

The Battle of Leyte Gulf

by

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September 27, 2009

Note: Click [here](#) to got to my website about my current book, ***Morning of the Rising Sun: The Heroic Story of the Battles for Guadalcanal.***

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## Introduction

In June 1944, the Japanese Navy suffered a painful defeat in the Battle of the Philippine Sea in which the Japanese lost more than 200 planes. The bulk of the Japanese fleet, including its remaining carriers, had, however, escaped serious damage. But the loss of aircraft, and, what is more important, the loss of irreplaceable pilots and crews, left the Japanese Navy crippled, without essential air cover to protect it at Leyte. The Japanese carrier fleet now was but a shell of its former self.

Their victory at the Battle of the Philippine Sea allowed the Americans to capture the Marianas, and have bases near enough to the Japanese Home Islands to bomb them around the clock. The flying distance to Japan had been reduced by more than 1,200 miles. For the first time in the Pacific War, the Japanese people would begin to feel the same sting, agony, and death their

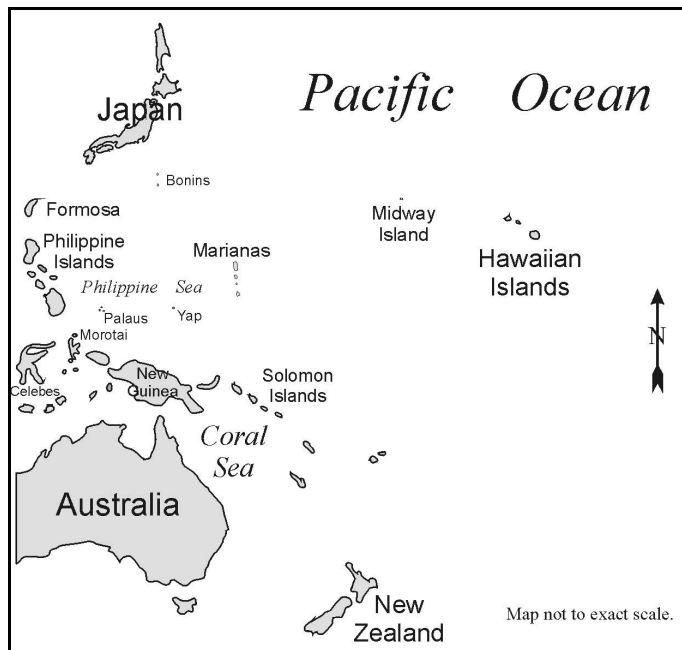
citizen counterparts in Nazi Germany had been feeling since 1943.

MacArthur's Southwest Pacific command had its share of successes, too. Under the general's brilliant leadership, American and Australian forces moved rapidly up New Guinea's northern coast. Using what the Americans called the "hit-them-where-they're-ain't" strategy, successful landings on New Guinea made possible the capture of the important harbors at Wakde, Biak, Noemfoor and Sansapor while bypassing heavily fortified Japanese positions. This string of victories along the thousand-mile advance culminated in the capture of Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea and placed MacArthur's forces at New Guinea's westernmost point by mid-1944, ready to invade the Philippines.

This was a heady time for the Allies.

So many victories had been won in Europe and the Pacific that rumors ran rampant through all levels of command predicting the war would end by Christmas 1944. Other more sensible people were less optimistic, however. In spite of having sustained severe losses in France, Italy, and the Soviet Union, the Reich was not yet finished.

The Japanese military establishment, for its part, remained a viable fighting force, too, with its primary supply lines between the East Indies and the Home Islands intact, although diminished. But American submarines made their presence felt there by inflicting enormous losses on the Japanese merchant fleet, so that, by August 1944, the Japanese merchant navy had



Western Pacific

lost more than 2,800,000 tons of merchant shipping.

Japan's near-fanatical defense of the Central Pacific islands showed that the Japanese would fight anyone, anywhere, and ready to die for their Emperor. The Americans' next objective, meanwhile, became a subject of considerable debate. General MacArthur and the Navy could not agree on a target. Where would they strike next? The answer to this question would dictate how, when, and where the Pacific war would go, and how it would end.

