatever daylight, if any, happened to remain after Vitgeft was completely outside of his defensive minefields.

**Environment:** Sea State 0, clear skies, visibility 100%, wind calm. Sunset is at 1900 hours, visibility starts to decrease by one table every half hour till it reaches 5%.

**Russian Forces:** First Pacific Squadron, RADM Vitgeft, Fleet Flagship *HIRMs Tsarevich*.

Battleship Division – RADM Vitgeft, *HIRMs Tsarevich*: *Tsarevich* (*Tsarevich* class OBB), *Retvizan* (*Retvizan* class OBB), *Pobyeda*, *Peresvyet* (flag of RADM Prince Ukhtomsky) (*Peresvyet* class OBB), *Sevastopol*, *Poltava* (*Petropavlovsk* class OBB).

Division of Long-distance Scouts – RADM Reycenshteyn, *HIRMs Askold*: *Askold* (*Askold* class OCR), *Pallada*, *Diana* (*Pallada* class OCR).

Screen: *Novik* (*Novik* class OCR), *Boiki*, *Burni* (*Boiki* class ODD), *Vuinoslivi*, *Vlastni*, *Grozovoi* (*Vnimatelni* class ODD), *Bezstrashni*, *Bezshumni*, *Bezposhtchadni* (*Bezstrashni* class ODD).

**Russian Orders:** Break through the Japanese blockade and sail to Vladivostok.

**Russian Victory Conditions:** *Decisive:* Inflict greater damage on the Japanese battleships than you receive, while escaping to Vladivostok with the majority of your battleships and cruisers still in fighting condition (less than 50% damage). *Tactical:* Escape with the majority of your fleet still in fighting condition (less than 50% damage).

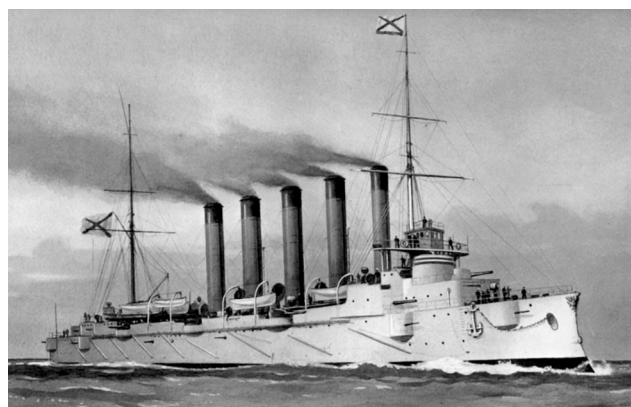
**Japanese Forces:** First Division – ADM Togo, *HIJM Mikasa*: *Mikasa* (*Mikasa* class OBB), *Asahi* (*Asahi* class OBB), *Fuji* (*Fuji* class OBB), *Shikishima* (flag of RADM Nashiba) (*Shikishima* class OBB), *Kasuga* (*ex-Italian Mitra* class CR), *Nisshin* (flag of VADM Kataoka) (*ex-Italian Roca* class CR), *Yaeyama* (*Yaeyama* class CS).

Third Division – VADM Dewa, *HIJM Yakumo*: *Yakumo* (*Yakumo* class CR), *Kasagi*, *Chitose* (*Chitose* class OCR), *Takasago* (*Takasago* class OCR).

Fifth Division – VADM Yamada, *HIJM Hashidate*: *Hashidate*, *Matsushima*, (*Matsushima* class OCR), *Chinyen* (*ex-Chinese Chen Yuan* class OBB).

Sixth Division – VADM Togo Masaji, *HIJM Akashi*: *Akashi*, *Suma* (*Suma* class OCR), *Akitsushima* (*Akitsushima* class OCR).

1<sup>st</sup> Destroyer Division – Captain Asai, *HIJM Asashiwo*: *Asashiwo* (*Shirakumo* class ODD), *Kasumi* (*Akatsuki* class ODD), *Shirakumo* (*Shirakumo* class ODD).



*HIRMs Askold*

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2<sup>nd</sup> Destroyer Division – Commander Ishida, *HIJM Ikazuchi*: *Ikazuchi*, *Inadzuma*, *Oboro*, *Akebono* (*Ikazuchi* class ODD).

