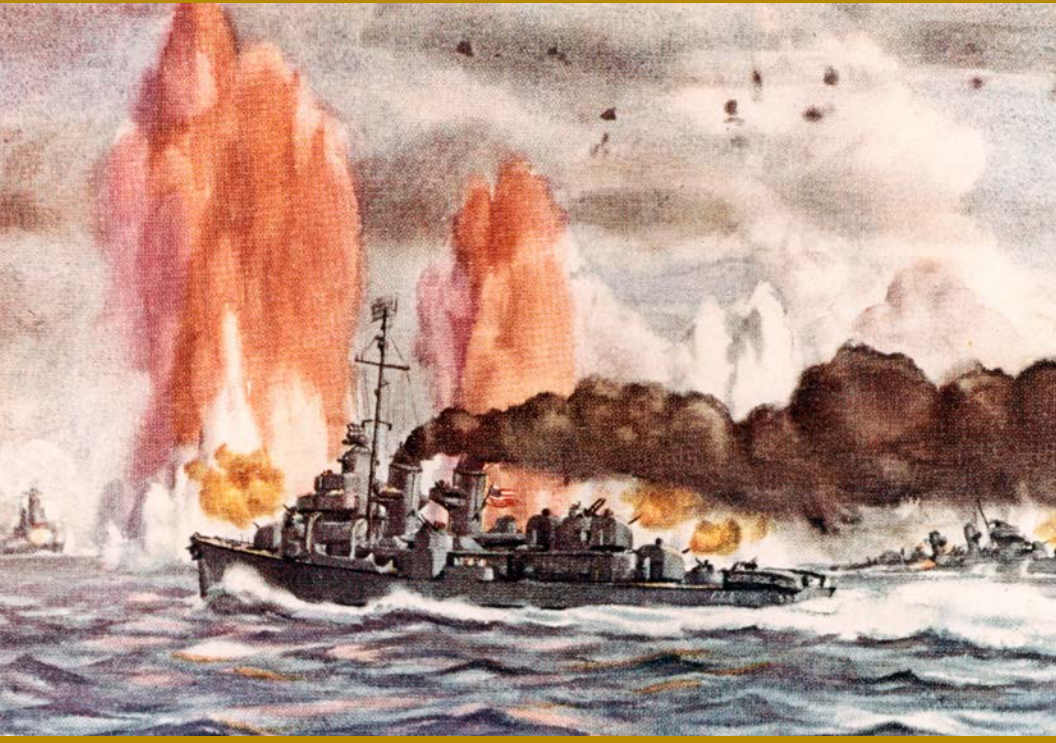


U.S. NAVY OPERATIONS IN WORLD WAR II

# "CALMNESS, COURAGE, AND EFFICIENCY"

REMEMBERING THE  
BATTLE OF LEYTE GULF



MARTIN R. WALDMAN




**"CALMNESS, COURAGE,  
AND EFFICIENCY"**

**REMEMBERING THE  
BATTLE OF LEYTE GULF**

**MARTIN R. WALDMAN**

*Naval History and Heritage Command  
Department of the Navy  
Washington, DC  
2022*



*Published by*  
Naval History and Heritage Command  
805 Kidder Breese Street SE  
Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374-5060

www.history.navy.mil

Cover art: Commander Dwight C. Shepler, *Battle off Samar, 25 October 1944*, watercolor (NHHC NH 79033-KN)

Use of ISBN: This is an official U.S. Government edition of this publication and is herein identified to certify its authenticity. This digital edition is cataloged under ISBN 978-1-943604-77-7.

## CONTENTS

---

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: "I HAVE RETURNED": PLANNING FOR THE INVASION OF THE PHILIPPINES</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: "STRIKE, REPEAT: STRIKE!": IN THE SKIES OVER SIBUYAN SEA</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: "MAKE ALL READY FOR NIGHT BATTLE": LAST CLASH OF THE BATTLESHIPS IN SURIGAO STRAIT</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: "WHERE IS TASK FORCE 34?": DECISION AND INDECISION OFF CAPE ENGAÑO</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: "IN HARM'S WAY": THE BATTLE OFF SAMAR</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>"NO HIGHER HONOR": EPILOGUE</b> .....	<b>79</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>81</b>

## FOREWORD

In early 2019, I suggested to then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John M. Richardson that the theme for that year's Navy birthday should be "No Higher Honor," in recognition of the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. The phrase was drawn from the after-action report of Lieutenant Commander Robert W. Copeland, skipper of the destroyer escort *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413), which was lost in a valiant sacrificial action off Samar. In lauding the actions of his crew in the face of near-certain death, Copeland wrote, "Men zealously manned their stations wherever they might be, and fought and worked with such calmness, courage and efficiency that no higher honor could be conceived than to command such a group of men." To my mind, there is no better tribute to the dedicated and indomitable spirit of the men and women who serve in our Navy than these words. Admiral Richardson readily agreed and, ultimately, selected "No Higher Honor" as the theme for the Navy's 244th birthday.

Copeland's words remain just as relevant now as they did then. As the U.S. Navy faces increasingly capable potential adversaries in the mid-twenty-first century, the time may well come when "calmness, courage, and efficiency" are once again the critical core values in determining the outcome of battle. One need only look at the action off Samar to see how an engagement of even Leyte's scope and scale could turn on the heroism of a select few such as Lieutenant Commander Copeland or Commander Ernest Evans of *Johnston* (DD-557). The latter's decision to put himself and his ship repeatedly in harm's way to protect the escort carriers of "Taffy 3" from the much larger Japanese Center Force represents, in my view, one of the purest instances of what Samuel Eliot Morison described as "gallantry, guts and gumption" in our Navy's history and also sets no finer example to emulate when the time comes for our sailors to answer once more their country's call.

Even for those who will never be asked to fight a battle "against overwhelming odds from which survival could not be expected," there is still much to be learned from the "calmness, courage, and efficiency"

demonstrated by those who fought at Leyte. As Dr. Waldman highlights in this publication, the multi-faceted nature of the battle placed extraordinary demands on our Navy—demands which were, by and large, met due to the equally extraordinary planning, preparation, and execution undertaken by those who carried out the operation. Whatever your community within our Navy, or specific interest in naval history, there is at least one aspect of this battle worthy of admiration, emulation, and deeper contemplation, be it Commander David McCampbell's record nine aerial victories in a single sortie during the Battle of Sibuyan Sea or the pitch-perfect manner in which Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf's force crossed the enemy's "T" at Surigao Strait. Even those elements of the battle which were imperfectly executed, such as Admiral William F. Halsey's controversial decision to take his carriers northwards and the communications breakdown that enabled the Japanese Center Force to transit the San Bernardino Strait uncontested, offer teachable moments that leaders and decision-makers can all learn from.

All of these things and more are covered in the following pages. While Leyte remains a subject of endless fascination and debate in numerous articles and books, it is my hope that this pamphlet will stand on its own as a concise summary of events, a primer on the operational lessons one can draw from them, and, above all else, a tribute to those who fought with "calmness, courage, and efficiency" during the largest engagement in our Navy's history.

Rear Admiral Samuel J. Cox, USN (Retired)

Director, Naval History and Heritage Command

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is not only the culmination of my personal labors, but also the product of the many and varied contributions from colleagues who assisted me at every step along the way. This includes Dr. Peter Luebke, who provided guidance on the publication process, Chris Havern, Sr., with whom many conversations at the outset of, and during this project, profoundly shaped my thinking, and Dr. Jon Middaugh, who provided some helpful suggestions after the first iteration of this work was published on the Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC) website. Special thanks goes to Robert Cressman and Curtis Utz, both of whom thoroughly reviewed the main text and provided thoughtful critiques that strengthened this work considerably. Likewise, I owe both Carsten Fries and Wendy Arevalo of the Communication and Outreach Division (COD) a considerable debt of gratitude, both for editing this work and shepherding it through to publication. Additionally, I am grateful to COD's Darnell Surles for designing the publication. Charles Brodine, my supervisor and editor-in-chief, has made similarly impactful contributions, reviewing the final text for clarity and ensuring that it is relatively error-free. Consequently, any errors that may remain within this work are the author's own.

In addition, I would like to acknowledge the hard-work and dedication of NHHC's library staff and archivists, whose myriad labors ranged from checking out (and endlessly renewing) many of the books cited in this publication to pulling materials that were absolutely invaluable to my research. I cannot thank enough Laura Waayers of the Archives Branch who pulled materials for me on multiple occasions. Likewise, Lisa Crunk assisted me in pulling and scanning some of the outstanding photos included in this work. Outside of NHHC, credit is owed to the special collections staff at the U.S. Naval Academy's Nimitz Library for assisting me with my review of the Jesse Oldendorf memoir, which has been an invaluable source for both this project and others.

I also wish to thank NHHC's Dr. Kristina Giannotta, Assistant Director, Histories and Archives Division, and Dr. Gregory Bereiter, head

of the Histories Branch, both of whom strongly encouraged me to turn my original web essay into the publication you are reading now. Dr. Bereiter, in particular, took a number of steps to facilitate this, including setting up the peer review and allotting sufficient time and space for me to see this project through to completion.

Aside from my dear colleagues, none of this would have been possible without the love and support of my wife. She not only provided considerable moral support during the writing of this project (much of it while on deployment), but she also offered a Navy officer's perspective on decision-making and dissent, as well as other critical aspects of the battle. I remain ever grateful for the opportunity to support her (and, by extension, the Navy) both at home and through the important work we do at NHHC.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the life-long contributions of my father, who passed away prior to publication of this work. He was not just my father, he was my greatest teacher. It was he who taught me to set sail for new horizons, to brave stormy seas and uncharted waters, and to find my way safely back to shore. All that I have achieved thus far is just as much his accomplishment as it is mine. Although his absence is keenly felt, the example he set, the love he gave, and the wisdom he shared, will forever be the stars by which I navigate.

## INTRODUCTION

In the U.S. Navy's history, few battles are as significant or as controversial as that of Leyte Gulf (23–26 October 1944). Among the largest naval battles ever fought, Leyte involved nearly 200,000 men and 282 ships fighting in four separate engagements across 100,000 square miles of ocean.<sup>1</sup> It was exactly the sort of “decisive battle” that both the Allies and the Japanese had sought, one that pitted the waning might of the Japanese Combined Fleet against the U.S. Third and Seventh Fleets. Although the Japanese hoped that this battle would revive their flagging fortunes, in the end, it would prove to be their navy's death knell, leaving the Allies in command of the Pacific and well situated to recapture the remainder of the Philippines.

Beyond Leyte Gulf's operational significance, it can be argued that no other battle fought during World War II encompassed as many facets of naval warfare nor, for that matter, the rich tableau of experiences and challenges that U.S. Navy sailors endured in service to their country during the conflict. This battle was a naval operation on an incomparable scale, the outcome of which turned on innumerable individual acts of heroism; a showcase for naval air power, which also featured the last engagement between battleships; and an unparalleled victory that came perilously close to becoming an unmitigated disaster. More than 75 years later, Leyte Gulf still has much it can teach us about operational planning and preparation, the evolving nature of warfare, decision-making under fire, and, above all, individual sacrifice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although Leyte Gulf is frequently described as the largest naval battle ever, this is likely only true in terms of tonnage and geographic area.

## **"I HAVE RETURNED": PLANNING FOR THE INVASION OF THE PHILIPPINES**

From its very inception, the invasion of the Philippines promised to be one of the most wide-ranging naval campaigns ever conducted by the U.S. Navy, one that would involve multiple fleets, raids on other Japanese-held islands, shore bombardments of enemy defenses, and, most importantly, the transportation and landing of Army troops onto the shores of Leyte. Naturally, the planning that went into this undertaking was quite extensive, with Navy planners working hand-in-hand with their Army counterparts to develop a workable strategy for the upcoming invasion. The proposed undertaking was well-conceived, but, like all joint operations, it would require a high degree of cooperation and coordination among all forces involved, a task complicated by the fact that command of forces afloat would be divided between Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr. (Third Fleet) and Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid (Seventh Fleet). While this would prove no obstacle to success initially, the divided command structure had the potential to complicate the operation, particularly if the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) decided to vigorously oppose the invasion.

In any event, this is exactly what the IJN intended to do. Following the Combined Fleet's disastrous showing at the Battle of the Philippine Sea (19–20 June 1944),<sup>1</sup> its leaders recognized that time and resources were running out to blunt the Allies' momentum and prevent them from launching attacks against the Japanese Home Islands. Believing it necessary to force the U.S. Navy into a decisive battle, but uncertain as

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Cutler, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: 23–25 October 1944* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 16–18. Over the course of this battle, the Japanese lost two aircraft carriers, between 350 and 450 aircraft, and many of their remaining experienced aviators and aircrews. The lopsided nature of the engagement earned it the nickname, "The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot."

to where it would strike next, they developed four separate contingency plans that corresponded to potential invasion routes the Allies might take.<sup>2</sup> Collectively known as *Shō-Go* (Operation Victory), each plan called for the IJN to commit the bulk of its remaining fleet to the proposed engagement in the hopes of delivering a crippling blow to its enemies.

The IJN's plan to defend the Philippines (*Shō-1*) initially involved three separate task forces. The first, the Mobile Force, Main Body, consisting primarily of carriers under Vice Admiral Jisaburō Ozawa, would sortie from Japan and approach the Philippines from the north, stationing itself off the island of Luzon. Joined by Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima's Second Striking Force (sometimes referred to as Second Diversionary



Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid (left center) with General Douglas MacArthur (center) on the flag bridge of light cruiser *Phoenix* (CL-46) during the pre-invasion bombardment of Los Negros Island, in the Admiralty Islands, 28 February 1944 (National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], NHC SC 188839).

2 The Philippines, Formosa [Taiwan], central Japan, and northern Japan were all considered possible routes.

Attack Force) they would attempt to draw off the ships covering the Allied landings. With the amphibious armada now unprotected, Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's First Striking Force (sometimes referred to as First Diversionary Attack Force) could then swoop in unopposed and destroy the transports and supply ships, leaving the Allied troops stranded until a counter-invasion could be launched to wipe them out.<sup>3</sup>

As we shall see, *Shō-1* underwent some crucial revisions once the Allied invasion of the Philippines actually materialized, but even in its earliest form, it can be viewed as a product of both strategic daring and sheer desperation. So much of the operation's success rested on a number of different variables, not the least of which was whether or not Vice Admiral Ozawa's fleet could entice the U.S. Navy's covering fleet to abandon the amphibious forces. While the Japanese publicly exuded confidence, those involved in the operation privately knew it was a desperate gambit, with Ozawa admitting to Allied interrogators after the war that he did "not have much confidence in being a lure, but there was no other way than to try."<sup>4</sup> Others were even more fatalistic, including Vice Admiral Kurita. In the run-up to the battle, he asked his crew, "Would it not be a shame to have the fleet remain intact while our nation perishes?"<sup>5</sup>

Although the U.S. Navy possessed some intelligence concerning Japan's plans for a decisive battle,<sup>6</sup> those involved in the planning of the

3 The broad outline of this plan was laid down in "Combined Fleet Top Secret Operations Order No. 83" on 4 August 1944. It should be noted as well that between July and October 1944, Combined Fleet HQ changed the tactical designations of many of its numbered fleets. The First Mobile Fleet, for example, became the Mobile Force, Main Body. For discussion of this, the plan, and its evolution, see [Maj. Gen. Charles Willoughby and] General Staff, *Reports of General MacArthur: Japanese Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area*, vol. 2, pt. 1. (1966; repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1994), 328–30; Milan Vego, *The Battle for Leyte, 1944: Allied and Japanese Plans, Preparations, and Execution* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 53–59.

4 Interrogation Nav. No. 55, USSBS No. 227, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials* (Washington, DC: Naval Analysis Division, 1946), I: 221.

5 Masanori Ito and Roger Pineau, *End of the Imperial Japanese Navy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 120.

6 This was the so-called "Z" plan, which was obtained after Admiral Mineichi Koga's plane crashed and his chief of staff, Shigeru Fukudome, fell into the hands of Filipino partisans on 31 March 1944. See John Prados, *Storm over Leyte: The Philippine Invasion and the Destruction of the Japanese Navy* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2016), 95–98.



Philippines campaign did not anticipate “that major elements of the Japanese fleet will be involved in the present operation.”<sup>7</sup> While this prediction proved to be woefully inaccurate,<sup>8</sup> it cannot be said that they were ill-prepared to defend the landings in the event that a Japanese attack did materialize. Whereas most prior operations had only utilized a single fleet, the plan for Leyte Gulf called for the involvement of both the Third and the Seventh Fleets. The latter, under the command of Vice Admiral Kinkaid, would operate out of Leyte Gulf, bombarding Japanese shore defenses, ferrying General Douglas MacArthur’s troops ashore, and guarding the southern approach to the gulf through the Surigao Strait. Admiral Halsey’s Third Fleet, on the other hand, would “cover and support forces of Southwest Pacific [i.e., the Seventh Fleet],” as well as destroy “enemy naval and air forces in or threatening the Philippines Area.” Crucially, Halsey’s orders also contained the important caveat that, “In case opportunity for destruction of major portions of the enemy fleet offers or can be created, such destruction becomes the primary task.”<sup>9</sup> This certainly got Halsey’s attention, as he subsequently wrote Nimitz, “My goal is the same as yours—to completely annihilate the Jap fleet if the opportunity offers.”<sup>10</sup>

Halsey’s enthusiastic reaction was characteristic of his overall command style and temperament. Known for aggressive tactics and bombastic pronouncements (upon hearing a Japanese broadcast that tauntingly asked, “Where is the American fleet?” the admiral told an aide,

---

7 “Annex M to Commander, Allied Naval Forces, Southwest Pacific Area, Operation Plan 13-44, 26 September 1944,” Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives and Records Administration, 2; Vego, 103–5.