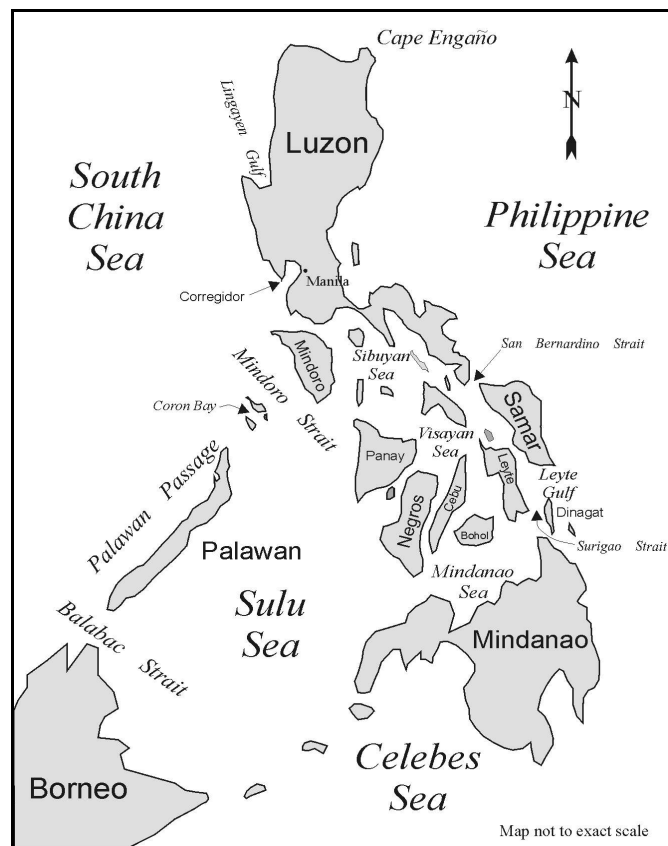
## Setting the Strategy

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt received the Democratic Party's nomination for an unprecedented fourth term as President of the United States, the debate over American strategy in the Pacific had reached an impasse. As Commander-in-Chief, he took the unprecedented step of intervening into the debate and force a conclusion.

Boarding a train in Chicago in July 1944, he traveled to San Diego where he boarded the heavy cruiser *Baltimore* and sailed for Honolulu. Roosevelt arrived in Pearl Harbor on July 21 to a tumultuous welcome to meet with Admiral Chester Nimitz and General MacArthur. The only member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to accompany Roosevelt was Admiral William D. Leahy, the president's chief-of-staff. After a photo opportunity with two of America's most celebrated military leaders, Roosevelt retired to rest from his long journey.

That evening, Roosevelt, MacArthur, Nimitz, and Leahy ate dinner and discussed Pacific War strategy. As Commander-in-Chief, Roosevelt started the meeting by asking MacArthur, "Well, Douglas, where do we go next?" Without hesitation, MacArthur replied, "The Philippines, Mr. President."

Roosevelt then asked Nimitz to present the Navy's strategy. The navy wanted to attack Formosa (now Taiwan) and bypass the Philippines. Nimitz argued that Formosa could act as a base to bomb the Japanese homeland and plug the vital Japanese supply lines between the East Indies and Japan. Because Formosa was close to the Chinese mainland, it could serve as a



The Philippine Islands

base to help the embattled Chinese with their struggle against the Japanese.