3<sup>rd</sup> Destroyer Division – Lt.-Commander Tsuchiya, *HIJM Usugumo*: *Usugumo*, *Shinonome* (*Murakumo* class ODD), *Sazanami* (*Ikazuchi* class ODD).

4<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Division – Commander Nagai, *HIJM Hayatori*: *Hayatori*, *Harusame*, *Asagiri*, *Murasame* (*Harusame* class ODD).

5<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Division – Commander Mano, *HIJM Kagero*: *Kagero*, *Murakumo*, *Yugiri*, *Shiranui* (*Murakumo* class ODD).

2<sup>nd</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division: *Number 38*, *Number 37*, *Number 46*, *Number 45* (*Number 31* class TB).

10<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division – Commander Odaki, *HIJM Number 43*: *Number 43*, *Number 42*, *Number 40*, *Number 41*, (*Number 39* class TB).

14<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division – Commander Sakurai, *HIJM Chidori*: *Chidori*, *Kasasagi*, *Hayabusa*, *Manadzuru*, (*Hayabusa* class TB).

21<sup>st</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division: *Number 47*, *Number 49*, *Number 44* (*Number 31* class TB).

**Off Map:** 1<sup>st</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division – Commander Seki, *HIJM Number 69*: *Number 69*, *Number 68*, *Number 70*, *Number 67* (*Number 67* class TB).

6<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division: *Number 56*, *Number 59*, *Number 57*, *Number 58* (*Number 50* class TB).

16<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division – Commander Wakabayashi, *HIJM Shirataka*: *Shirataka* (*Shirataka* class TB), *Number 39*, (*Number 39* class TB), *Number 71* (*Number 67* class TB), *Number 66* (*Number 39* class TB).

20<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-Boat Division – Commander Arakawa, *HIJM Number 62*: *Number 62*, *Number 64*, *Number 63*, *Number 65*, (*Number 39* class TB).

Belonging to Third Division but arriving alone: *Asama* (Asama class CR).

Belonging to Sixth Division but arriving alone: *Idzumi* (ex-Chilean *Esmeralda* class OCR).

**Japanese Orders:** Destroy the Russian Squadron!

**Japanese Victory Conditions:** *Decisive:* Sink or cripple (50% damage or greater) all of the Russian battleships and cruisers with no major damage (less than 50%) to any of your own battleships. *Tactical:* Sink or cripple two Russian battleships while preventing their escape to Vladivostok, with no major damage (less than 50%) to your own battleships.

**Setup:** See map. Courses for the Japanese are as follows: First Division, course 250°, 500 yards between ships, speed 15 knots.

Third Division, course 140°, 500 yards between ships, speed 12 knots.

The Fifth Division course 240°, 500 yards between ships, speed 14 knots.

The Sixth Division, course 260°, 500 yards between ships, speed 14 knots.

*Yaeyama* is on course 150°, speed 10 knots.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Destroyer Division is on course 120°, speed 15 knots, 100 yards between ships followed by the 14<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-boat Division.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Destroyer Division is on course 160°, speed 15 knots, 100 yards between ships.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Destroyer Division is on course 060°, speed 15 knots, 100 yards between ships.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Division is on course 160°, speed 15 knots, 100 yards between ships.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Division is on course 210°, speed 18 knots, 100 yards between ships.

The 2<sup>nd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> Torpedo-Boat Divisions are on course 130°, speed 12 knots, 100 yards between ships.

Off map units arrive as follows using rule 3.8.1 **Errors in Navigation**. *Idzumi* arrives at 1300 hours from the north side of the engagement area. Course and speed is at the Japanese player's discretion.

*Asama* arrives at 1600 hours from the north side of the engagement area. Course and speed is at the Japanese player's discretion.

The 1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Torpedo-Boat Divisions arrive at 2000 hours from the east side of the engagement area. Course and speed is at the Japanese player's discretion.