8 Kinkaid and others hotly disputed the notion that they had not expected a major attack by the Japanese fleet. See Thomas Kinkaid, “Review of Vol. XII—*Leyte*, History of U.S. Naval Operations, World War II,” 2–3, box 94, Samuel Eliot Morison Papers, Naval History and Heritage Command.

9 “CINCPAC Operation Plan 8-44,” quoted in Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, “Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas during the Month of October, 1944,” Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives and Records Administration, 56. This caveat may have been added in response to Raymond Spruance’s controversial decision to not pursue the Japanese fleet during the Battle of Philippine Sea. It is not known for certain, however, whether it was Nimitz or King who added it to Halsey’s orders. Cutler, 60–61.

10 Quoted in Cutler, 60.

“Send them our latitude and longitude!”<sup>11</sup>), Halsey was a commander very much in the mold of Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson. In the months following Pearl Harbor, he had led task forces and groups in raids against the Marshall and Gilbert Islands (1 February 1942), Wake Island (24 February 1942), and Marcus Island (4 March), commanded the task force (TF 16) which had transported and launched the B-25s that participated in the famed Doolittle Raid (18 April 1942), and turned around the Navy’s operations in the eastern Solomons after replacing Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley on 18 October 1942. Feted by the American press and revered by many who served under him, Halsey was, arguably, the face of the Navy during World War II.

His counterpart, Kinkaid, was almost the polar opposite. Although Kinkaid had developed his own well-deserved reputation as a “fighting admiral,” Kinkaid was considerably more cautious and personally reserved than Halsey. “Please don’t say I made any dramatic statements,” he once remarked to a reporter, “You know I’m incapable of that.”<sup>12</sup> As a commander, he tended to take a more group-oriented approach, trusting in the abilities of his subordinates and collaboration with others to accomplish the tasks at hand. It was for this reason that Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief Pacific Ocean Areas (CINCPAC), had chosen him to lead joint operations with the Army, first in the Aleutians in 1943 and then in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA). The latter assignment placed him under Douglas A. MacArthur, the famed general who had led the defense of the Philippines in early 1942 and was now single-mindedly seeking to return there. Despite the general’s mercurial temperament and his staff’s innate distrust of the Navy, Kinkaid developed a productive working relationship with them during their campaigns against the Admiralty Islands and western New Guinea.<sup>13</sup>

This strong relationship would pay dividends in developing plans for the upcoming invasion of the Philippines. Although planning for the

---

11 Cutler, 39.

12 C. Vann Woodward, *The Battle for Leyte Gulf* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 29.

13 For Kinkaid’s thoughts on their relationship, see Thomas C. Kinkaid, *The Reminiscences of Thomas Cassin Kinkaid* (New York: Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1961), 249–62.



Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas (CINCPAC/CINCPAO) Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, (*standing*) confers with (*left to right*) General Douglas MacArthur, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Admiral William D. Leahy, the chief of staff to the President, concerning future moves in the war against Japan during the President's visit to Hawaii, 26 July–10 August 1944 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-46221).

operation had begun in July 1944, the decision in mid-September to move up the invasion from December to October gave Kinkaid and his staff only five weeks to come up with a workable plan. Thankfully, most of the principle staff involved were located at or near MacArthur's headquarters in Hollandia, New Guinea,<sup>14</sup> enabling them to resolve issues quickly and gain a greater understanding of all aspects of the operation. Indeed, the planning process was apparently so thorough that it impressed even Roger Keyes, former Royal Navy Admiral of the Fleet. Keyes, who was visiting Hollandia at the time, told Kinkaid, "I've been here for your briefings. I

<sup>14</sup> Present-day Jayapura, Papua, New Guinea.

understand what is going on, I know your plan, and I think the plan is a good one and it will succeed."<sup>15</sup>

As thorough as the planning process had been, there was one potential sticking point: the command structure. Since early in the war, Pacific operations had been divided into two separate theaters, with MacArthur in charge of the Southwest Pacific Area and Nimitz commanding the Pacific Ocean Area. Under this arrangement, the Seventh Fleet had been placed under MacArthur's overall command (hence, its nickname "MacArthur's Navy"), while the Third/Fifth Fleet had been under Nimitz.<sup>16</sup> Ideally, the two commands would have merged once operations converged in a single theater, but it is unlikely that either Nimitz or MacArthur would have suffered being made subordinate to the other.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the divided command structure remained in place, even as the Allies prepared for what would be the largest, most complicated amphibious operation since the landings at Normandy earlier that year.

In Halsey's view, the divided command structure contributed to some of the problems subsequently experienced at Leyte. As he later argued, "If we had been under the same command, with a single system of operational control and intelligence, the Battle of Leyte Gulf might have been fought differently to a different result."<sup>18</sup> Kinkaid, on the other hand, contended that, "One head would not have been better than two in a case of this sort, where each of us had his mission, I thought, very clearly stated."<sup>19</sup> On this last point, Kinkaid was arguably mistaken. Although some elements of

<sup>15</sup> Kinkaid, 299. Baron Roger Keyes had been one of Britain's most distinguished admirals, having fought in the Boxer Rebellion, assisted in the planning and execution of the Dardanelles Campaign in World War I, and, early in World War II, served as director of combined operations. Kinkaid, who initially chafed at having to spend his valuable time entertaining a VIP, was eventually won over, noting, "I don't think I ever ran into a man who was obviously such a real fighting man."

<sup>16</sup> Cutler, 39–40. For all intents and purposes, the Third and Fifth Fleets were one and the same, save for their commanders and the staff attached to them. When Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance was in command, it was designated Fifth Fleet, when it was Halsey, it was Third Fleet.

<sup>17</sup> Vego, 22. On the relationship between the two, see Cutler, 26–28. Commander in Chief U.S. Navy/CNO (COMINCH/CNO) Ernest J. King was particularly insistent that the Navy not be placed under the command of a non-naval officer.

<sup>18</sup> William Halsey and Joseph Bryan III, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947), 210.

<sup>19</sup> Kinkaid, 292.

the Third Fleet had been involved in the planning process,<sup>20</sup> Halsey and Nimitz's involvement had been limited to a handful of planning sessions, largely attended by their representatives. Thus, it should not necessarily be surprising that Kinkaid and Halsey held differing perceptions as to their respective missions. Whereas Kinkaid and MacArthur believed that the Third Fleet's main priority was to provide cover for the landing operation, Halsey viewed his mission as being potentially much more offensively oriented.<sup>21</sup>

Complicating things further were the communications restrictions that MacArthur had imposed on Kinkaid. Perhaps fearful of ceding any authority, MacArthur forbade Kinkaid from communicating directly with Nimitz or Halsey and required that all communications be routed through a radio station on Manus, in the Admiralty Islands. This would greatly complicate the already difficult task of coordinating the two fleets, as the radio station proved unable to cope with the sheer volume of messages that would flow through it during the battle. Consequently, some very critical dispatches were not delivered until many hours after they had been sent, something that would significantly affect Halsey and Kinkaid's decision-making.<sup>22</sup>

It must be emphasized that, at least for now, the divided command structure and communications barriers remained only potential complications for the Leyte operation, and that the invasion plan itself was quite strategically sound. Indeed, the opening stages of the Philippines invasion went about as smoothly for the Allies as could be hoped for. On 17 October, Task Group (TG) 77.2 (the Fire Support and Bombardment Group) under Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf approached Leyte from the east, conducting minesweeping and shore bombardment operations off the islands of Suluan, Homohon, and Dinagat in order to secure the entrance to the gulf.<sup>23</sup> Three days later, on 20 October, Kinkaid, MacArthur, and the

rest of the Seventh Fleet entered the gulf and commenced the invasion of Leyte proper. Not content to watch the operation from afar, MacArthur waded ashore and famously proclaimed, "People of the Philippines! I have returned."

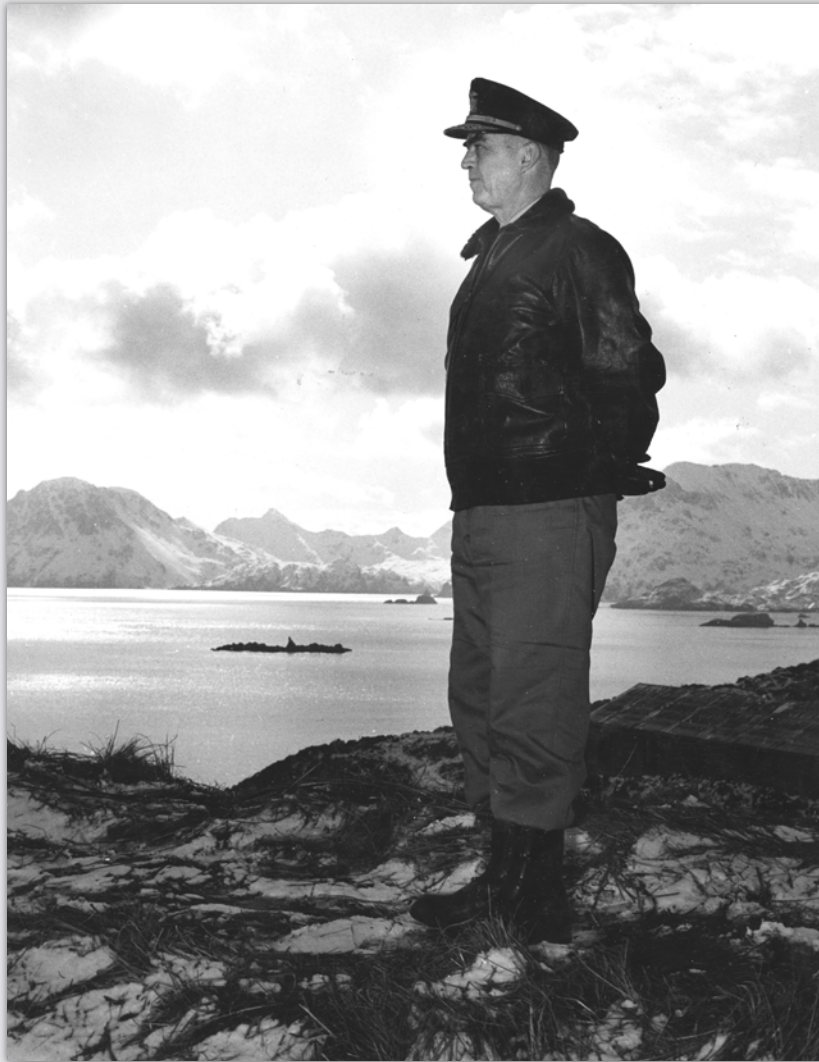
Despite the grandiloquent certainty of this pronouncement, however, the general's return was anything but assured at this point. Although the Navy's strategic planning had already paid considerable dividends, it remained to be seen whether or not it would hold up under pressure, particularly once the Japanese put their own plans into effect. Once that occurred, the Third and Seventh Fleets would be forced to contend with not only the surface forces of the Combined Fleet, but also the shore-based aircraft of the IJN and Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). It would be here, in the skies over the Philippines, that the opening stages of the Battle of Leyte Gulf would be won or lost.

20 Since the Seventh Fleet would be primarily in charge of landing operations, Vice Admiral Theodore "Ping" Wilkinson's Third Amphibious Force was temporarily placed under the Seventh Fleet's command.

21 Thomas Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 341–45.

22 Evan Thomas, *Sea of Thunder: Four Commanders and the Last Great Naval Campaign, 1941–1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 212.

23 Woodward, 31–32.



Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid looks out over Kuluk Bay from Adak Island in the Aleutians on 4 June 1943. Kinkaid served as Commander, North Pacific Force, from January to October 1943. (NARA, 80-G-50342).

### Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, Commander, Seventh Fleet

When the United States entered World War II, few would have predicted that the newly promoted Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid would become one of the Navy's highest ranking officers.<sup>1</sup> Compared to most of his contemporaries, he had far less time at sea, having spent the interwar period largely serving in various staff billets and as a naval attaché in Rome.<sup>2</sup> However, what Kinkaid lacked in seagoing experience, he more than made up for with a certain quiet competence, one that allowed him to navigate challenging situations, both in and out of battle, with a calm demeanor, easy rapport with others, and judicious decision-making. Never one to seek the spotlight, Kinkaid nevertheless had, in his own words, "a very lucky career" with a knack for being "available at the time and on the spot" when opportunities arose.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the case when Kinkaid was promoted to rear admiral on 27 November 1941. Ordered to assume command of Cruiser Division Six, he was en route to Pearl Harbor when the Japanese launched their surprise attack. Kinkaid would put out to sea not long after arriving, accompanying his soon-to-be predecessor, Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, on the aborted expedition to rescue the Marines trapped on Wake Island. He would subsequently remain at sea for almost the entirety of 1942, steaming almost 91,000 miles and participating in major operations such as Coral Sea, Midway, and the Guadalcanal campaign.<sup>4</sup> During the Guadalcanal campaign, he commanded Task Force 16 while aboard *Enterprise* (CV-6), the last non-aviator to fly his flag from a fast carrier. His record during this time was mixed, suffering a narrow defeat at the Battle of Santa Cruz (26

1 On 9 March 1942, a board of top-ranking officers submitted to President Franklin D. Roosevelt a list of the Navy's forty "most competent" flag officers. Kinkaid did not make the list, though, in fairness, neither did Nimitz or Spruance. Richard B. Frank, "Picking Winners?" *Naval History Magazine* 25, no. 3 (October 2011): 24–30.

2 Since becoming a lieutenant commander, Kinkaid had spent 14 ½ years ashore versus 8 ½ at sea. Gerald Wheeler, *Kinkaid of the Seventh Fleet: A Biography of Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, U.S. Navy* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1995), 132.

3 Kinkaid, *Reminiscences*, 438.

4 Wheeler, 292.

October 1942) while making important contributions in the first stage of the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (13 November 1942).<sup>5</sup>

Kinkaid would have greater success during the next phase of his wartime service. Tasked with overseeing operations in the Aleutian Islands over the course of 1943, he not only successfully dislodged the Japanese from the islands of Attu and Kiska, but also demonstrated an aptitude for joint operations. His success was due in no small part to his ability to establish productive working relationships with his Army counterparts, in particular Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. This would lay the groundwork for his appointment as the commander of the Seventh Fleet under General Douglas MacArthur on 26 October 1943.<sup>6</sup>

Given MacArthur's mercurial temperament and clashes with Kinkaid's predecessors, the assignment promised to be a challenging one. As Kinkaid recalled, "Nobody could take MacArthur as an average man. They either put him up on a pedestal, or else they damned him, and neither is correct."<sup>7</sup> Approaching this task with his customary unflappability, Kinkaid gradually won MacArthur over with his calm demeanor, diplomatic approach, and capable support during operations in New Guinea, the Admiralty Islands, and Hollandia. When it came time for MacArthur to make his triumphant return to the Philippines in October 1944, it was Kinkaid and the Seventh Fleet that transported him and his forces to the beaches at Leyte and subsequently oversaw successful landings at Luzon and Mindoro.<sup>8</sup>

It was following these operations that Kinkaid pinned on his fourth star on 6 April 1945. Although the newly minted admiral had the opportunity to return stateside to become superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, he chose to remain with the Seventh Fleet until the war's end, accepting the Japanese surrender at Seoul, Korea, and overseeing the liberation of Allied prisoners of war in Korea, Formosa (Taiwan), and China. Finally

---

5 Clark Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1978), 33–34.

6 Wheeler, 295–342.

7 Kinkaid, 254.

8 Wheeler, 343–447.

returning to the United States in November 1945, Kinkaid would close out his military career as the commander of the Eastern Sea Frontier.<sup>9</sup>

Even though he retired from the Navy in 1950, Kinkaid nonetheless remained quite active in military-related matters for the remainder of his life, including serving nearly 15 years (1953–68) on the American Battlefield Monuments Commission, which oversaw the maintenance and construction of American cemeteries and military monuments overseas. Following his passing on 17 November 1972 at age 84, tributes poured in from every quarter including from former Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh Burke, who praised Kinkaid not just for his combat achievements but for "the example he set for his associates in the Navy, both senior and junior. . . . By just being the kind of man he was, he caused others to become better men than they otherwise would have been."<sup>10</sup> Just two years later, destroyer *Kinkaid* (DD-965) was launched and, like her namesake, spent multiple decades in stalwart service to the Navy.

---

9 Wheeler, 449–69.

10 Quoted in Wheeler, 487–88.



Commander, Third Fleet, Admiral William F. Halsey, on board battleship *New Jersey* (BB-62), c. 1944 (NHHHC NHF-102-B/TR-12369).

