

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# THE BATTLE OF THE SIBUYAN SEA

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*The 1930s were the era of the battleship. Naval aviation had yet to demonstrate its prowess, and both Japan and America had been involved in a race to make the most powerful gun platforms afloat. Billy Mitchell's insubordinate demonstration in 1921 notwithstanding, the prevailing international opinion was that big naval guns were the keystone of the fleet (but that didn't stop the development of carrier aviation anywhere). When Japan sank the British heavy ships Prince of Wales and Repulse by aircraft alone, early in the War, opinions began to change. The ultimate test of battleship versus airplane came later in the Pacific War, with the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea, part of the larger Battle of Leyte Gulf.*

## SINKING OF THE IJN MUSASHI

### Background

Allied forces were inexorably advancing across the central Pacific in 1944. The goal was to regain (ocean) territory, and to capture and prepare bases for the strategic bombing and invasion of Japan. The naval war in the Pacific had turned with the Battle of Midway in June, 1942, and the invasion and capture of Guadalcanal six months later. Yamamoto had promised his forces would "run wild" for six months after Pearl Harbor, but after that, the future was not so clear. He was right, but didn't live long enough to know it.

One key American objective as the Pacific War reached its climax was the capture of the islands of Guam, Saipan, and Tinian in the Marianas Island group. The topography of the last-named was particularly useful, as it could hold a number of large runways and supporting infrastructure for B-29 long-range bombers. The attack began in June, 1944. The Japanese were well aware of the danger B-29s based that close to their home islands posed, and defended them accordingly. The result was disastrous. Not only were the islands captured, but many of their remaining aircraft and pilots were shot down. The results were so lop-sided that this action was derisively known as the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot."

The American strategy was to approach Japan with a large-scale pinchers movement; the Army (McArthur) would capture land bases as his forces approached from the south, while the Navy (Nimitz) would island-hop across the Pacific from the east. They two would converge on the Philippines, which would serve as a base for shorter-range attacks.

The Japanese threw pretty much everything they had to defend the Philippines from American capture. Everyone knew the first target would be the island of Leyte, on the eastern side of the Philippine Archipelago, south of the main island of Luzon. The battle would take place in October, 1944.

The Americans planned to assault Leyte from the eastern side, defending the landing force with fleet carriers, battleship old and new, “jeep” carriers, and supporting ships, grouped into different task forces. American carrier air began attacks in both the Philippines and the Okinawa area to attrit air resources and soften up the area. The Japanese had prepared detailed defense plans for American attacks at different locations. The carrier raids on Okinawa triggered the defensive plan for that region, but the landings at Leyte, covered by a different plan, began on October 20. Japan had lost half of its available land-based aircraft north of Leyte in the week prior.

The Japanese had at least a quarter-million soldiers in the Philippines, but any additional naval support would have to contend with the other islands west of Leyte in order to attack the beachhead. The naval high command realized the importance of preventing the Americans from capturing Leyte, and would devote all had in its defense. Including kamikazes.

American naval forces outnumbered Japanese in all categories: Carriers: 32-4; Battleships: 12-7; Cruisers: 23-20; and Destroyers: 100-29. Japan did have two half-carrier/half-battleship craft that could do neither role well, and the Americans had a preponderance of submarines and smaller attack craft.

The geography allowed only three avenues for naval attack: Surigao Strait in the south, San Bernardino Strait in the west, and around the islands from the north. The Japanese would use both, and they would also post their carriers, which had lost almost all their planes, to the north in an attempt to draw off American defenders.

The focus of this item is on the attacking force coming toward San Bernardino Strait.

### **The Battle of Leyte Gulf – The Prelude**

The best remaining Japanese ships were assigned to the San Bernardino attack group, led by Admiral Kurita, aboard the heavy cruiser *Atago*. His group included the super-battleship *Yamato*, the super-battleship *Musashi*, and a number of smaller ships.

Two American subs were patrolling the San Bernardino Strait area, the *USS Dace* and the *USS Darter*. The Japanese were in a single-file arrangement, required by the narrow passage. *Darter* fired a full salvo, and sank *Atago* outright and badly damaged the heavy cruiser, *Takao*. Admiral Kurita had to abandon ship and make his way to the *Yamato*, trailing the cruisers. In hot pursuit of additional ships, and with inaccurate charts, *Darter* ran aground. Meanwhile, *Dace* fired off a salvo and sank heavy cruiser *Maya*, before breaking off contact to rescue the *Darter* crew. They reported their location and info on the composition of the Japanese force. The Americans sent out reconnaissance aircraft to track and report on the Japanese force.

The submarine attack caused a disruption, but Kurita hoped that the two super-battleships and their supporting ships at his disposal could still repel, if not destroy, the Leyte landing forces.