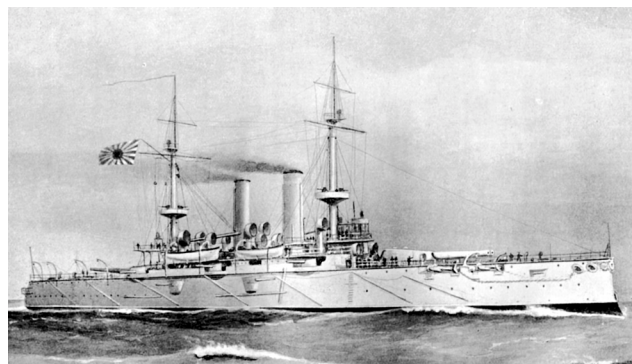
The Russian player sets up as shown, course 135°, 400 yards between ships, speed 8 knots. *Novik* and four destroyers are 800 yards to port. The second group of destroyers is 100 yards to port of *Novik*'s group.

**Special Rules:** The *Sevastopol* had damaged one of her rear 12"/40 guns while returning fire on Japanese ships bombarding Port Arthur. When she sailed on 10 August, this gun was still not repaired. The Russian player must designate one of the rear turret guns as damaged and cannot use it. The Russian Squadron also sailed missing several guns, which had been loaned out to the land forces defending Port Arthur. The Russian player must remove 10 – 6", and 12 – 12pdr guns from the squadron. The Russian player need not inform the Japanese player of which ships have been used to meet this requirement. Ignore any critical hits that would effect these mounts.

**Escape:** the Russian player is considered to have eluded the enemy and escaped if at any point in time he is not within visible range of the Japanese player and the Japanese player fails to reacquire him for five Tactical Turns. If the Russian vessel or squadron was on a course of 000° - 135° at the time of escaping Japanese detection, he is considered to have escaped to Vladivostok for victory purposes. Any other course counts as an escape back to Port Arthur or other places unknown for victory purposes.

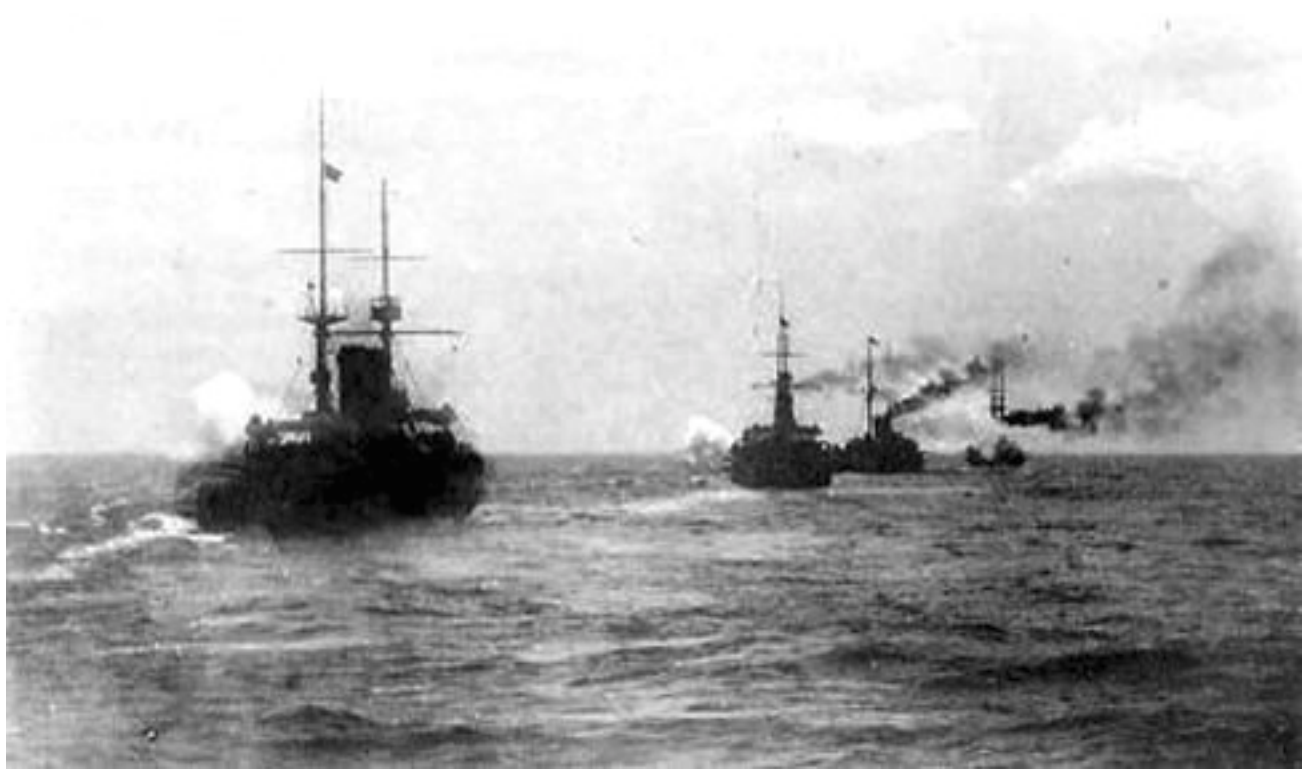
**Historical Outcome:** The Battle of the Yellow Sea was the closest and, except for Tsushima, the most decisive naval engagement of the war. Encountering Vitgeft's squadron in the early afternoon, Togo's first moves were designed to put himself between it and Port Arthur, so as to prevent its return and force a major fleet action. However, when it had become clear that the Russians had no intention of going back but were making for Vladivostok, Togo was so far behind the Russian fleet that he had to waste hours in getting around Vitgeft's weaker vessels so as to catch up with the battleships at the head of the Russian line. It was 1743 hours when he opened fire on the leading Russian ships. From then until dusk Togo's First Division and the six Russian battleships, banged away at each other on almost even terms, with *Mikasa* and *Tsarevich* sharing the brunt of the punishment.