### Admiral William F. Halsey, Commander, Third Fleet

It is not easy to separate the long and distinguished career of Fleet Admiral William "Bill" F. Halsey from the larger-than-life legend of "Bull" Halsey. Although his later reputation as a hard-charging, outspoken admiral earned him comparisons to officers of earlier eras such as Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson and Admiral David G. Farragut, Halsey stood out as a forward-thinking officer who embraced new technology and forms of warfare. He was not only among the first wave of "tin-can" sailors, commanding multiple destroyers both during and prior to World War I,<sup>1</sup> but also an equally strong proponent of air power in the decades that followed. He even went so far as to earn his naval aviator's wings at age 52, believing that aerial warfare would be a critical component of any future conflict and that it was imperative to have a "clear understanding of a pilot's problems and mental processes."<sup>2</sup>

Events would soon prove Halsey right. While in command of aircraft carrier *Enterprise* (CV-6), the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Fortuitously, *Enterprise* had been out at sea when the attack occurred, sparing her and the other carriers from the destruction that befell the U.S. Navy's battleships at anchor in Pearl Harbor. Sailing back into Pearl Harbor at dusk on 8 December, Halsey surveyed the wreckage and grumbled to all within earshot, "Before we're through with 'em, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell!"<sup>3</sup> Over the next few months, he would seek to make good on that promise, leading task groups in a series of daring raids against the Japanese-held islands in the Pacific, as well as ferrying Lieutenant Colonel James "Jimmy" H. Doolittle's raiders to within striking distance of Japan's Home Islands. Much to his consternation, however, Halsey did not have the opportunity to engage the IJN's vaunted *Kidō Butai* (Mobile Force) head-on, as a severe case of dermatitis forced him to stand down in May 1942, just ahead of the critical Battle of Midway. As

<sup>1</sup> Halsey's service under Admiral William S. Sims in the years preceding World War I and during it not only allowed him to make meaningful contributions to the development of new destroyer tactics and doctrine, but also significantly influenced his command style, in particular his reliance on staff conferences for decision-making. Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 67–93.

<sup>2</sup> Halsey and Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Halsey and Bryan, 81.

Admiral Chester Nimitz joked, Halsey spent one of the war's most critical battles "itching to get into the fight."<sup>4</sup>

Halsey would have plenty of other opportunities to distinguish himself and make life miserable for the Japanese. In October 1942, he assumed command of the South Pacific area and the Navy's campaign in the Solomons. Charged with jumpstarting the Navy's stalled efforts to secure the island of Guadalcanal, Halsey's aggressive approach not only immediately boosted morale, but in the long run, prevented the Japanese from delivering much needed provisions and reinforcements to the island, leading to their eventual retreat. He would subsequently oversee joint operations at New Georgia and Bougainville as part of the Allied campaign to encircle Rabaul in 1943 and 1944.<sup>5</sup>

Once matters in the Solomons were well in hand, Halsey returned to sea duty as the commander of the Third Fleet in May 1944. Charged with supporting the Leyte operations in October, he executed a series of highly successful raids against Formosa and pounded Admiral Kurita's Center Force at the Battle of Sibuyan Sea. It was following the latter action that Halsey controversially turned his fleet north to pursue the Japanese forces, leaving the San Bernardino Strait undefended. Although he would escape any immediate repercussions for this fateful decision, the ensuing controversy over "Bull's Run" would become an indelible part of his legacy.<sup>6</sup>

Other controversies would soon follow. In December, Halsey sailed the Third Fleet into the heart of Typhoon Cobra, losing three destroyers and approximately 800 sailors. The admiral narrowly avoided being disciplined for this disaster, but when the Third Fleet encountered another typhoon in June 1945, the court of inquiry recommended that he be reassigned. Admiral Ernest J. King set aside the court's recommendation,

4 Halsey and Bryan, 107.

5 For extensive assessments of Halsey's command record during this period, see Hughes, 172–392; E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 148–268.

6 Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 283–97.

owing both to Halsey's earlier service and the fact that he still remained the face of the Navy.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these issues, Halsey finished out 1945 on a series of high notes: conducting strikes against the Japanese Home Islands in July and August, attending the surrender ceremony at Tokyo Bay on 2 September, and being promoted to fleet admiral (five stars) on 11 December. He subsequently retired in 1947 and spent his remaining years serving on corporate boards, engaging in leisure activities, and, true to form, occasionally courting controversy by defending his actions at Leyte Gulf.<sup>8</sup> Following his death on 16 August 1959, the Navy christened the guided-missile frigate DLG-23 as *Halsey*, the first of two ships to be named after him (the other being DDG-97).

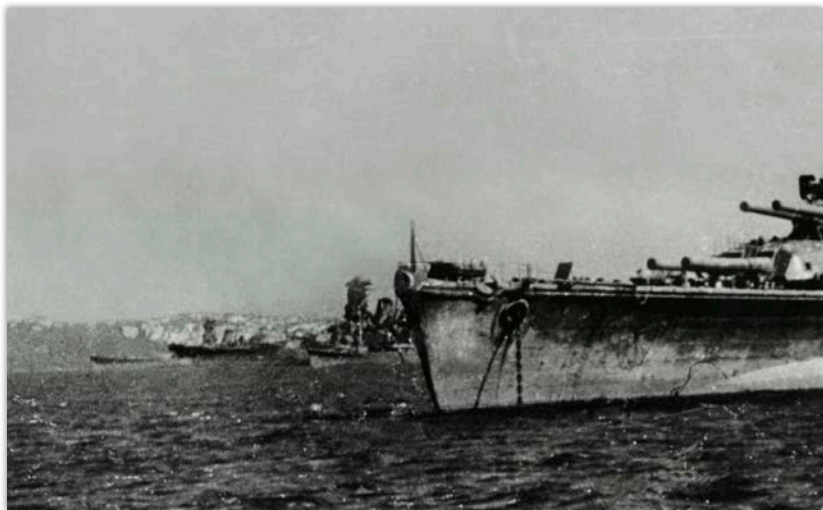
In the years since his passing, Halsey's reputation among historians and military strategists has suffered, largely due to his actions at Leyte Gulf and the controversies that followed. Even so, it should not be overlooked that whatever mistakes he made in the latter stages of the war, many of Halsey's contemporaries continued to hold him in considerable esteem, admiring him deeply for both his personal qualities and his leadership. Admiral Robert B. Carney, his chief of staff, observed that Halsey engendered "greater affection and loyalty than I have ever seen rendered to any other military leader."<sup>9</sup> Vice Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf went even further, stating, "If any man I know really typifies personal leadership Halsey is that man." He went on to note, "His subordinates not only admire him, they also love him, and, so far as I have seen them, would go through hell for him. It is only fair to say, however, that he would do the same for them."<sup>10</sup>

7 Hughes, 382–83, 88–90.

8 Potter, 364–81.

9 Quoted in Hughes, 416.

10 Oldendorf, "As Seen from the Bridge," 215.



Japanese battleships at Brunei, Borneo, October 1944, photographed just prior to the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Ships (left to right): *Musashi*, *Yamato*, a cruiser, and *Nagato*. At Leyte Gulf, these three battleships were components of Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's Center Force (NHHC NH 73090).

## 2

### **"STRIKE, REPEAT: STRIKE!": IN THE SKIES OVER SIBUYAN SEA**

Since the beginning of World War II, aviation had redefined naval warfare, indelibly linking the struggle for supremacy at sea to supremacy in the air. This remained true even as naval actions in the Pacific shifted from carrier duels in open waters to pounding shore installations and carrying out support missions for land-based operations, such as the invasions of Guadalcanal, the Marianas, and the Philippines. Indeed, air power arguably became even more important at this stage in the war, for although the Japanese had sustained irreversible losses to their carrier-based aircraft at the Battle of Philippine Sea, both the IJN and IJA still possessed significant shore-based air power that could be brought to bear against the Navy, particularly now that the action had moved from isolated atolls to large islands in closer proximity to the Japanese mainland.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, any successful defense of the Leyte landings would depend just as much on the Navy's ability to neutralize these aircraft as it did on the Combined Fleet's ships. Fortunately, in contrast to their opponents, the Navy had both the air power and the trained people necessary to do just that.

One of the engagements that was most critical to the success of the Leyte campaign actually occurred in the weeks preceding the landings. In order to throw the Japanese off-balance and keep them guessing as to where the Allies would target next, Halsey and the Third Fleet staged a series of raids against Okinawa, Formosa, and Luzon, which succeeded

<sup>1</sup> Prados, 36–37. The Japanese aerial forces included elements of the Fifth and Sixth Base Air Forces, as well as the Fourth Air Army. For more on the Japanese aerial forces, see Vego, 201, 230–32.



beyond all expectations. The Third Fleet not only forced the Japanese to partially activate *Shō-1* and *Shō-2* plans, but to also sortie the shore-based aircraft of the Sixth Base Air Force and the Formosa Army against Halsey's forces.<sup>2</sup> The ensuing aerial battles (11–16 October) absolutely decimated the Japanese air fleets, costing them an estimated 529 aircraft. Critically, some of these aircraft were from Ozawa's carrier force, leaving him with as few as 110 in reserve for the Leyte Gulf operation.<sup>3</sup> The loss of both carrier and shore-based planes, would leave the ships of the Combined Fleet with precious little air cover heading into the upcoming engagement.<sup>4</sup> Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, air staff officer to the commander in chief of the Combined Fleet, later testified that this, essentially, doomed the Leyte Gulf operation from the start.<sup>5</sup>

One other important consequence of Halsey's raids is that it delayed the Japanese response until it became clear that the Allies' primary target was not Formosa or Luzon but Leyte. It was only on 18 October that the Japanese finally initiated the *Shō-1* plan in earnest and sortied their fleets in the hopes of catching the Third and Seventh Fleets unawares. Departing from Brunei on 22 October, Kurita's First Striking Force (referred to as the "Center Force" in U.S. Navy documents) would proceed as planned to the Sibuyan Sea in the hopes of reaching Leyte Gulf by 25 October. Upon the



The four Japanese officers charged with executing *Shō-1*. Left to right: Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita, Center Force (NHHHC NH 63694), Vice Admiral Jisaburō Ozawa, Northern Force (NHHHC NH 63425), Vice Admiral Shōji Nishimura, Southern Force (NHHHC NH 63424), and Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima, Second Striking Force (NHHHC NH 63426).

<sup>2</sup> Vego, 164–68.

<sup>3</sup> See Ozawa's testimony in Interrogation Nav No. 155, USSBS No. 227, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 220.

<sup>4</sup> For a broader discussion of the battle, see Prados, 118–51.

<sup>5</sup> Interrogation Nav No. 29, USSBS No. 113, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 131.

recommendation of fleet headquarters, he would also detach a smaller force of seven ships (two battleships, one cruiser, and four destroyers) under Vice Admiral Shōji Nishimura (the "Southern Force") to proceed through the Sulu and Mindanao Seas with the aim of approaching Leyte Gulf from the south through the Surigao Strait. They would be followed shortly thereafter by Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima's Second Striking Force, which had originally been slated to oversee the counter-landings at Leyte in the event of *Shō-1*'s success. Meanwhile, Ozawa's Mobile Force ("Northern Force") would proceed southward from Japan in the hopes of luring away Halsey's Third Fleet. If all went according to plan, the Center and Southern Forces would meet in Leyte Gulf and overwhelm the amphibious shipping of the Seventh Fleet.<sup>6</sup>

Despite their best efforts, however, the Japanese quickly lost the element of surprise when U.S. submarines *Darter* (SS-227) and *Dace* (SS-247) espied the Center Force off Palawan on 23 October. Taking advantage of their good fortune, the two submarines launched their own surprise attack against the Japanese fleet, damaging cruiser *Takao* and sinking heavy cruisers *Maya* and *Atago*, Kurita's flagship. Humiliatingly, Vice Admiral Kurita would be forced to spend at least part of the engagement (later dubbed the "Battle of Palawan Passage") treading water until he could be rescued.<sup>7</sup>

As all of this was occurring, Halsey was busy preparing his own warm welcome. Upon receiving word that the Center Force had entered the Sibuyan Sea on the morning of 24 October, he ordered his aircraft to launch at 0833 with the admonition, "Strike! Repeat: strike!"<sup>8</sup> Over the course of the day, they did just that, mercilessly pounding the Center Force with bombs and torpedoes while the combat air patrols over Halsey's carriers successfully fended off incoming waves of Japanese aircraft launched from Luzon and other parts of the Philippines. In a demonstration of just how profoundly air power had reshaped naval warfare, Third Fleet's pilots fatally wounded *Musashi*, one of the IJN's two *Yamato*-class battleships.

<sup>6</sup> David Sears, *The Last Epic Naval Battle: Voices from Leyte Gulf* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 85–86.

<sup>7</sup> Cutler, 94–110.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Cutler, 121.



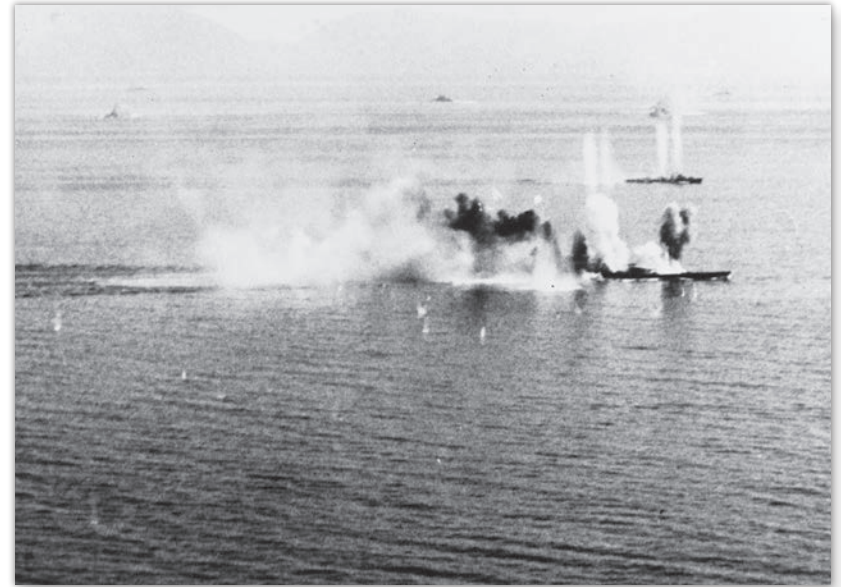
After her successful attacks on the Japanese Center Force, *Darter* (SS-227) ran aground on Bombay Shoal, off the island of Palawan. Note the damage caused by her crew's attempts to scuttle her (NHHC NH 63699).

The largest battleships ever built, the *Yamato*-class ships had been heralded as nigh unsinkable symbols of Japan's naval might.<sup>9</sup> Now, lacking air cover, they had become target practice for the determined squadrons of the Third Fleet, with *Musashi* alone taking 20 to 30 hits from bombs and torpedoes. Despite considerable effort being made to save her, she would sink at 1900, taking 1,100 sailors into the deep with her. Just prior to going down with his ship, Rear Admiral Toshihira Inoguchi allegedly expressed considerable regret at having placed so much faith in big guns and big ships.<sup>10</sup>

U.S. naval air power proved just as effective against airborne foes as it did against surface ones. Over the course of the battle, the Japanese sent three waves of 50 to 60 shore-based planes, all of which were fearlessly met by interceptors from the Third Fleet. During the first wave alone,

9 Cutler, 64–66.

10 Prados, 200–216.



The Japanese battleship *Musashi* under heavy attack during the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea, 24 October 1944 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-281765).

Commander David McCampbell and Lieutenant (j.g.) Roy W. Rushing, USNR, of aircraft carrier *Essex* (CV-9) shot down a combined 15 planes, with McCampbell's nine earning him the record for most kills in a single engagement and a Medal of Honor.<sup>11</sup> Despite such heroics, at least one Japanese plane did manage to get through and bomb small carrier *Princeton* (CVL-23) at 0938. Although the initial damage was not fatal, internal communication issues and repeated air raid alerts hindered attempts to control the ensuing fire. At 1523, the fire caused an explosion in her torpedo storage, which not only mortally wounded *Princeton*, but also caused significant casualties (229 killed, 420 wounded) on board the light cruiser *Birmingham* (CL-62). The latter had pulled alongside the small carrier to render assistance.<sup>12</sup>

11 Cutler, 121–28.

12 Samuel Eliot Morison, *Leyte: June 1944–January 1945*, vol. 12 of *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 177–83.



Crew members on *Birmingham* (CL-62) direct fire hoses at the burning *Princeton* (CVL-23) as their ship comes alongside to assist in damage control measures on 24 October 1944 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-270357).

This tragedy notwithstanding, the U.S. Navy's overall successes in the air were crucial in forcing Kurita to reverse course. With the operation having lost a significant number of aircraft even before it had begun, Kurita lacked the air cover necessary to fend off the swarms of bombers that Halsey launched at his force that day. Recognizing that he was at a severe disadvantage, the Japanese admiral retired westwards at 1600, both in the hopes of avoiding further damage and giving the impression that he was in full retreat. Despite the significant loss of *Musashi* and heavy cruiser *Myōkō* as well as the earlier losses he had sustained off Palawan, Kurita still retained a formidable force of 22 ships (four battleships, six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and ten destroyers). Although he could not possibly hope to compete against the Third Fleet, he still had sufficient numbers to attack the amphibious forces of the Seventh Fleet, assuming he could make it through the San Bernardino Strait unmolested. Hoping to bolster his fatigued commander's resolve, Admiral Soemu Toyoda,

commander in chief of the Combined Fleet, sent Kurita a message at 1800 with the exhortation, "Trusting in Divine guidance, resume the attack."<sup>13</sup>

Kurita's retreat marked the end of the first engagement of the Leyte campaign (the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea). While the U.S. Navy had suffered some casualties, they had inflicted far more damage on the Center Force. Despite these early successes, however, neither Halsey nor his staff could rest easy. To this point, most of the aircraft encountered by the Third Fleet had been shore-based, leading Halsey's air operations officer, Commander Horace D. Moulton, to eloquently inquire, "Where in the hell are those goddamn carriers!?"<sup>14</sup> Such questions only intensified when two air squadrons from *Enterprise* (CV-6) spotted Nishimura's Southern Force steaming through the Sulu Sea at 0820 without any carriers or fighter cover.<sup>15</sup> It would not be until 1245, when small carrier *Langley* (CVL-27) detected fighters inbound from the north, that they realized that the Japanese carriers were approaching from the *north*.