The Navy had overwhelming force at Leyte. Admiral Lee had a group of America's best battleships, and Halsey's carrier forces were vastly superior to the airpower available to the Japanese. We knew a task force was coming through San Bernardino, and we had evidence of the southern arm of the pincher, coming through Surigao Strait, where layered American forces were cannily deployed by Admiral Oldendorf (more on them later).

But what about Japanese carrier air?

Admiral Halsey's orders were ambiguous as to his role in the Leyte invasion. He was to protect the landing ships and beaches, but he was authorized to pursue the major part of the Japanese fleet should that opportunity arise. To him, that meant the remaining Japanese carriers; the invasion force could take care of itself.

### **The Battle of the Sibuyan Sea – Why This is an Item in A+StW**

Admiral Kurita recovered from his dunking and gamely proceeded toward San Bernardino Strait. He was confident in the firepower of the *Yamato* and *Musashi*; they had the biggest guns of any ship afloat, were heavily armored, and had lots of secondary guns, including 130 anti-aircraft cannons (but no [proximity fuses](#)).

Halsey prepared his forces, and recalled a strong carrier unit [commanded by Senator McCain's grandfather] recently sent to base for re-fueling. Meanwhile, Lee's battleships moved into position protecting the Strait, and the other fleet carriers present launched a full-scale strike, precipitating the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea, one of the subsets of the Battle for Leyte Gulf.

The flight to the Japanese was short, and the attacking Americans focused their efforts on the *Musashi*, *Yamato*, and battleship *Nagato*. They scored some hits, but did not knock any ships out of action. Then a second attack wave came in ...

*Musashi* had been hit a few months earlier by a submarine torpedo, one of a salvo fired by the submarine, *Tunny*. The damage required a return to Japan for repairs. *Musashi* was present, but did not significantly participate, in the Battle of the Marianas in June. But now, in the Sibuyan Sea approaching San Bernardino Strait, the attacking American aircraft swarmed the battleship force, and concentrated their fire on the *Musashi*. All told, *Musashi* absorbed 19 torpedo hits and 17 bomb hits. The only thing that saved *Musashi* from sinking outright was that the torpedo hits were evenly split on the port and starboard sides. A hit on one side was balanced by a hit on the other; negating the need to counter-flood to correct list. But the cumulative damage was seriously degrading *Musashi's* combat effectiveness. The big battleship lost way, and was left behind by the rest of Kurita's temporarily-retreating fleet. It would slowly sink.

***If any doubt remained about the supremacy of the air power over the battleship, the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea removed it.***

**Sidebar:** The aerial victories were not totally one-way. Also on October 24, one of the light carriers attacking other targets in the Philippines to support the Leyte invasion, the U.S.S. *Princeton*, was struck by an aerial bomb from a Manila-based air group, causing a fatal fire that sank the ship. *Princeton* suffered a total of 108 casualties, but an explosion aboard when the

cruiser *Birmingham* was alongside assisting killed 233 of *Birmingham's* crew and wounded another 426.

### **The Battle of Leyte Gulf**

Admiral Kurita had reversed course during the aircraft attacks in the Sibuyan Sea, heading away from San Bernardino Strait, a movement seen by American search planes. His backtracking was only temporary, he had no intention of running away. After dark, he turned his task force around and headed for San Bernardino Strait and a dawn attack on the invasion force. He was counting heavily on the Americans discovering Admiral Ozawa's depleted carrier force, operating as a decoy target, and sending off a lot of the warships defending the invasion so he could attack with impunity.

The Japanese plan called for Kurita's force and the ships coming through Surigao Strait to join up and annihilate the invasion forces. Kurita was coming, but the other pincher ran into a carefully-crafted buzzsaw. The geography of the Strait and its approaches was tailor-made for a layered defense, and Admiral Oldendorf, in charge of preventing an attack on the invasion force, knew it. He did not need the most modern, highest speed, American battleships; instead, he had a mixed force anchored by older, slower, battleships, including several salvaged and repaired Pearl Harbor veterans. Oldendorf prepared a naval gauntlet the Japanese would have to run in order to get to the beachhead. The Japanese would encounter PT boats first, on either side of the approach, then destroyers. The surviving ships would find a line of battleships already in place athwart their path (capping the Japanese "T" without need to maneuver). No planes were needed. The entire Japanese force, save one destroyer, was sunk, with essentially no damage to the American ships.

Admiral Halsey felt that the amount of damage to Kurita's force precluded there being an immediate threat from that direction, and he had confidence in Oldendorf's position. But he hoped to find and destroy the remaining aircraft carriers, to achieve total victory.

Admiral Ozawa had been trying to get discovered by the Americans for some time before a search plane finally spotted him about the time Kurita's force was being hit. His group included the large carrier *Zuikaku*, the only survivor of the six carriers that hit Pearl Harbor, three light carriers, and a few escorts. When word got to Halsey, he immediately began moves to attack.