What finally decided the issue, just as it was beginning to look as though the Russians would be able to hold their course until darkness enabled them to escape, was a



HIJMS Fuji

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*Japanese Fleet opens fire at Yellow Sea*

double hit by two Japanese shells that at almost the same instant struck *Tsarevich's* bridge. The result was not merely the death of Vitgeft, of whom all that was later found was a part of one leg, but the death or incapacitation of every one else on the bridge or in the conning tower beneath it. These included the helmsman, whose loss proved to be of even more immediate significance than that of the admiral commanding.

In addition to killing the helmsman, the explosion wedged the ship's wheel into the position of a port turn. An instant later the turn began, so sharply that *Tsarevich* heeled over 12 degrees; and *Retvizan*, which had detected nothing about the latest hit on the flagship to distinguish it from earlier ones, followed in her wake. By the time *Pobyeda* arrived at the turning point, *Tsarevich* had swung around more than 180 degrees and was heading back into her own line, making it apparent at last that something was seriously wrong. Nonetheless, in the absence of any signal to indicate what had happened there was no way for the other ships to deduce that in fact *Tsarevich* was not only out of control, and without admiral, but actually without any one at all in command.

By the time an officer had been found to take charge and signal Rear Admiral Prince Ukhtomsky, Vitgeft's second in command aboard *Peresvyet*, that responsibility for the fleet now rested with him, most of the cruisers stationed to port of the battleships had copied the 180 degree turn of the leading *Tsarevich* and *Retvizan*, with the result that the entire squadron was in total disarray. There was little left for Ukhtomsky to do but give up the attempt to reach Vladivostok, and order the squadron to follow him back to Port Arthur. Even this, since *Peresvyet* was too damaged to hoist intelligible signals, was not

clearly understood, and many of the cruisers wandered off on their own, to eventual internment, capture, or destruction.

What Togo had to decide at this critical point was whether to leave it to his torpedo boats and destroyers to try to prevent the Russians from regaining Port Arthur or to risk trying to finish it off himself in a night fleet action at short range. The latter, if successful, would end the threat of the Russian Pacific Squadron once and for all, but it had serious drawbacks. *Mikasa* had already suffered more than twenty hits in the course of the battle, and his other three battleships were damaged to a comparable degree. To risk losing one or more of these irreplaceable ships without the chance of at least a proportionate gain seemed unjustifiable to Togo, and it also seemed to him doubtful that the present circumstances provided any such chance.

The Russians had been turned back from their objective and the torpedo boats and destroyers might well be able to damage them further during the night. Even if the Russians did regain Port Arthur, the ships would remain subject to Japanese artillery fire; and any that survived would become Japanese prizes when Port Arthur finally fell. Togo chose the prudent course, with the result that five of the six Russian battleships, on which the Japanese torpedo boats proved unable to score any hits, found their way home by dawn the next day, never too fight again. *Tsarevich*, unable to keep up with the others, eventually put in at the German port of Tsing-Tau.

**Best Book:** *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War*, Vol. I, Julian S. Corbett.