What they did not learn until much later is that the Northern Force was the decoy force outlined in the *Shō-1* plan. Indeed, Vice Admiral Ozawa was so eager to be found that he had repeatedly broken radio silence in the hopes of getting the Third Fleet's attention. When this failed to work, he launched nearly all of his aircraft (little more than 110 in all), both in the hopes of relieving pressure on Kurita's Center Force and attracting Halsey's notice. On the latter account, he succeeded, as planes from TG 38.3 discovered the Northern Force at 1640.<sup>16</sup> Having finally found his quarry, Halsey had to decide whether to pursue them or continue guarding the San Bernardino Strait in the event that the Center Force returned. Ever eager to go on the offensive, Halsey ultimately chose the former course, a decision that would eventually come to overshadow nearly everything that had been achieved at Sibuyan Sea.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Thomas, *Sea of Thunder*, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Halsey and Bryan, 216.

<sup>15</sup> Richard W. Bates, *Battle of Surigao Strait, October 24th–25th*, vol. 5 of *The Battle for Leyte Gulf, October 1944, Strategic and Tactical Analysis* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 1958), 189; Cutler, 139–41.

<sup>16</sup> Prados, 218.

We shall examine this decision momentarily, but for now, let us remain focused on the battle just fought. In certain respects, few naval battles of World War II demonstrate just how profoundly air power had reshaped naval warfare than Sibuyan Sea. Before the battle had even commenced, the Japanese had been placed at a severe (perhaps fatal) disadvantage with the loss of so many aircraft and experienced pilots in the Battle of Philippine Sea and over Formosa. Unable to muster sufficient air support for its upcoming mission, the Center Force would be forced to rely primarily on its anti-aircraft (AA) guns to counter the threat from the skies above, a rather inadequate solution as the loss of *Musashi* proved. Built to go head-to-head with any ship afloat, the majestic battleship was nonetheless largely rendered impotent by the lack of air support and the repeated air attacks against it. Her rather inglorious end was not only a huge blow to the Japanese, but also an unmistakable signal that the battleship era was swiftly drawing to a close. As we shall see, however, the battleships still had at least one more major engagement to fight.

### **Commander David McCampbell, Commander, Carrier Air Group 15**

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy (class of 1933), Captain David McCampbell's Navy career was almost over before it even began. Owing to the economic pressures the Navy faced due to the Great Depression, McCampbell and the lower half of his class received honorable discharges upon graduation and were commissioned in the U.S. Naval Reserve.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, McCampbell was recalled to active duty a year later, leading him to report on board *Portland* (CA-33) as an aircraft gunnery observer with Scouting Squadron 11. In 1937, he began flight training at Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida, where he earned his Wings of Gold on 23 April 1938. He subsequently served on board *Ranger* (CV-4) as part of Fighting Squadron Four (VF-4).<sup>2</sup>

McCampbell began World War II serving on *Wasp* (CV-7). Although he would later boast that he had made it through the war without ever being shot down,<sup>3</sup> his track record at sea was less than perfect, as he was forced to abandon ship when a Japanese submarine torpedoed *Wasp* on 15 September 1942. Returning stateside, McCampbell spent the next year serving as an instructor at naval air stations in Jacksonville, Florida, and Melbourne, Florida.

Opportunity would beckon for McCampbell in 1944. Assigned to *Essex*, McCampbell commanded Fighting Squadron 15 (VF-15) and, subsequently, Carrier Air Group 15 (CAG-15). Nicknamed the "Fabled Fifteen," the air group compiled an astounding record in just six months (May–November 1944), with 26 pilots qualifying as aces, including McCampbell.<sup>4</sup> On 19 June 1944, he led his pilots into combat at the Battle of Philippine Sea, taking on an attacking formation of 30 to 40 Japanese aircraft with just twelve Grumman F6F Hellcats. He shot down five enemy

1 McCampbell was commissioned in the Naval Reserve as an ensign. David Russell, *David McCampbell: Top Ace of U.S. Naval Aviation in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019), 12–14.

2 Edwin Hoyt, *McCampbell's Heroes: The Story of the U.S. Navy's Most Celebrated Carrier Fighters of the Pacific War* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1983), 13.

3 David McCampbell, *The Reminiscences of Captain David McCampbell U.S. Navy (Retired)* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 2010), 123.

4 To qualify as an ace, one had to shoot down at least five planes in the air. Hoyt, 218.



Carrier Air Group 15 Commander David McCampbell sits in the cockpit of his Grumman F6F Hellcat fighter, proudly showing off flags denoting the 30 Japanese planes he had shot down. The aircraft is on board *Essex* (CV-9), 29 October 1944 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-258198).

planes, then two more off Guam later that day, granting him the distinction of being an ace in a day.<sup>5</sup>

McCampbell would follow that up with an even more impressive performance at the Battle of Leyte Gulf on 24 October 1944, flying headlong into a formation of 60 Japanese planes and shooting down nine of them.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, McCampbell was not even supposed to go up in the air, having previously been instructed not to participate in actions that strictly involved fighter craft. However, a shortage of available pilots and aircraft meant that there was little choice but to let him go up along with Lieutenant (j.g.) Roy W. Rushing, USNR. Possessing the altitude advantage, the pair made a series of coordinated attacks, with each calling out which planes they were attacking. As McCampbell recalled, "I'd pick out my plane, then he'd [Rushing] make his. We'd make an attack, pull up, keep our altitude advantage, speed, and go down again. We repeated this over and over."<sup>7</sup> Their attack was so ferocious that by the end of the flight McCampbell had nine kills to his credit and only six rounds left in his starboard outboard gun.<sup>8</sup>

For his actions at both Leyte Gulf and Philippine Sea, McCampbell received the Medal of Honor. This would not be his only legacy. With a total of 34 confirmed aerial victories, he remains to this day the Navy's Ace of Aces and holds the records for most kills by an American pilot during a single tour of combat duty and the most kills during a single flight.<sup>9</sup> Despite these achievements, McCampbell was not content to rest on his laurels and bask in the fame he had achieved. Instead, he continued to serve in the Navy for nearly two decades, with subsequent tours as commanding officer of the oiler *Severn* (AO-61) and aircraft carrier *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA-31). He finally retired in 1964 at the rank of captain and passed away in 1996. In recognition of his service, the Navy christened the guided-missile destroyer DDG-85 as *McCampbell* on 2 July 2000.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Russell, 94–98.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, 4–8.

<sup>7</sup> McCampbell, 202.

<sup>8</sup> McCampbell, 203.

<sup>9</sup> McCampbell, 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, 205–213.



Crew members stationed in the sky control of *Pennsylvania* (BB-38) observe the Battle of Surigao Strait unfolding, 25 October 1944 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-288496).

### 3

#### **"MAKE ALL READY FOR NIGHT BATTLE": LAST CLASH OF THE BATTLESHIPS IN SURIGAO STRAIT**

Although the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea had offered yet another example of just how dramatically air power had changed naval warfare, the big guns of the battleship still had one last song to sing before their final curtain call. The stage for this final performance would be Surigao Strait; the leads, Rear Admiral Oldendorf and Vice Admiral Nishimura; the production, an updated interpretation of a maritime classic that had previously been performed at such illustrious venues as Tsushima in 1905, Jutland in 1916, and, on a smaller scale, at Guadalcanal in 1942. It was, to put it less poetically, a classic naval surface engagement between big-gun fleets, one which saw the combined forces of TG 77.2, TG 77.3, and Destroyer Squadron (DesRon) 56 absolutely decimate the Southern Force using the sort of maneuvers that could have come straight out of any war college textbook. While at least some of this outcome can be attributed to last-minute revisions to the *Shō-1* plan and poor coordination among the Japanese forces, it was also a rare example of a meticulously drawn-up battle plan being executed to near perfection.

In its earlier iterations, the *Shō-1* plan had not actually called for a separate force to attack Leyte through the Surigao Strait. Instead, the strait was supposed to serve as an exit for Kurita's force. However, at 1006 on 20 October, Vice Admiral Ryūnosuke Kusaka, Admiral Toyoda's chief of staff, recommended that Kurita detach part of his force to head through Surigao Strait so that they might attack the Seventh Fleet from both the north and the south. Kurita concurred with this recommendation and detached seven ships (including battleships *Fusō* and *Yamashiro*) under the command of Vice Admiral Nishimura. Curiously, it was around this

same time that Vice Admiral Shima received permission to also take the Second Striking Force through the Surigao Strait. One might assume that this force was intended to reinforce Nishimura's, but there does not actually appear to have been any coordination between the two, nor attempts from above to exercise greater command and control.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Kurita was not even aware that Shima had been assigned to the operation until after he had drawn up his plans for Nishimura.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, Nishimura's Southern Force would enter the strait ahead of the Second Striking Force.

Although the U.S. Navy would soon have to deal with its own coordination and communications issues, at least when it came to defending Surigao Strait, all commanders involved were very much on the same page. Once word arrived that some of *Enterprise's* planes had come into contact with Nishimura's force, Kinkaid sent a message to Oldendorf at 1443, ordering him to "Make all ready for night battle."<sup>3</sup> Consisting of approximately 40 ships, Oldendorf's forces (TG 77.2 and 77.3) already significantly outnumbered the seven ships of the incoming Southern Force. To further tilt the odds in their favor, Kinkaid also detached a group (TG 70.1) of motor torpedo boats (MTBs, also referred to as "PT boats") to patrol the southern end of the strait. These would serve as plywood forward sentries, informing Oldendorf when the Southern Force entered the strait and then harrying its ships until they came within range of his guns.

Having received his orders, Oldendorf set about developing a battle plan for the upcoming engagement. Taking advantage of the strait's geography, Oldendorf positioned his destroyers along both sides of the strait while his cruisers and battleships formed the main line across the strait. If all went according to plan, the incoming Japanese column would be subjected to torpedo attacks by the destroyers and then finished off by

- 1 Cutler, 95–96. Cutler speculates that part of the reason why they did not operate together is that the two admirals did not get along. Issues of seniority may have also played a role, as Nishimura was considered junior to Shima, despite having served longer.
- 2 Shima, it must be recalled, was under Ozawa and had initially been intended to serve as either the vanguard for the latter's fleet or to handle the counter-landings on Leyte. For more on Shima and the planning of the operation, see Anthony Tully, *Battle of Surigao Strait* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 20–28.
- 3 Quoted in Kenneth I. Friedman, *Afternoon of the Rising Sun: The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 2001), 197.

raking gunfire from the battleships and cruisers that formed Oldendorf's battle line. The latter's firing range would be somewhat limited by the fact that they were mainly carrying high-capacity (HC) explosive rounds meant for shore bombardments rather than armor-piercing (AP) rounds,<sup>4</sup> but this would not be a serious impediment in the forthcoming action.

From a tactical standpoint, Oldendorf's plan was quite sound, but, like any plan, its success would depend on those carrying it out. Wanting to make sure that his commanders had a thorough understanding of the plan and how it was to be carried out, Oldendorf invited his task force commanders, Rear Admiral George L. Weyler (the battle line) and Rear Admiral Russell S. Berkey (right flank) over to his flagship, heavy cruiser *Louisville* (CA-28), to discuss every aspect of it from necessary range of the guns to how best to utilize torpedoes.<sup>5</sup> According to Captain Roland N. Smoot, commander of DesRon 56, this was very much in character for Oldendorf. As he recalled, Oldendorf was "a very thorough and meticulous man, and one for whom I had the greatest admiration, because he left no stone unturned to be sure that all of his Commanding Officers were versed in the way he thought and how he was going to do this operation."<sup>6</sup> Such praise stands in stark contrast to some of the criticisms leveled at Oldendorf's opponent, Vice Admiral Nishimura, whose officers later questioned his "indifference at not attending the briefings,"<sup>7</sup> and the fact that his "tactical conceptions were quite different from those of the other ships under his command."<sup>8</sup>

With all preparations complete, there was little else Oldendorf and his forces could do but wait. Only vaguely aware of the force assembled to meet him in confines of the strait, Nishimura's Southern Force entered it around midnight and was almost immediately swarmed by MTBs. Although they failed to hit any of the Japanese ships with their torpedoes, they at least provided Oldendorf with crucial intelligence concerning the

- 4 Friedman, 200.
- 5 Jesse B. Oldendorf and Hawthorne Daniel, "As Seen from the Bridge: Glimpses Along the Sea Road to Tokyo, as Seen by an Admiral Enroute," 1945, Nimitz Library Special Collections & Archives, U.S. Naval Academy, 187–88.
- 6 Roland Smoot, *The Reminiscences of Vice Admiral Roland N. Smoot, U.S. Navy (Retired)* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1972), 126.
- 7 Tully, 49.
- 8 Interrogation Nav No. 79, USSBS No. 390, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 351.



PT-131 (foreground) and other motor torpedo boats prepare for the Battle of Surigao Strait on 24 October 1944. Note the Mark XIII torpedoes, rockets, mortar (atop PT-131's forward deckhouse), 20mm machine cannon and 50-caliber machine guns carried by these PT boats. (NARA, NHHC 80-G-345819).

disposition and composition of the enemy fleet. Almost immediately, he knew that seven or eight ships were proceeding through the strait and that they would reach his position in approximately two and a half hours.<sup>9</sup>

While awaiting the arrival of the Southern Force, Oldendorf worried that Nishimura would stop and reverse course in an attempt to draw him deeper into the strait. He need not have been concerned, as Nishimura instead moved his destroyers to the front of the column and increased his speed. The admiral could scarcely believe his good fortune. Although he had planned for this possibility, he had not actually expected the Japanese to engage in such a reckless maneuver, one that would leave them exposed to gunfire from his entire battle line while limiting them to using just their forward guns. Known as “crossing the T,” this was exactly the sort of scenario “dreamed of, studied, and plotted in War College maneuvers and

<sup>9</sup> This intelligence came from PT-130 and was transmitted by PT-127. Sears, 104–110.

never hoped to be obtained.”<sup>10</sup> The Japanese had defeated the Russians at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 using this maneuver and now they were poised to be on the receiving end of it. As Oldendorf recalled, “It can readily be seen that the force at my disposal was enormously superior to the Southern Japanese Force. . . . Is it any wonder that I could not quite believe that this far outmatched Jap force would really run headlong into us?”<sup>11</sup>

Oldendorf’s incredulity was understandable, but it must be emphasized that the Southern Force’s strategy was very much in line with the daring and desperation that underlay other parts of the *Shō-1* plan. While his orders had only stated that he was to transit the Surigao Strait and rendezvous with the Center Force in Leyte Gulf, Nishimura was wise enough to know that his mission was likely one-way, intended primarily to divert part of the Seventh Fleet similar to how Ozawa’s carriers were intended to distract the Third Fleet. Even knowing this, Nishimura was determined to carry out his mission at all costs, perhaps believing that his forces might either win, or at least, distract Oldendorf’s ships long enough to allow Kurita’s Center Force more time and opportunity to penetrate Leyte Gulf and destroy the amphibious shipping.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of Nishimura’s intentions and expectations, Oldendorf was not about to give him any quarter. Muttering, “This is going to be good,”<sup>13</sup> he ordered his ships to open fire on the approaching Southern Force at 0240. The destroyers were the first to attack, launching wave upon wave of torpedoes that would punch into the hulls of the vulnerable Japanese ships. In the first half hour alone, the Japanese Southern Force would

<sup>10</sup> Commanding Officer (USS *Louisville*), “Action Report, U.S.S. *LOUISVILLE* (CA-28) for the Night Surface Engagement off SURIGAO STRAIT, Leyte Gulf, Philippine Islands on 25 October 1944,” Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Oldendorf, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Tully, 43–49. Although there is no documentation that expressly states that this was a suicide mission, Tully compellingly argues that it was indeed planned as such and that Admiral Nishimura was quite aware of this fact. On the other hand, Commander Shigeru Nishino of destroyer *Shigure*, the only commanding officer of Nishimura’s force to survive the battle, maintained that he and his fellow officers believed that they could force the strait and that both sides’ naval strength would be relatively balanced. Interrogation Nav No. 79, USSBS No. 390, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 342.

<sup>13</sup> Oldendorf, 199–200.



suffer significant casualties, with *Fusō* and *Yamashiro* receiving significant damage, while destroyers *Asagumo* and *Michishio* were disabled entirely. Destroyer *Yamagumo*, on the other hand, exploded in spectacular fashion, quickly sinking within a matter of minutes. According to an eyewitness, the fiery wreckage made a sizzling sound as it sank into the water, “like a huge red-hot iron plunged into water.”<sup>14</sup> All of this was before Oldendorf had even brought his cruisers and battleships forward.