His orders held an ambiguity, as previously mentioned. Halsey was to defend the invasion force, but to "destroy major elements of the Japanese Navy if the opportunity arose." Since the beachhead appeared secure, he wanted to send his carriers, AND his line of battleships, to cripple the enemy carriers with planes and sink them with guns.

Several of Halsey's staff pointed out that Kurita's force was damaged and retreating, but there was a possibility that Kurita would return for a dawn attack, so they proposed sending the aircraft carriers and a few support ships after Ozawa, but leave Lee and his battleships to protect the invasion fleet. They felt that carrier air would be more than sufficient to sink Ozawa's carriers without the battleships. And they were worried that Ozawa's carriers were only a decoy.

Halsey disagreed, and did not want to split his force. He ordered a maximum effort attack against Ozawa, just what the Japanese had hoped for.

Ozawa was a long way off, but a maximum strike was launched anyway. The attack (the Battle of Cape Engaño) was quite successful. The *Zuikaku* was sunk, as were two of the light carriers and a destroyer. The other light carrier and a light cruiser were badly damaged.

The situation looked pretty good on the evening of October 24. The invasion landing was underway, Kurita had retreated, and reports starting coming in about the successes of Oldendorf and the carrier air attacks on Ozawa. But some were concerned. Lee's battleships were now too far from the beachhead to provide support, and Oldendorf's ships were nearly out of ammo and were also too far from the beachhead for them to provide direct support.

And then Kurita's task force emerged from San Bernardino Strait ...

### **The Battle off Samar**

Six small American carriers, designed for supporting invasions, not fighting large naval units, were lying off the invasion beachhead. A few destroyers and destroyer escorts were in attendance. Imagine the surprise those sailors felt when a fleet of Japanese battleships and cruisers suddenly sailed into view that morning!

What happened next was arguably one of the U.S. Navy's finest hours. Without hesitation, the escort ships charged the much more powerful Japanese ships at flank speed, firing every gun they had. The planes of the "jeep" carriers loaded up with any ordinance available and attacked with equal ferocity. The Japanese were convinced they were up against cruisers and fleet carriers. Destroyer *Johnston* knocked the cruiser *Kumano* out of action, then was blown apart by heavy gunfire [read about captain [Ernest E. Evans](#) for a profile in [courage!](#)].

The Japanese guns did sink one of the jeep carriers, but Kurita's ships were getting hit from multiple directions. By this point, Kurita knew that the southern pincher had been defeated, and his forces were insufficient to destroy the beachhead, so he lost heart, and retreated for good this time. The *Yamato* and a few other ships lived on to fight another day.

## **AFTERMATH**

Japan had made plans to build three of the most powerful battleships in existence: the *Yamato*, the *Musashi*, and the *Shinano*, to be constructed in that order, starting in 1938. Strictest secrecy was invoked about the construction of these ships, and U.S. Intelligence knew nothing of them until much later in the War. The Battle of Midway demonstrated both the importance and the vulnerability of aircraft carriers, so *Shinano* was converted to become a super-carrier while still on the building ways. What happened to *Shinano* in November, 1944, was recounted in an earlier Item of the Week ([here](#)).

The *Yamato* survived the battles around the Philippines and returned to the Japanese home islands. *Yamato* would later be sent out on a desperate but futile attempt to stop the American invasion of Okinawa, but get the same demonstration of the superiority of air power *Musashi* received. *En route*, *Yamato* was attacked by overwhelming carrier air forces. American pilots

had seen how many bombs and torpedoes it took to sink *Musashi* (on an even keel), so they planned to concentrate their torpedoes and bombs on the port side of *Yamato*, in order to capsize it. This they did. *Yamato* took at least 11 torpedo hits and six bomb hits before turning turtle. The *Yamato*, light cruiser *Yahagi*, and four destroyers were sunk by American planes on April 7, 1945.

## CODA

Admiral Halsey came under criticism for his calculated-risk decision to send all his attack forces after Ozawa's carriers. The counsel he received to leave Lee's battleships to counter any additional attacks while sending his carriers after Ozawa is eminently logical, even if there may be some "Monday morning quarterbacking" in that assessment. Bottom line: If he didn't make any attack on Ozawa, he would have failed in his duty. If he sent everything to attack Ozawa, he ran the risk that the landing force would be attacked, which also would have been a failure in his duty. Since the attack came, Halsey failed (IMHO). If he had split his forces as suggested, he would have accomplished both his missions, and he should have known that.

Also in my opinion: A lot of naval brass grew up with pictures of early battleships on their bedroom walls, hoping that someday they could take part in a Jutland-type naval slugfest. They were particularly incensed at the destruction of many of those same ships at Pearl Harbor, and were pleased by the role of Pearl Harbor ships in Oldendorf's force. Halsey's decision deprived them of what would have been history's penultimate battleship vs. battleship contest; there will never be another situation like what could have been at Leyte.

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