Prior to World War II, the U.S. and Japan had expected their big-gun fleets to play a critical role in any hostilities, but the emergence of the aircraft carrier and naval air power had largely relegated the battleship to the sidelines of many engagements and left them to serve as oversized escort ships.<sup>15</sup> Now, they were involved in just the sort of battle for which they had been designed. After Oldendorf’s cruisers engaged the enemy at 0351, his battleships’ 14- and 16-inch guns roared to life at around 0353. Fittingly, one of the opening shots was fired by *West Virginia* (BB-48), which had been sunk during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Raised from the harbor and refitted, she and her sister ships had waited three long years for this very moment. She made it count, hitting Nishimura’s flagship *Yamashiro* dead on with her very first salvo.<sup>16</sup>

Much to his chagrin, Oldendorf saw very little of this. In his zeal to see *Louisville*’s big guns in action, he had failed to shield his eyes, causing him to be temporarily blinded when they fired.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, DesRon 56 commander Captain Smoot was able to provide him with a rather poetic description of the action, observing, “The devastating accuracy of this gunfire was the most beautiful sight I have ever witnessed. The arched line of tracers in the darkness looked like a continual stream of lighted railroad



Top: Sailors in a motor launch rescue a survivor from the water alongside the sunken *West Virginia* (BB-48) during or shortly after the Japanese air raid on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-19930). Bottom: The resurrected *West Virginia* anchored just outside of Tokyo Bay, c. August 1945. Mt. Fuji is in the background (NHHC NH 89362).

14 Quoted in Tully, 158. For a detailed summation of the battle’s early action, see Tully, 149–64.

15 Cutler, 46–47. The one notable exception was the Second Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (14–15 November 1942), in which USS *Washington* (BB-56) and USS *South Dakota* (BB-57) fired upon and sank the Japanese battleship *Kirishima* and destroyer *Ayanami*. See Mark Evans, “*South Dakota* II (BB-57), 1941–1942,” *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, last modified 12 November 2015, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhnc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/south-dakota-ii-bb57-1941-42.html>.

16 Robert C. Stern, *Big Gun Battles: Warship Duels of the Second World War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 209–17; Tully, 191.

17 Oldendorf, 202–3.



U.S. cruisers firing on the Japanese Southern Force in the Surigao Strait, 25 October 1944. (NARA, NHHC 80-G-288493).

cars going over a hill. No target could be observed at first, then shortly there would be fires and explosions, and another enemy ship would be accounted for.”<sup>18</sup>

From the Japanese perspective, the reality of the situation was far less idyllic than Smoot had described. Oldendorf’s ships absolutely decimated the Southern Force, ultimately sinking five vessels including *Fusō* and Nishimura’s flagship *Yamashiro*. On board the two battleships alone, 3,500 hands went to the bottom of the strait,<sup>19</sup> almost one and a half times the number killed at Pearl Harbor. By the time Shima’s force finally arrived, only *Mogami* and *Shigure* were still afloat (although the former would soon have to be abandoned and ultimately scuttled). Amazingly, no one among those on board the surviving ships thought to warn Shima what

18 Commander Destroyer Squadron 56, “Action-Report—Battle of SURIGAO STRAIT, 24–25 October 1944,” Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives, 7.

19 Craig Symonds, *World War II at Sea: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 577.

awaited him at the other end of the strait. It was only as he got closer to Oldendorf’s position and saw the strait lit up by the burning, twisted hulks of sinking ships that he learned of the Southern Force’s fate. Recognizing the futility of pressing forward, he retreated southward.<sup>20</sup>

Compared to the significant casualties they had inflicted on the Japanese, the Allied losses had been fairly minimal save for those on board destroyer *Albert W. Grant* (DD-649). In one of the war’s tragic ironies, the ship had experienced engine trouble during the battle, leaving it exposed to the withering crossfire from both *Yamashiro* and Oldendorf’s battle line. Smoot’s enthusiasm turned to horror when he realized what was happening. He immediately got on the radio at 0408 and alerted Oldendorf that, “You are firing on ComDesron 56! We are in the middle of the channel!”<sup>21</sup> By the time Oldendorf’s battle line stopped firing, 34 men were dead or dying. More might have perished had their commanding officer, Commander Terrell A. Nisewaner, not descended into the forward engine room (one of the hardest-hit areas of the ship) and carried out a number of wounded.<sup>22</sup>

Even accounting for this tragedy, Surigao Strait was still arguably one of the more lopsided naval victories of World War II, one that to this day stands as both the last engagement fought directly between battleships and one of the few in which a fleet successfully crossed its opponent’s “T.” While the ultimate outcome was not particularly in doubt given Oldendorf’s numerical superiority and the Southern Force’s suicidal approach, the engagement could have exacted a considerably higher toll on the U.S. ships had the planning or the execution been lackluster. Neither was, however, something which is attributable in part to the high degree of preparedness of all involved. As Captain Jack H. Duncan of light cruiser *Phoenix* (CL-46) enthused in his after-action report, “I was most forcibly impressed with the calmness and coolness of action of all hands.

20 Tully, 220–29.

21 Quoted in Tully, 213.

22 Cutler, 195–98. Nisewaner received the Navy Cross for his actions. Smoot recalled recommending him for the Medal of Honor, but stated that this recommendation went nowhere. No additional evidence for this claim has been found, however. Smoot, *Reminiscences*, 139; WWII Award Card Files, NHHC Archives.



PT-321 picks up Japanese survivors in the Surigao Strait on or around 25 October 1944. Note the second man in the water alongside the PT vessel. (NARA, NHHC 80-G-285970).

Here was the peak of every naval fighting man's ambition – a major surface engagement! Here we were in a situation which every officer and man in the Navy not present with us, would literally give a right arm to share! Here we were carrying the ball in the pay off! One would think from observing that a routine drill was being carried out in oil smooth fashion.”<sup>23</sup>

Oldendorf deserves at least some of the credit for this as he not only drew up the battle plan for the engagement, but also ensured that those involved had a firm understanding of it. The CINCPOA report on the operation praised Oldendorf as “a man holding a handful of aces or trumps,” who “played them with consummate skill.”<sup>24</sup> For his part, Oldendorf merely noted, “Luck plays a part in any battle. I myself, I admit,

<sup>23</sup> Commanding Officer (USS *Phoenix*), “Report of Action of SURIGAO STRAITS, Philippine Islands, 25 October, 1944,” Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives, 11.

<sup>24</sup> CINCPOA, “Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas during the Month of October, 1944,” Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, 80.

after 40 years of training, was lucky to be there in command. But the force that I commanded was well balanced and war seasoned—manned by able officers and men who, when the order came to open fire, knew what to do—and did it.”<sup>25</sup> Such modesty characterized Oldendorf's views on command and its role in winning battles. As he reflected at another point in his memoir, “Neither land nor sea battles are any longer won (if they ever were) by the unaided genius of any individual who suddenly changes the whole course of action by some order that proves to be so clear and so unanswerable as instantly to decide the outcome.”<sup>26</sup> Left unsaid is the fact that while battles might not be won by the “unaided genius” of individuals, they can indeed be lost on account of it. Such was nearly the case of Admiral Halsey and his fateful decision to pursue the Northern Force.

<sup>25</sup> Oldendorf, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Oldendorf, 100.



Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf (NARA, NHHC 80-G-451546).

### **Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf, Commander, Task Group 77.2 (Fire Support and Bombardment Group)**

For the first two years of U.S. involvement in World War II, Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf yearned for an assignment at sea. Having served in the Philippines as commanding officer of *Houston* (CA-30) from 1939 to 1941, he had departed the theater that September with the utmost reluctance when orders came for him to join the staff of the Naval War College. Once hostilities commenced in December, Oldendorf made it plain to his superiors that he strongly desired to return to sea. "Sea duty is what every sailor wants," he later wrote, "when, after so many years of preparation—the time against which we have prepared has come."<sup>1</sup>

Sea duty would have to wait, however, as Oldendorf was first assigned to take command of the Allied antisubmarine efforts in the Aruba-Curaçao sector of the Caribbean Sea Frontier in February 1942. As part of his responsibilities, Oldendorf would command not only Navy units, but Dutch and U.S. Army ones as well. Despite some initial tensions with the Dutch, Oldendorf acquitted himself quite well, earning their trust and respect. Owing to this success, he was subsequently assigned to the Trinidad Sector in July 1942, and then as Commander, Task Force 24 at Naval Operating Base, Argentia, Newfoundland, in April 1943, working closely with the Army and the British in both instances to put an end to U-boat attacks along critical convoy routes.<sup>2</sup>

Even with his considerable success in these assignments, Oldendorf characterized it as the "hard work and drudgery of war, not the brilliant battle action that makes headlines" and continued to hold out hope that he might see the "really dramatic side of war."<sup>3</sup> His wish was granted in November 1943, when he was assigned to Cruiser Division Four in the Pacific. Steaming out from Pearl Harbor, Oldendorf's ships provided fire support for amphibious operations in the Marshall and Palau Islands. It was while stationed off Peleliu in September 1944 that Oldendorf controversially halted shore bombardment operations a day early, believing that all available targets had been destroyed. This would have tragic consequences, as most of the Japanese defenders had survived the bombardment, enabling them to take up position on the north and south flanks of the landing beaches.

<sup>1</sup> Oldendorf, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Oldendorf, 9–51.

<sup>3</sup> Oldendorf, 39, 44.

They would inflict considerable casualties on the Marines attempting to secure a beachhead.<sup>4</sup>

Oldendorf would find some measure of redemption in the Philippines. Leading Task Group (TG) 77.2 (Fire Support and Bombardment Group), his ships expertly swept mines and cleared the shores ahead of the amphibious landings at Leyte, and then subsequently decimated Nishimura's Southern Force at Surigao Strait on 25 October 1944. Later, at Lingayen Gulf on 6 January 1945, Oldendorf's group came under sustained attack from kamikazes, which inflicted severe damage on multiple ships. His own flagship, *California* (BB-44), was not only struck on the main mast by one of the planes, but also hit by friendly fire when a nearby ship tried to take down a low-flying kamikaze. Nonetheless, the bombardment group carried out its mission, enabling the U.S. Sixth Army to land on the beaches unopposed on 9 January.<sup>5</sup>

The remaining months of the war would offer a different set of challenges for Oldendorf. Although he was supposed to participate in the invasion of Okinawa, he suffered significant injuries to his ribs and collarbone when the motor boat he was on collided with a buoy on 10 March 1945. He would eventually recover and return to sea, but his streak of ill luck continued as he was again injured when his flagship, *Pennsylvania* (BB-38), was torpedoed by a Japanese plane off Okinawa on 12 August 1945, just three days before Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender.<sup>6</sup>

Following the war, Oldendorf assumed command of the Eleventh Naval District in San Diego, California, and Naval Operating Base, San Diego. In February 1947, he was appointed commander of the Western Sea Frontier, a post which he held until his retirement in 1948. Promoted to the rank of admiral upon retirement, he enjoyed a quiet life until his passing in 1974.<sup>7</sup> The Navy would posthumously honor him by naming destroyer *Oldendorf* (DD-972) after him in 1978. While he would never enjoy the sort of postwar fame that some of his peers attracted, Oldendorf still holds the distinction of being the last person to hold overall command in an engagement between battleships and also one of the few naval officers who can claim to have successfully crossed an enemy's "T."

<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Gayle, *Bloody Beaches: The Marines at Peleliu* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1996), 7; Oldendorf, "As Seen from the Bridge," 137–48.

<sup>5</sup> Oldendorf, 156–239.

<sup>6</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command, "Jesse Barrett Oldendorf, 16 February 1887–27 April 1974," Modern Biographical Files, Navy Department Library, last modified 20 March 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/modern-biographical-files-ndl/modern-bios-o/oldendorf-jesse-barrett.html>.

<sup>7</sup> NHHC, "Jesse Barrett Oldendorf."

## 4

### "WHERE IS TASK FORCE 34?": DECISION AND INDECISION OFF CAPE ENGAÑO

Following the Battle of Sibuyan Sea, Bill Halsey had a critical decision to make, one which, in his view had the potential to not only influence the outcome of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but the war itself. To the north, just off Luzon, lay the Japanese carrier fleet that had served as the heart of Japan's naval might since the war's beginning. To the west lay the Center Force, which had been bloodied, but could potentially resume its approach toward San Bernardino Strait. Both posed potential threats to the Leyte operation, but, in Halsey's view, only one of them could be dealt with at a time. Faced with the choice of going on the offensive against the Japanese carriers or guarding the strait against a possible attack from the Center Force, Halsey chose the former option, and, in doing so, exposed the Seventh Fleet to a devastating attack. Controversial even at the time it was made, Halsey's decision is a cautionary tale that highlights the need to maintain flexibility of thought in the heat of battle. It also highlights the importance of establishing clear channels of communication among forces, firm awareness of the overall strategic objectives, and creating a command culture that both permits and encourages collaboration and criticism.

Given its significance, it is just as important to analyze why Halsey made his decision as it is to understand its fateful consequences. It must be strongly emphasized at the outset that Halsey's decision to pursue the Japanese carrier force was not an inherently poor one nor was it entirely unworkable. While it is true that the Northern Force was intended to serve as decoy and possessed very few carrier-based aircraft, Halsey knew neither of these things for certain. In fact, all he knew *at the time* was that there was a sizable enemy carrier force to the north, one that likely



Commander, Third Fleet, Admiral William F. Halsey confers with his staff on board *New Jersey* (BB-62), c. December 1944. Rear Admiral Robert B. Carney, Halsey's chief of staff, is seated to the right of him (NHHC NH 124377).

possessed the capability to strike at both him and other forces operating in and around Leyte. Equally important, the Northern Force's proximity to Luzon might have enabled its aircraft to rearm and refuel ashore, allowing them to conduct shuttle bombing runs. Given these possibilities, one can understand why Halsey deemed the Northern Force a more significant threat than it actually was.<sup>1</sup>

Even bearing this in mind, the innately pugnacious admiral still had to weigh these considerations against the possibility that Kurita's Center Force would return and try to slip through the San Bernardino Strait. Halsey did not consider this likely, having been led to believe by his pilots' reports that the Japanese Center Force was considerably more damaged than it actually was. As he wrote in his action report, "Jap doggedness was admitted, and Commander THIRD Fleet recognized the possibility that the Center Force might plod through the San Bernardino Straits and on to

1 Halsey and Bryan, 216.

attack Leyte forces, a la Guadalcanal, but Commander THIRD Fleet was convinced that the Center Force was so heavily damaged that it could not possibly win a decision."<sup>2</sup> Halsey and his staff probably should have been more skeptical of their pilots' claims (aviators on both sides notoriously inflated the number of enemy ships destroyed), but again, this was all the intelligence they had to work with.

Given these possibilities, Halsey had to carefully weigh the prospect of destroying the Japanese carrier force against the need to defend San Bernardino Strait. Theoretically, he could have achieved both ends by leaving behind a portion of his forces to guard the strait while he proceeded north with the remainder. However, the notion of dividing one's forces was antithetical to one of the prevailing strategic principles of the time, namely, that it was imperative to always concentrate one's forces.<sup>3</sup> Deeply influenced by the ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan and the exploits of Vice-Admiral Nelson, Halsey was not about to violate this seemingly core tenet of naval strategy, particularly if it meant leaving TF 34 without air support.<sup>4</sup> As such, the choice between pursuing the carriers and defending the strait was, in Halsey's view, a purely binary one.

Prudence would have dictated that Halsey should guard the strait, but as Commander Ralph "Rollo" Wilson Jr., USNR, his operations officer, argued, this would be akin to watching "a rat hole, waiting for the rats."<sup>5</sup> Aware of the criticism Spruance had endured for demonstrating too much "nuance" at Philippine Sea and believing that destruction of the carriers would "mean much to future operations,"<sup>6</sup> Halsey was not about to let them escape. Indeed, to do so would go against the very core of his command philosophy. As he later wrote in his autobiography, "If any principle of naval warfare is burned into my brain, it is that the best defense is a strong offense—that as Lord Nelson wrote in a memorandum to his officers

2 United States Pacific Third Fleet, "Action Report – Period 23–26 October 1944, both dates inclusive," Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives, 4–5.

3 Cutler, 137–38; Trent Hone, *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 297–98.

4 It is possible that the Seventh Fleet could have provided air support for TF 34, but such a contingency may not have been planned for.

5 Quoted in Thomas, 218.

6 Third Fleet, "Action Report," 5.

before the Battle of Trafalgar, ‘No Captain can do very wrong If he places his Ship alongside that of an Enemy.’”<sup>7</sup>

In an age in which fleets were regularly attacking each other from hundreds of miles away, beyond the horizon, with technology undreamt of in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, relying on the wisdom of Horatio Nelson might seem imprudent, but in fairness to Halsey, he was not the only officer of his generation who had worshipped at the twin altars of Nelson and Mahan. We must remember, after all, that when Halsey and his fellow officers first entered the Naval Academy, naval aviation did not even exist and the most recent naval battles during their lifetimes were Commodore George Dewey’s triumph at the Battle of Manila Bay and Rear Admiral Winfield S. Schley’s at the Battle of Santiago de Cuba in 1898. For them, the model of a successful officer was one who had been in the thick of the action, fighting ship-to-ship engagements with, at best, a small number of ships. Although Halsey would adapt very well to the many technological and doctrinal shifts that had subsequently occurred (he had even earned his naval aviator wings), at heart he was still very much a traditionalist, eager to take direct command of any situation and to engage the enemy aggressively.

Such qualities had served Halsey quite well in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, when the Navy’s collective morale stood on a knife’s edge and bold action was needed to dispel the aura of invincibility that surrounded the Combined Fleet. The situation had changed considerably since that time with carrier duels having largely given way to support operations for amphibious assaults such as the one in which the Third and Seventh Fleets were now engaged. Such operations required both a greater degree of strategic flexibility and a support-oriented mindset to achieve their objectives, namely, protecting and assisting the troops on shore while denying the enemy supplies and reinforcements. Halsey had begrudgingly adapted to this new reality during his campaigns against New Georgia and Bougainville,<sup>8</sup> but he never lost his instinctive aggressiveness nor his desire to go toe-to-toe with the Japanese fleet on the high seas.

<sup>7</sup> Halsey and Bryan, 128.

<sup>8</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of some of Halsey’s earlier struggles in these amphibious campaigns, see Hughes, 274–300.

Now, at Leyte Gulf, this instinct threatened to get the better of him. Even before the Combined Fleet appeared, Halsey chafed at the “restrictions” imposed by having to cover the landings and asked permission to operate out of the South China Sea. Nimitz reminded him that “There was no shortage of tasks set forth in his Operation Plan No. 8-44 and that any restrictions imposed by covering the SOUTHWEST PACIFIC Forces were unavoidable.” MacArthur also admonished Halsey that, “The basic plan for this operation in which for the first time I have moved beyond my own land-based air cover was predicated upon full support by the Third Fleet; such cover being expedited by every possible measure, but until accomplished our mass of shipping is subject to enemy air and surface raiding during this critical period; . . . consider your mission to cover this operation is essential and paramount.”<sup>10</sup> None of this seems to have made a deep impression on Halsey. Latching onto the caveat in his original orders, he was prepared to risk leaving the San Bernardino Strait unguarded in order to pursue Ozawa’s carriers. From his perspective, destroying the carriers was not only an opportunity to mortally wound the Japanese fleet, but also an opportunity to achieve something that, “I had dreamed of since my days as a cadet.”<sup>11</sup>

This aggressive, individualist attitude appears to have not only influenced Halsey’s decision-making, but also filtered down to his staff. Although all were competent, outspoken officers in their own right, “group think” appears to have taken hold during deliberations on board battleship *New Jersey* (BB-62), Halsey’s flagship, with almost all of those involved readily assenting to his plan.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps as a consequence of this, Halsey did not consult his plans, intelligence, or radio officers, nor for that matter, any of his task group commanders. Had he done so, he might have received a very different set of opinions. Commander Marion “Mike” C. Cheek, USNR, his intelligence officer, told Moulton, “They’re

<sup>9</sup> CINCPAC, “Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas during the Month of October, 1944,” 57.

<sup>10</sup> [Maj. Gen. Charles Willoughby and] General Staff, *Reports of General MacArthur: The Campaigns of MacArthur in the Pacific*, vol. 1. (1966: repr., Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1994), 218.

<sup>11</sup> Halsey and Bryan, 221.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, 217–22.

coming through [the San Bernardino Strait], I know, I've played poker with them."<sup>13</sup> Unable to convince Moulton, he took the matter to Halsey's chief of staff, Rear Admiral Robert B. Carney, hoping to persuade him to wake the admiral. Carney was reluctant to wake Halsey, but told Cheek he was more than welcome to do so with the warning that Halsey had been without sleep for 48 hours and that he had already overruled the last person who dissented. Cheek chose to walk away. As he recalled years later, "I silently agreed that any effort on my part would be useless."<sup>14</sup>



Commander Marion "Mike" C. Cheek, USNR (NHHC TR-12508).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, 106, 160. Cheek had previously resigned from the Navy in 1919 to pursue business interests in the Far East. His frequent dealings with the Japanese (including playing poker) provided him with a considerable amount of insight into their mindset, which he would subsequently use to great effect when he rejoined the Navy as an intelligence officer. Rear Admiral Robert B. Carney, Halsey's chief of staff, praised Cheek as being the staff officer who came closest to "thinking like a Jap."

<sup>14</sup> Cheek to Clark Reynolds, 16 June 1955, quoted in Thomas, 231.

Others were similarly deterred from pressing the point. During the transit northward, planes from *Independence* (CVL-22) spotted navigation lights along the San Bernardino strait and possibly even Kurita's Center Force. Vice Admiral Gerald F. Bogan attempted to report this information to Halsey, but, as the admiral was resting, one of his staff brushed him off. Vice Admiral Willis A. Lee, Jr., likewise was ignored when he attempted to reach Halsey in the hopes of being detached to guard the strait.<sup>15</sup> Commodore Arleigh A. Burke did not even get that far. As he recollected, when he went to Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher to send a dispatch, the admiral told him, "There's nothing worse than changing orders in a battle, then having a subordinate come in and criticize a plan that's being executed. . . . I don't think we ought to bother Admiral Halsey. He's busy enough." Burke was not deterred. He went back and rewrote the dispatch he drafted to suggest leaving behind a force of battleships and one task group to guard the strait. Again, Mitscher rebuffed him, stating, "Admiral Halsey is in command. He has all the information. He's drawn different conclusions than we have. He can be right. If we start making critical analyses, it's going to confuse an already hectic operation."<sup>16</sup>

Mitscher's subdued reaction and refusal to send Burke's dispatch were rather uncharacteristic, as he normally had no hesitation about forcefully articulating his opinion to his superiors. Some have speculated that he was smarting from Halsey having shunted him aside to assume direct control over carrier operations, while others, such as Burke, have drawn attention to the fact that he was in rather poor health by this point in the war. His assertiveness may have also been tempered by previous experiences, namely, the Battle of the Philippine Sea, in which his attempts to urge Spruance to go on the offensive received a cold reception.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the case may be, this was precisely the wrong time for him and Halsey's other commanders to show deference and assume that the admiral had "all the information" or that "any effort" to persuade him "would be useless." Just as a ship requires its crew to assume a questioning attitude and provide

<sup>15</sup> Cutler, 208–13.

<sup>16</sup> Arleigh Burke, *Reminiscences of Admiral Arleigh Burke, USN Retired*, Special Series on Selected Subjects, Vol. 1 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979): 398–99

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, 123–25



forceful backup,<sup>18</sup> so too do senior commanders need their subordinates to speak up when they appear to have overlooked something. Unfortunately, Halsey's subordinates were either unwilling or unable to express their concerns, something which may have been the product of the admiral's own forceful personality and an unwillingness to solicit opinions from those outside of his inner circle.

This breakdown in communications extended beyond the Third Fleet. While Halsey was deciding how best to proceed, he sent messages to Nimitz and Admiral Ernest J. King stating that TF 34 "will be formed." In his view, the wording indicated this was merely a contingency, but both Nimitz and King assumed otherwise. So, too, did Kinkaid, who had intercepted the message even though it had not been addressed to him. Consequently, when Halsey messaged Kinkaid at 2024 to indicate



Commander, Task Force 58 Vice Admiral Marc "Pete" A. Mitscher consults with his chief of staff, Commodore Arleigh A. Burke, during operations off Okinawa, c. May 1945 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-468931).

18 Forceful backup and a questioning attitude are two out of the six Sound Shipboard Operating Principles and Procedures (SSOPP) (also known as Watchstanding Principles) taught to today's sailors.

that he was, "proceeding north with 3 groups to attack enemy carrier force at dawn," the Seventh Fleet commander assumed that Halsey had left a fourth group (TF 34) behind to guard the San Bernardino Strait. What Halsey really meant to say was that his group *and* three others were proceeding northward.<sup>19</sup>

Unaware that his messages were being misinterpreted, Halsey concentrated his forces at 2345 and began his run northward. Although Mitscher had anticipated encountering the enemy fleet at around 0430, TF 38's search planes lost contact with the Northern Force during the night. Not wanting to lose the initiative, Mitscher launched not only his search planes at dawn but also his air patrol and strike group. The latter would trail behind the search planes, ready to strike as soon as contact was made. This much-awaited event came at 0735, when one of the planes caught sight of the Northern Force approximately 140 miles east of TF 38's position. Wasting no time, the first strike group launched their attack at 0810. Both they and Halsey were surprised at the absence of planes in the air and on the decks of the Japanese carriers, but it was assumed that they had merely surprised the Japanese at an inopportune moment. Quickly dispatching the 15 or so aircraft that were covering the Northern Force, the first strike group hammered the Northern Force, sinking small carrier *Chitose*.<sup>20</sup>

TF 38 was just about to launch its second strike group when Halsey received an urgent dispatch from Kinkaid. Delivered in plain language, Kinkaid alerted Halsey that, "Enemy BB and cruiser reported firing on TU 77.4.3 from 15 miles astern."<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter, he sent another dispatch, stating, "Urgently need fast BBs Leyte Gulf at once." Several more requests of this nature followed over the course of the next hour and a half, much to Halsey's aggravation. From his point of view, not only should Kinkaid and Rear Admiral Clifton A. F. Sprague have detected the Center Force passing through the San Bernardino Strait, but they should have had more than enough ships to repulse it. It was not until he received another missive from Kinkaid informing him that Oldendorf's battleships were low on

19 Cutler, 170–72.

20 Woodward, 129–40.

21 Quoted in Cutler, 237.



Japanese aircraft carrier *Zuiho* under attack by planes from *Enterprise* (CV-6) during the Battle of Cape Engaño, 25 October 1944 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-281768).

ammunition that he began to grasp the severity of the situation.<sup>22</sup> Even so, Halsey felt there was little he could do save detach TG 38.1 under Vice Admiral John S. McCain, which, at this point, was en route from Ulithi.

At 1000, just as the second striking group was beginning its run against the Northern Force, Halsey received another message, this one from none other than Admiral Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas (CINCPAC/CINCPAO). It read: "WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK FORCE THIRTY FOUR THE WORLD WONDERS." The last part was originally just padding that had been added by a junior communications officer in order to complicate Japanese decryption attempts, but it somehow made its way into the message Halsey received. Believing that Nimitz had just slighted him, Halsey reacted with characteristic fury, only calming down when his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Carney, admonished him with the sternest possible language.

<sup>22</sup> Halsey and Bryan, 220.

With his battleships just 42 miles away from the Northern Force, Halsey was on the verge of fulfilling his dream to engage the enemy fleet head-on. However, he knew that he could no longer ignore the dire situation in the south. Thus, with great reluctance, he ordered part of TF 34 (including his own flagship *New Jersey*) to detach itself and turn south. Ironically, having justified his decision to head north as being based on the need to maintain concentration of his forces, he was now dividing them.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, by this point, the battle's outcome was not really in doubt. After the third strike at 1435, the Japanese task force was pretty much finished, having lost, or on the verge of losing, two destroyers, one cruiser, and four carriers. The latter group included *Zuikaku*, the last surviving carrier to have participated in the attack on Pearl Harbor. More strikes would be launched over the remainder of the day, but, for all intents and purposes, the Battle of Cape Engaño had become a cleanup operation. Even so, Halsey would have given much to participate in this. Having missed his opportunity to do battle with a Japanese fleet, he would find himself similarly frustrated when he reached San Bernardino Strait. By that point, the action off Samar had ended and the Center Force had retreated through the strait.<sup>24</sup> He would later bitterly reflect that, "My *real* mistake was in turning around."<sup>25</sup>

The only battle left for Halsey to fight that day would be the one to salvage his reputation. Although his superiors did not openly criticize him, many fumed privately at his decision to leave San Bernardino Strait unguarded. According to Lieutenant General Richard K. Sutherland, MacArthur's chief of staff, his boss seethed, charging Halsey "with failure to execute his mission of covering the Leyte operations. . . . Gen. MacArthur repeatedly stated that Halsey should be relieved and would welcome his

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the controversial memo and its various versions, see Cutler, 249–52.

<sup>24</sup> Cutler, 260–61.

<sup>25</sup> Russell F. Anderson, "Admiral Halsey Tells: 'My real mistake at Leyte Gulf'," *American Weekly*, 26 October 1952, 29.

relief as he no longer had confidence in him.”<sup>26</sup> Back in Washington, Admiral William D. Leahy, the President’s chief of staff, also had watched the situation unfold with increasing horror. In his assessment of Halsey’s actions, he noted, “We did not lose the war on account of it, but I don’t see why we didn’t. . . . I thought we were going to. Halsey started a little war of his own.”<sup>27</sup>

For the remainder of the hostilities, this criticism would remain behind closed doors. It would only be after the war, when Halsey published his autobiography and laid the blame squarely at the feet of Kinkaid, that the controversy became public and turned into a battle in its own right.<sup>28</sup> True to form, Halsey refused to back down, maintaining that he had made the right call. Not many were inclined to agree with him. While the outcome of the Battle of Cape Engaño was, on its own, one that the Navy could rightfully take pride in, it came at the expense of the Seventh Fleet and was a product of a decision that was made without consideration for the overall mission or the flexibility to adapt to the situation at hand. Not surprisingly, Halsey would maintain until the bitter end that his mission was an offensive one, but he did ruefully concede at one point that, “I wish that Spruance had been with Mitscher at Leyte Gulf and I had been with Mitscher in the Battle of the Philippine Sea.”<sup>29</sup> On this count, he was not alone, as many among and outside the Seventh Fleet held a rather similar attitude,<sup>30</sup> particularly those who had survived the fateful consequences of Halsey’s actions. For them, glory was not something to be pursued, but rather, something that they would have thrust upon them.

26 Quoted in Thomas, 325. Although MacArthur publicly backed Halsey and forbade his staff from openly criticizing the admiral, raw feelings still abounded as evidenced by the fact that Sutherland handwrote this account on the bottom of the congratulatory telegram MacArthur sent to Halsey on 29 October. For more on MacArthur and Halsey, see Paul Rogers, *The Bitter Years: MacArthur and Sutherland* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 188.

27 “Leahy Says Top Brass Feared Halsey Had Lost War at Leyte,” *Washington Evening Star*, 31 October 1953.

28 William F. Halsey and Joseph Bryan III, “Admiral Halsey Tells His Story, Pt. VII,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 July 1947, 63–72. For a concise summary of the ensuing debate, see Cutler, 283–97.

29 Statement made to Theodore Taylor, 9 April 1953. Quoted in Theodore Taylor, *The Magnificent Mitscher* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1954), 265.

30 See, for example, Commodore Oscar Smith (Ret.) to Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, 26 November 1947, box 19B, Kinkaid Papers, Naval History and Heritage Command.

### **Vice Admiral Marc “Pete” A. Mitscher, Commander, Task Force 58, and Commodore Arleigh A. Burke, Chief of Staff, Task Force 58.**

The emergence of naval aviation as a central component of naval warfare created more than its share of internal tensions among the Navy’s officer corps during World War II.<sup>1</sup> To mitigate this, and improve coordination among carriers and their screening ships, Admiral Ernest J. King mandated in 1944 that all aviation task force commanders were to have chiefs of staff with surface warfare backgrounds and vice versa. This aroused considerable protest from many task force commanders, including Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher, commander of Task Force 58, who suddenly found himself saddled with an accomplished, but surface warfare-oriented chief of staff, Commodore Arleigh Burke.<sup>2</sup>

Mitscher and Burke could not have been more different. Mitscher was an aviation pioneer, old enough to have earned his wings in 1916 and even served as part of the four Navy flight crews vying to complete the first transatlantic flight in 1919.<sup>3</sup> Burke, on the other hand, was the surface warfare officer *par excellence*, having earned the sobriquet “31-Knot” Burke for his aggressive tactics while in command of Destroyer Squadron 23. Neither especially wanted to work with the other; Mitscher in particular went out of his way to ignore Burke following his arrival.

Undeterred, Burke threw himself into his new task with his characteristic diligence, working long hours to understand every facet of aviation and aerial warfare, even going so far as hitch a ride on a torpedo bomber during a combat operation.<sup>4</sup> His hard work eventually paid off, earning not only Mitscher’s respect and trust, but eventually his friendship as well. For his part, Burke gradually came to admire Mitscher, noting, “Admiral Mitscher had a quality that I admire very much. He was a ruthless man.” He went on to explain that, “[Mitscher] was kind, but when he said do something you’d better a damned sight do it that way, because one of

1 For an overview of these tensions, see Clark Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 44–50.

2 Taylor, 189; Burke, 237.

3 Taylor, 35–67.

4 Burke, 250–52.



Despite their initial misgivings, Vice Admiral Marc “Pete” A. Mitscher (*right*), commander of Task Force 58, and his chief of staff, Commodore Arleigh Burke, developed a close personal and professional relationship. Photo taken on board carrier *Bunker Hill* (CV-11) in February 1945 (NARA, NHHC 80-G-303981).

the things that he taught me that I had known from studying history but never really hoisted aboard was that if a commander fails in battle he kills a lot of other people. Not only that, he is liable to jeopardize the whole battle.”<sup>5</sup>

For the remainder of the war, Burke would do things Mitscher’s way, serving under him at Philippine Sea, Leyte Gulf, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Such was their relationship that even after the war had ended, Mitscher asked Burke to stay on as his chief of staff when he was appointed Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air. Burke declined, believing that an aviator was far better suited to the position, but promised that he would serve under him once more if Mitscher ever went back out to sea.<sup>6</sup> Sure enough, when Mitscher hoisted his flag as the commander of the Eighth Fleet on 1 March 1946, Burke was right alongside him. He was still there when Mitscher was appointed the commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet (CINCLANT) on 20 September.<sup>7</sup>

Unbeknownst to them, their long and productive partnership was nearing its end. Already worn out from his long wartime service and in failing health, Marc Mitscher died of coronary thrombosis on 3 February 1947 at age 60. Although he had lost a dear friend and mentor, Burke would forge ahead and build his own legacy, one that included three terms as Chief of Naval Operations, the longest tenure of any CNO in the Navy’s history. He would not, however, forget all that he had learned under Mitscher, nor fail to appreciate the impact he had. Summing up their relationship, Burke simply noted, “If I ever loved any man it was Admiral Mitscher . . . I learned from him what a warrior really is.”<sup>8</sup>

5 Burke, 291.

6 Burke, 472–74.

7 Taylor, 327–28, 336–37.

8 Burke, 298.



Escort carrier *Kitkun Bay* (CVE-71) prepares to launch Grumman FM-2 Wildcat fighters during the action off Samar. In the distance, Japanese shells splash near *White Plains* (CVE-66) (NARA, NHHC 80-G-287497).

## 5

### **"IN HARM'S WAY": THE BATTLE OFF SAMAR**

Throughout its history, the U.S. Navy has had many "finest hours." Whether it be Captain John Paul Jones exclaiming, "I have not yet begun to fight" during the Battle of Flamborough Head in 1779 or Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut shouting, "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" during the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864, every U.S. Navy sailor has been indoctrinated with tales of determined commanders and crews fighting against overwhelming odds who somehow emerged victorious. By World War II, such tales of individual heroism may have begun to seem increasingly antiquated given the sheer number of vessels involved in operations, the complexity of the strategies that underlay them, and the participation of forces from the skies above and beneath the seas. As Vice Admiral Kinkaid observed, "Today, there is no room for heroics. Today, the forces involved are much larger and much more important. The issues are not only the differences to be settled between two ships or even between the two countries concerned. They are issues of world-wide significance."<sup>1</sup> From the standpoint of naval strategy, Kinkaid was not wrong, but he should have known better than anyone to dismiss the role of heroics. After all, were it not for the heroism and the sacrifices of those on board the ships of Seventh Fleet's very own Task Unit 77.4.3 (better known by its call sign, "Taffy 3"), the Battle of Leyte Gulf may very well have been remembered as one of the worst disasters in the Navy's history, rather than among its finest hours. None have captured this dynamic better than historian Samuel Eliot Morison, who memorably proclaimed, "In no engagement of its entire history has the United States Navy shown more

<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Kinkaid, "Four Years of War in the Pacific," box 7, Kinkaid Papers, 46.



Lieutenant Commander Ernest E. Evans (*center left*) speaks at the commissioning ceremony for *Johnston* (DD-557) at Seattle, Washington, on 27 October 1943 (NHHC NH 63368).

gallantry, guts and gumption than in those two morning hours between 0730 and 0930 off Samar.”<sup>2</sup>

When Halsey decided to turn his fleet northward, he did so in the belief that the Japanese Center Force was far too damaged to be much of a threat to the Seventh Fleet. This assessment turned out to be dangerously inaccurate, as the Center Force still had 22 ships at its disposal. Meanwhile, the bulk of the Seventh Fleet’s surface firepower (TG 77.2, 77.3, and DesRon 56) had been sent south to Surigao Strait, leaving the northern approach to Leyte Gulf dangerously exposed. This on its own would have been cause for concern, but Kinkaid had further compounded the problem by stationing his carrier groups at the mouth of the gulf. The northernmost one, Taffy 3, would patrol the area east of Samar, putting it right in the path of Kurita’s Center Force.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Morison, 275.

<sup>3</sup> Woodward, 163–65.

Task Group 77.4 consisted mainly of escort carriers, destroyers, and escort vessels. In contrast to the fast carriers (CVs) and small carriers (CVLs) that spearheaded the Third Fleet, the CVEs (also sometimes known as “jeep carriers”) were relatively small vessels (about 500 feet in length), merchant ship conversions, that carried at most 27 aircraft, a mix of fighters and torpedo bombers. They were not intended for engaging surface forces, but, rather, to support convoy and amphibious operations, with their aircraft being used primarily to hunt submarines and provide air cover.<sup>4</sup> While this made them the perfect vessels to support the Leyte landings, they were hardly equipped to fight a major surface engagement on their own.

Similar to the fast carriers, the jeep carriers of TG 77.4 were protected by a screen of escort vessels. Among these ill-fated ships was *Johnston* (DD-557), a *Fletcher*-class destroyer that had been commissioned less than a year prior. At the ship’s commissioning ceremony, her commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Ernest E. Evans, channeled the spirit of John Paul Jones, declaring, “This is going to be a fighting ship. I intend to go in harm’s way, and anyone who doesn’t want to go along had better get off right now.” Upon hearing these words, Gunner’s Mate 3rd Class Lloyd Campbell recalled, “Nobody made a move. They knew he meant it.”<sup>5</sup> Subsequent events would give truth to Evans’s words, as *Johnston* and her crew had repeatedly put themselves in harm’s way, participating in actions off Bougainville and Guam.

Although prepared to risk their lives in the service of their country, no one on board *Johnston* or any of the other ships of Taffy 3 believed that they would be called to do so again on 25 October. The same could be said for Kinkaid and his staff on board amphibious force flagship *Wasatch* (AGC-9). Having spent most of the evening following reports of the action taking place in Surigao Strait, the admiral was prepared to finally retire for the night when his chief of staff, Captain Richard H. Cruzen, observed, “We’ve never asked Halsey directly if Task Force 34 is guarding the San Bernardino Strait.” Realizing that he had, in fact, not received any

<sup>4</sup> Cutler, 57–58.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Thomas, 110. By the time of the Battle of Samar, Evans had received the temporary rank of commander.

confirmation from Halsey to that effect, Kinkaid dashed off a message to Halsey requesting confirmation. Under normal circumstances, it should have been easy for him to get confirmation, but as we noted earlier, MacArthur had forbidden Kinkaid and Halsey from communicating directly. Instead, Kinkaid would be forced to send his message through the radio station at Manus, where it would languish for over two hours.<sup>6</sup> This delay would prove costly, for by the time Halsey responded, Kinkaid and the Seventh Fleet had clearly established that TF 34 was not, in fact, guarding the strait.

The first sign of trouble came at 0637, when escort carrier *Fanshaw Bay* (CVE-70) intercepted a Japanese transmission. Shortly thereafter, radar contact was made with unidentified surface craft and anti-aircraft bursts were sighted on the horizon. Initially it was thought that these ships were from the Third Fleet, but upon sighting pagoda masts, all involved quickly realized that they were up against a large force of Japanese vessels. A flurry of reports soon followed from other vessels, bringing the situation into clearer view: the Center Force had transited the San Bernardino Strait, rounded the island of Samar, and was now bearing down on Taffy 3. Almost immediately, Rear Admiral Clifton A. F. Sprague ordered his ships to make smoke while his carriers turned into the wind and launched all planes, regardless of their state of readiness. While they were doing this, the guns of the Japanese ships roared, first targeting *White Plains* (CVE-66) and *St. Lo* (CVE-63). Sprague later reflected that, "It did not appear any of our ships could survive another five minutes. . . . The task unit was surrounded by the ultimate of desperate circumstances."<sup>7</sup>

On board *Wasatch*, Kinkaid monitored the situation with mounting dread. A veteran of multiple battles who had been involved in the war since the very start, he knew full well the implications of what was transpiring. As one eyewitness later recounted to him, "I watched you undergo one of the most severe strains that I think any human being could ever be required to endure. I refer to the time when you could not understand

6 Friedman, 215–16.

7 Commander Task Unit 77.4.3, "Actions Against the Japanese Main Body off Samar Island, 25 October 1944, Special Report of," Enclosure (C), Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives and Records Administration, 1.

the lack of support, and justly so, and the moment when you felt that our chances for survival were at a minimum."<sup>8</sup> Facing potential annihilation, Kinkaid immediately messaged Halsey to request assistance. As before, however, his requests were invariably delayed by the communications setup imposed by MacArthur.

In the meantime, Kinkaid had some difficult decisions to make, not the least of which was what to do about Taffy 3. Although he still had Oldendorf's task force at his disposal, the Seventh Fleet commander knew that they were too far south to render immediate assistance. Even if they could, they were also low on ammunition and were still needed to guard against Shima's Second Striking Force in the event that he too reversed course and came back through the strait. Mindful that his primary mission was to protect MacArthur's beachhead, Kinkaid ordered Oldendorf at 0850 to proceed just to the north of Hibuson Island. While this placed him in position to render aid to Taffy 3, it was clear that no immediate aid would be forthcoming for the beleaguered task unit.<sup>9</sup>

Lieutenant Commander Robert W. Copeland, USNR, commanding officer of destroyer escort *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413), also knew the situation was dire. Rather than conceal this from his men, he chose a different tact: complete transparency. Getting on the general announcing system, he announced that this would be "a fight against overwhelming odds from which survival could not be expected, during which time we would do what damage we could."<sup>10</sup> Although all on board were prepared for the worst, many privately hoped that they would somehow manage to pull off the impossible.

On board *Johnston*, Commander Evans prepared to make good on his promise to "go in harm's way." Even before Sprague could order his destroyer screen to form up, *Johnston* rushed ahead of *Hoel* (DD-533) and *Heerman* (DD-532) to make a torpedo attack. As Lieutenant Robert C.

8 R.J. Abbot to Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, 6 August 1947, box 19B, Kinkaid Papers.

9 Morison, 293–95.

10 Commanding Officer (USS *Samuel B. Roberts*), "Combined Action Report, Surface Engagement off Samar, Philippine Islands, and Report of Loss of U.S.S. *SAMUEL B. ROBERTS* (DE-413), on 25 October 1944," Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, National Archives and Records Administration, 14.



*Heerman* (DD-532) and a destroyer escort lay a smoke screen to protect Taffy 3 from the attacking Japanese surface ships at the beginning of the Battle off Samar, 25 October 1944. Photographed from *White Plains* (CVE-66) (NARA, NHHHC 80-G-288885).

Hagen, USNR, *Johnston's* gunnery officer, recalled, "We felt like David without a slingshot."<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, *Johnston* unleashed a furious barrage of nearly 200 rounds from her 5-inch battery, followed by a spread of ten torpedoes. They found their mark, hitting the bow of heavy cruiser *Kumano* and setting it aflame. *Johnston*, however, took six hits for her troubles,<sup>12</sup> resulting in the loss of power to her main steering and her aft guns. Evans himself lost two fingers on his left hand and had the clothing on his upper torso shredded, but he remained unbowed.<sup>13</sup> Finding shelter in a nearby rainstorm, he and his crew set about making repairs.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Symonds, 580.

<sup>12</sup> All six came from *Yamato*—three from her 18.1-inch guns and three from her 6.1-inch. Robert Cressman, "Johnston I (DD-557), 1943–1944," *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, last modified 7 April 2021, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/j/johnston-i.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, 308.

The destroyers were not finished. At 0742, Sprague ordered his screen to make another torpedo attack, this one to include the smaller escort vessels (code-named the "little wolves"). Boldly steaming forward in what can best be described as a maritime rendition of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," they fought the Japanese ships for well over an hour even as casualties mounted and shipboard systems failed. During this action, *Heerman* actually went head-to-head against battleships *Yamato* and *Haruna*, causing one of her crew to joke, "What we need is a bugler to sound the charge."<sup>14</sup> Not to be outdone, *Samuel B. Roberts* launched a daring assault of her own against cruisers *Chōkai* and *Chikuma*, firing nearly 608 of her 650 shells and even launching starshells and antiaircraft rounds. So relentless were her attacks that she subsequently came to be known as the "destroyer escort that fought like a battleship."<sup>15</sup> Gunner's Mate 3rd Class Paul H. Carr was among the chief contributors to this legacy. Manning *Samuel B. Roberts's* aft 5-inch gun, he kept firing until a breech explosion destroyed it, killing or wounding nearly all of its crew. Mortally wounded himself, Carr nonetheless repeatedly attempted to load a final round into the gun, even as others sought to attend to him. He would posthumously receive the Silver Star for his unwavering devotion to his duty.<sup>16</sup>

Although *Johnston* had used up the last of her torpedoes and was running on one engine, Evans was not about to hang back while others risked their lives. Even as *Hoel* and *Samuel B. Roberts* succumbed to the overwhelming firepower of the Japanese ships, *Johnston* continued to race about, providing fire support to any ships in need. Around 0850, she observed *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73) taking severe damage from a Japanese cruiser. With no thought for his ship's safety, Evans ordered his crew to "commence firing on that cruiser, draw her fire on us and away from

<sup>14</sup> Friedman, 317.

<sup>15</sup> John Wukovits, *For Crew and Country: The Inspirational True Story of Bravery and Sacrifice Aboard the USS Samuel B. Roberts* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Guy Nasuti, "Samuel B. Roberts I (DE-414)," *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, last modified 17 June 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/samuel-b-roberts-de-413-i.html>.



*Gambier Bay*.<sup>17</sup> *Johnston* not only drew the cruiser away but subsequently interposed herself between the carriers and an approaching force of destroyers led by cruiser *Yahagi*.

Despite her valiant efforts, *Johnston* could not long survive the sustained attacks from the ships of the Center Force. As Lieutenant Hagen observed, “We were now in a position where all the gallantry and guts in the world couldn’t save us.”<sup>18</sup> Surrounded on all sides, she endured heavy fire and sank at 1010. Out of her complement of 327, 186 would be lost including Evans, who made it off the ship but then drifted away from the life rafts with two junior officers. Lieutenant Commander Copeland of *Samuel B. Roberts* would never forget the sight of the bloody and bare-chested Evans waving to him from the fantail as *Johnston* undertook her final charge toward the Japanese destroyers.<sup>19</sup> In signing what Samuel Eliot Morison described as her own “death warrant,”<sup>20</sup> *Johnston* helped to temporarily stall the Japanese offensive against the carriers. Now, out of the fight, her crew and those of the other sunk vessels would wage a different kind of battle, trying to stay afloat until they could be rescued. Sadly, their rescue would not soon be forthcoming.

Taffy 3’s screening vessels were not the only ones that distinguished themselves that day. Many of the planes launched from the escort carriers fought just as tenaciously. Ordered by Sprague to launch shortly after sighting the first pagoda mast on the horizon, some planes launched low on fuel or even without ammunition. Nonetheless, they harried the Japanese ships from all sides, forcing them to take constant evasive maneuvers. Later joined by planes from Taffy 1 and Taffy 2, they helped to sink *Chōkai* and significantly damaged a number of other ships. Lieutenant (j.g.) Leonard E. Waldrop, USNR, performed an even more spectacular feat when he spotted a large spread of torpedoes headed directly for *Kalinin Bay* (CVE-68). Heedless of the danger to himself and flying a plane with a three-foot hole in his port wing, he dove astern of the torpedo formation and actually



An explosion rocks *St. Lo* (CVE-63) after she is hit by a kamikaze off Samar on 25 October 1944 (NARA, NHC 80-G-270516).

managed to explode one with strafing fire.<sup>21</sup> Given their effectiveness and persistence, it is no wonder that Kurita actually thought he was under attack from land-based aircraft rather than those from the very carriers he was pursuing.<sup>22</sup>

Despite efforts from both their screening vessels and aircraft, the escort carriers did not escape their pursuers unscathed. Even before *Johnston* came to her rescue, *Gambier Bay* had already been mortally wounded, while *Kalinin Bay*, *White Plains*, and *Fanshaw Bay* all took significant damage from gunfire. *St. Lo* would experience an even crueler fate. Having finally escaped her pursuers, some of her crew had just been allowed to stand down from general quarters when a Mitsubishi A6M 5 Type 0 carrier fighter (“Zero”) carrying a small bomb beneath each wing, plunged directly into her flight deck at 1051. The ensuing fires on

<sup>21</sup> Woodward, 186–93.

<sup>22</sup> Shelley Mydans to Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, 11 September 1947, box 2, Kinkaid Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in James Hornfischer, *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004): 272.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Morison, 179.

<sup>19</sup> Friedman, 324–25.

<sup>20</sup> Morison, 272.

the flight and hangar decks set off multiple explosions, causing the ship to sink in less than 15 minutes, taking 141 men to the deep with her.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, some of her crew had predicted this fate two weeks earlier when they received word that the ship's name would be changed from *Midway* to *St. Lo*. Superstitious to the core, one of her crew allegedly exclaimed, "You don't change the name of a Navy ship. We'll be at the bottom of the ocean in two weeks!"<sup>24</sup> The prediction turned out to be true, though even they could not have foreseen that their ship would have the dubious honor of being the first to be sunk by a kamikaze attack.

On board *Wasatch*, Kinkaid was growing frantic. Frustrated with all the communication delays, he finally sent Halsey a message in plain language, demanding to know, "Where is Lee!? Send Lee!" Unbeknownst to the beleaguered admiral and the rest of the Seventh Fleet, Kurita himself was beginning to experience a crisis of confidence. Although his forces had sunk four U.S. ships (*Gambier Bay*, *Hoel*, *Johnston*, and *Samuel B. Roberts*), he had not expected to encounter such determined resistance. As the hours wore on and he began to take losses of his own, his doubts only began to grow and his judgment of the situation became shakier. Estimating the jeep carriers' speed to be about 30 knots (in actuality, they could only steam at 18 knots), he and his commanders believed that they had no chance of catching them and, indeed, thought they had lost them in the smoke and squalls (they were, in fact, only seven nautical miles away).<sup>25</sup> The delays also increased his concern about the fuel situation and the possibility that U.S. reinforcements would soon arrive in the gulf, particularly after he learned that Nishimura's Southern Force had failed in its mission.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Kinkaid's frantic messages in plain language on an open channel only increased these fears. Rather than interpreting these as an indication that no help was forthcoming, Kurita assumed it was a ruse

<sup>23</sup> Thomas, 302–5.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Sears, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Morison, 298

<sup>26</sup> For more on this, see Rear Admiral Tomiji Koyanagi's testimony in Interrogation Nav No. 35, USSBS No. 149, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, 1:150–51. Kurita contradicts Koyanagi's account, stating that he was not yet aware that Nishimura's attack had completely failed when he decided to break off his attack. Interrogation Nav No. 9, USSBS No. 47, 49–50.



Lieutenant Commander Robert W. Copeland, USNR, receives the Navy Cross from Rear Admiral David M. LeBreton at Norfolk, Virginia, 16 July 1945 (NHHC NH 90677).

intended to entrap him. As he later confided, it was "very, very unusual to intercept a message from the United States fleet and I thought perhaps they thought we could not understand English."<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, Kurita decided to turn his ships northward back toward the San Bernardino Strait. His stated reason was that he was concerned that enemy aircraft appeared to concentrate on Tacloban, at the northeastern tip of Leyte Island, and the disposition of the U.S. Navy ships within the gulf was unknown. Rather than risk his force in an engagement in which he would be easy prey for enemy planes and unable to maneuver easily, he instead would turn northward, in the hopes of engaging an enemy task force that was supposedly located at "113 miles bearing 5° of Suluan Light at 0945, when it least expected us to come." It is uncertain where Kurita received this information from, but what is known is that there was no

<sup>27</sup> Shelley Mydans to Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, 11 September 1947, box 2, Kinkaid Papers.

such task force in the north, as Halsey was still over 300 miles away.<sup>28</sup> Some of Kurita's own subordinates were skeptical of his stated reasons, particularly Vice Admiral Matome Ugaki. In his diary, he laconically wrote, "I felt irritated on the same bridge seeing that they [Kurita and his staff] lack fighting spirit and promptitude."<sup>29</sup>

No such criticism could be leveled at those sailors who had fought off Samar that day. In the face of overwhelming odds, they had managed to hold their own against the Center Force. If it were not for their tenacity and sacrifice, the Center Force might very easily have overwhelmed the Seventh Fleet and brought the invasion of the Philippines to a grinding halt. Instead, the Center Force was compelled to spend precious hours, fuel, and ammunition doing battle with ships that, by all rights, it should have defeated easily. To be certain, there was still little chance that the "tin cans" of Taffy 3 could have survived had Kurita truly wished to press his advantage. As Sprague acknowledged, "The Jap main body could have, and should have, waded through and completed the destruction of this Task Unit."<sup>30</sup> However, their staunch defense provided sufficient time and space for other factors to influence events, not the least of which were doubt and fatigue on Kurita's part. Unable to secure a quick victory and already worn down by the struggles of the prior two days (including being forced to swim to escape his sinking flagship), the Japanese admiral had been pushed beyond his breaking point, not by the majestic carriers of the Third Fleet or the towering battleships of TG 77.2, but by the scrappy jeep carriers, destroyers, and escort vessels of Taffy 3. Their crews' collective and individual heroism continue to serve as a reminder that, for all their complexity, for all the planning they involve, and for all the resources they demand, battles are still fought and won by the bravery, tenacity, heroism, and sacrifices of sailors such as Ernest Evans (who posthumously received the Medal of Honor) and Paul H. Carr. As Lieutenant Commander

---

28 Thomas, 310. Thomas suspects the telegram that prompted reports of the task force's existence was a fiction created to save face.

29 Matome Ugaki, *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945*. Translated by Masataka Chihaya (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 497.

30 Commander Task Unit 77.4.3, "Actions Against the Japanese Main Body," Enclosure (A), Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, 2.

Copeland (himself a recipient of the Navy Cross) observed of his own crew, even knowing that they faced certain death, "Men zealously manned their stations wherever they might be, and fought and worked with such calmness, courage and efficiency that no higher honor could be conceived than to command such a group of men."<sup>31</sup>

---

31 Commanding Officer (USS *Samuel B. Roberts*), "Combined Action Report, Surface Engagement off Samar," Records of the Chief of Naval Operations, RG 38, 14.



Lieutenant Commander Ernest E. Evans (*right*), commanding officer of *Johnston* (DD-557), flashes a smile during the ship's commissioning ceremony at Seattle, Washington, on 27 October 1943 (NHHHC NH 63499).

### **Commander Ernest Evans, Commanding Officer, USS *Johnston* (DD-557)**

Born in 1908 in Pawnee, Oklahoma, Commander Ernest Evans was of both Muscogee (Creek) and Cherokee descent. Although open racism towards Native Americans was still quite prevalent at this time, Evans never sought to hide his heritage nor would he be deterred from pursuing a career in the military. Kept out of the Marine Corps due to a knee injury, he enlisted in the Navy in 1926. Remarkably, after only one year in the service, he earned an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy via fleet competition. While there, he came to be known as "Chief," both on account of his background and his innate leadership qualities.<sup>1</sup>

At the commencement of hostilities between the United States and Japan, Evans was serving as executive officer on board *Alden* (DD-211). Having witnessed firsthand the defeat of the Allied fleet and its retreat during the Battle of Java Sea (27 February 1942), he later vowed at *Johnston's* (DD-557) commissioning on 27 October 1943: "Now that I have a fighting ship, I will never retreat from any enemy force."<sup>2</sup> He never gave his crew a reason to think otherwise. Not one given to anger or psychological ploys to motivate his crew, Evans nonetheless had an iron sense of discipline and made it clear that he had high expectations of them. They largely met these expectations during the ship's all-too-brief career, expertly providing shore bombardments during the invasion of the Marshall Islands in February 1944, Bougainville in March and April, and Guam in July. Evans's crew even assisted in the destruction of Japanese submarine *I-176* on 16 May, scoring their first kill of an enemy vessel.<sup>3</sup>

None of this could have prepared either Evans or his crew for what awaited them off Samar on 25 October 1944. Sighting Kurita's Center Force, Evans did not wait for orders to have engineering light off all boilers for maximum speed and begin making funnel smoke nor, for that matter, did he await orders before ordering *Johnston* forward to make a torpedo attack. Such initiative and coolness under fire was characteristic of Evans's

<sup>1</sup> Hornfischer, 48–49.

<sup>2</sup> Hornfischer, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Cressman, "Johnston I (DD-557)."

leadership that day. Making good on his promise to “never retreat from any enemy force,” he repeatedly ordered *Johnston* into harm’s way in order to protect Taffy 3’s escort carriers. His men followed willingly, frightened, but nonetheless full of faith in their captain. As *Johnston*’s gunnery officer Lieutenant Robert C. Hagen observed, Evans “was a captain who could strike fighting spirit from his men the way steel strikes spark from a flint.”<sup>4</sup>

Evans’s gallantry would not save him, his ship, or many of his crew from the Center Force’s onslaught, but it did contribute to Kurita’s decision to withdraw. For his bravery under fire, Evans would posthumously be awarded the Medal of Honor, the first Native American from the Navy to be accorded this honor, and only one of three so far in the Navy’s history.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Hornfischer, 161.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Evans, both Boatswain’s Mate 1st Class James E. Elliot (Cherokee) and Engineman 2nd Class Michael E. Thornton (Cherokee) received the Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry during the Vietnam War. “Contributions of American Indians to the U.S. Navy,” Naval History and Heritage Command, last modified 15 Nov 2021, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/american-indians.html>.

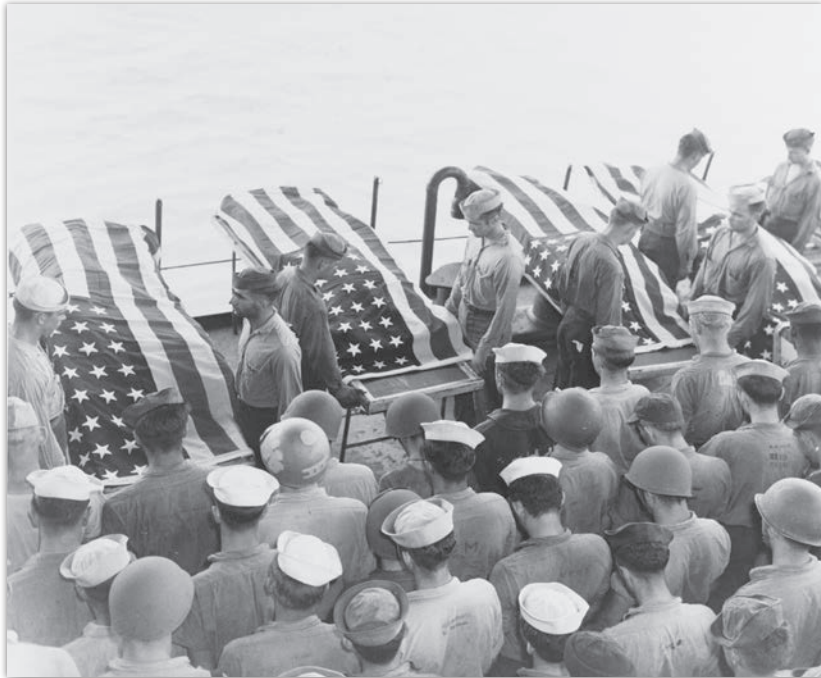
## “NO HIGHER HONOR”: EPILOGUE

Leyte Gulf would not be the last major naval operation of World War II, let alone the last in the campaign to retake the Philippines. It was, however, the culmination of a journey that began on 7 December 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and established an aura of seeming invincibility that would persist until Midway. Now, almost three years later, some of very same ships sunk at Pearl Harbor had returned to action and the U.S. Navy had grown exponentially, both in terms of ships and personnel. Having worked tirelessly to achieve ascendancy on the sea, in the skies above, and below the surface, the Navy struck a mortal blow against the Combined Fleet, forever ending Japan’s dreams of a Pacific empire and maritime dominance.

The lessons drawn from Leyte Gulf are as varied as the engagements themselves, but their relative successes (and failures) hinged, in part, on the plans developed before and during the battle. At Sibuyan Sea and Surigao Strait, the U.S. Navy executed its plans to near perfection, using its superior firepower and positioning to inflict significant losses on the Japanese forces. At Cape Engaño, a questionable decision nearly derailed the entire operation, revealing weaknesses in the operation’s command structure and communications procedures, as well as highlighting the necessity of informed dissent, awareness of the mission’s overall objectives, and flexibility of thought on the part of those in command. Finally, at Samar, the men of Taffy 3 demonstrated that, even in an operation of Leyte’s scope, individual acts of heroism and sacrifice could still mean the difference between defeat and victory.

These individual acts are particularly important to highlight. Although the course of Leyte Gulf was shaped by command decisions made at the highest levels of both the U.S. and Japanese fleets, these decisions still had to be carried out by countless individuals, often under the most trying of circumstances. Even if one excludes the Battle off Samar

from consideration, one can still find innumerable examples of “calmness, courage, and efficiency” among the thousands of sailors, submariners, and aviators who participated in the battle. Whether they were in the thick of combat or not, it was their efforts that made the “largest naval battle” in history into one of the U.S. Navy’s greatest triumphs. Thus, the Battle of Leyte Gulf should be seen, not just as an “imperishable part of our national heritage,”<sup>1</sup> but also as one of the purest examples of the dedicated and indomitable spirit that has animated (and continues to animate) the actions of every man and woman who has ever fought in the service of their country.



A funeral service takes place on board *Kalinin Bay* (CVE-68) on the morning of 26 October 1944 following the conclusion of the Battle off Samar (NARA, NHHHC 80-G-288160).

<sup>1</sup> Morison, 338.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### ARCHIVAL SOURCES

National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD

Record Group 38. Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. Records.

Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC

Kinkaid, Thomas C. Papers.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. Papers.

World War II (WWII) Award Cards. Card Files.

Special Collections, Nimitz Library, United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD

Jesse Oldendorf Memoirs, 1944–1945.

### PUBLISHED SOURCES

Bates, Richard W. *Battle of Surigao Strait, October 24th–25th*. Vol. 5 of *The Battle for Leyte Gulf October, 1944: Strategic and Tactical Analysis*. Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 1958.

Burke, Arleigh. *Reminiscences of Admiral Arleigh Burke, USN Retired*. Special Series on Selected Subjects 1. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979.

“Contributions of American Indians to the U.S. Navy.” Naval History and Heritage Command. Accessed on 15 November 2021. <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/american-indians.html>.

Cressman, Robert. “*Johnston I* (DD-557), 1943–1944.” *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*. Naval History and Heritage Command. Last modified 2 April 2021. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/j/johnston-i.html>.

Cutler, Thomas J. *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: 23–25 October 1944*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Evans, Mark. “South Dakota II (BB-57), 1941–1942.” *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*. Naval History and Heritage Command. Last modified 12 November 2015. <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/south-dakota-ii-bb57-1941-42.html>.

Frank, Richard B. “Picking Winners?” *Naval History Magazine* 25, no. 3 (October 2011): 24–30.

Friedman, Kenneth I. *Afternoon of the Rising Sun: The Battle of Leyte Gulf*. Novato, CA: Presidio, 2001.

Gayle, Gordon D. *Bloody Beaches: The Marines at Peleliu*. Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1996.

Halsey, William and Joseph Bryan III. *Admiral Halsey's Story*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947.

Hone, Trent. *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898–1945*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018.

Hornfischer, James. *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*. New York: Bantam Books, 2004.

Hoyt, Edwin. *McCampbell's Heroes: The Story of the U.S. Navy's Most Celebrated Carrier Fighters of the Pacific War*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1983.

Hughes, Thomas. *Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Ito, Masanori and Roger Pineau. *End of the Imperial Japanese Navy*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1962.

“Jesse Barrett Oldendorf, 16 February 1887–27 April 1974.” Naval History and Heritage Command. Last modified 20 Mar 2019. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/modern-biographical-files-ndl/modern-bios-o/oldendorf-jesse-barrett.html>.

Kinkaid, Thomas C. *The Reminiscences of Thomas Cassin Kinkaid*. New York: Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1961.

McCampbell, David. *The Reminiscences of Captain David McCampbell U.S. Navy (Retired)*. Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 2010.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Leyte: June 1944–January 1945*. Vol. 12 of *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958.

Nasuti, Guy. “Samuel B. Roberts I (DE-414).” *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*. Naval History and Heritage Command. Last modified 17 Jun 2019. <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/s/samuel-b-roberts-de-413-i.html>.

Potter, E. B. *Bull Halsey*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985.

Prados, John. *Storm over Leyte: The Philippine Invasion and the Destruction of the Japanese Navy*. New York: NAL Caliber, 2016.

Reynolds, Clark. *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy*. Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1978.

Russell, David. *David McCampbell: Top Ace of U.S. Naval Aviation in World War II*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019.

Rogers, Paul. *The Bitter Years: MacArthur and Sutherland*. New York: Praeger, 1991.

Sears, David. *The Last Epic Naval Battle: Voices from Leyte Gulf*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005.

Smoot, Roland. *The Reminiscences of Vice Admiral Roland N. Smoot, U.S. Navy (Retired)*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1972.

Stern, Robert C. *Big Gun Battles: Warship Duels of the Second World War*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015.

Symonds, Craig. *World War II at Sea: A Global History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Taylor, Theodore. *The Magnificent Mitscher*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1954.

- Thomas, Evan. *Sea of Thunder: Four Commanders and the Last Great Naval Campaign, 1941–1945*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- Tully, Anthony. *Battle of Surigao Strait*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Ugaki, Matome. *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941–1945*. Translated by Masataka Chihaya. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991.
- United States Strategic Bombing Survey (Pacific), Naval Analysis Division. *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*. 2 vols. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1946.
- Vego, Milan. *The Battle for Leyte, 1944: Allied and Japanese Plans, Preparations, and Execution*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006.
- Wheeler, Gerald. *Kinkaid of the Seventh Fleet: A Biography of Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, U.S. Navy*. Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1995.
- [Willoughby, Maj. Gen. Charles and] General Staff. *Reports of General MacArthur*. 2 vols. 1966. Reprint, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1994.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *The Battle for Leyte Gulf*. New York: Macmillan, 1947.
- Wukovits, John. *For Crew and Country: The Inspirational True Story of Bravery and Sacrifice aboard the USS Samuel B. Roberts*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin R. Waldman is a historian at the Naval History and Heritage Command and the author of *Tingey House: Silent Witness to Our Navy's History* (published by NHHHC in 2021). He received his doctorate in history from the Catholic University of America in 2017 and his bachelor of arts from the College of William and Mary in 2006.