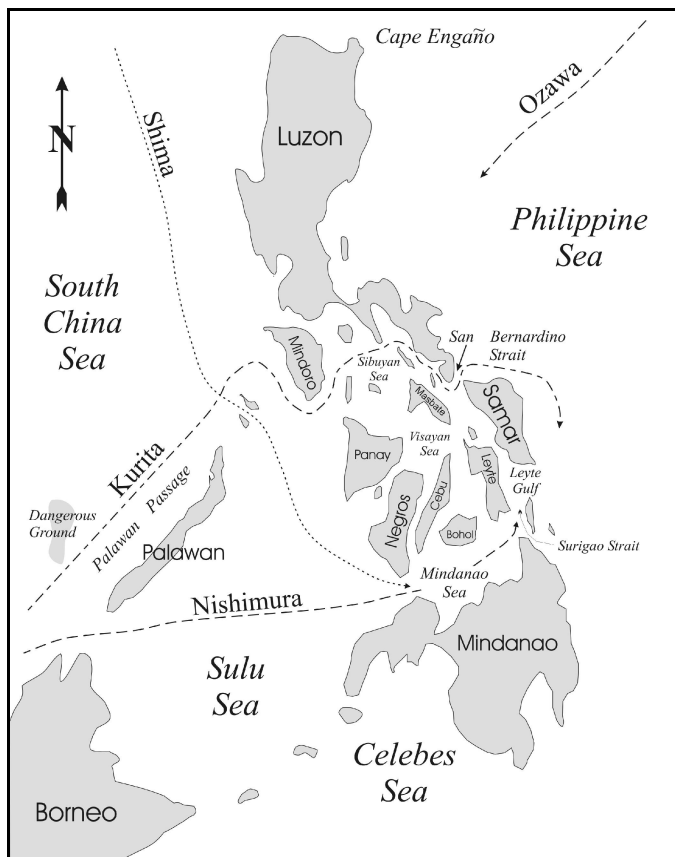
As he listened to Nimitz, MacArthur admired the sound military reasoning behind the admiral's arguments and realized they were the result of a brilliant military mind. After Nimitz finished, MacArthur lit his pipe, got up on his feet and stepped up to the large map of the Pacific Ocean on the wall.

MacArthur argued that leaving the Philippines in the American rear would endanger American supply lines. The Philippines were currently a powerful bastion of Japanese naval, air and military power. These forces could attack American supply ships and endanger the proposed American presence on Formosa.

But, MacArthur had even more powerful arguments against the Navy's proposal. He reminded Roosevelt that the president had pledged the United States would liberate the Philippines during those dark days after Pearl Harbor. If the United States broke that promise, MacArthur argued that the American public would register its displeasure in the November 1944 elections and maybe turn him out of office.

Roosevelt may not have been the most informed in military affairs. Nevertheless, he was one of the greatest American politicians and understood political arguments. MacArthur's arguments carried great weight with the President and convinced Roosevelt that the invasion of the

Philippines was the only viable next step. Later, at the OCTAGON conference in Quebec, Admiral King, with the approval of the Joint Chiefs, issued orders to invade setting the invasion date of the Philippines to October 20, 1944, thus a series of events into motion for the greatest and largest naval battle ever fought.



Japanese SHO-1 Strategy

## Forces on the Move

The Japanese expected that the United States would be attacking the Philippines as well as other potential targets. They came up with a plan to defend the Philippines called SHO-1. (SHO-2, 3, 4 were plans to defend other targets such as Formosa and the Ryukyu Islands; the Home Islands of Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku; and Hokkaido and the Kuriles. *SHO* is the Japanese word for victory.) Their plan would be adjusted when they knew just where the

Americans decided to land.

The key to the success of the Japanese SHO-1 plan was for the main surface forces commanded by Admiral Takeo Kurita (called the Center Force) and Vice Admiral Shoji Nishimura to simultaneously approach in a pincer maneuver and annihilate the American forces landing their troops on the Leyte beaches. To accomplish this, the Japanese had to lure the overwhelmingly powerful American carrier forces away from the Leyte beaches by executing a clever ruse. That deception would use the now depleted Japanese carrier forces that had suffered unrecoverable naval aviation losses in planes and aircrews at the Marianas Turkey Shoot. Knowing that dangerously impulsive Admiral William F. Halsey would command the enormously powerful American Third Fleet, the Japanese felt that if they could make Halsey believe that the toothless carrier force was the primary threat to the Leyte landings and move away from the Leyte area, the chances for their plan to succeed would be considerably improved. The man they chose to command the force (known as the Northern Force) was Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa, a highly respected advocate of Japanese naval aviation who had a fine war record. A cruiser force under the command of Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima would follow Nishimura and provide any aid he might need.

The Japanese sent every ship they could spare. Although the Imperial Japanese Navy had suffered terrible losses in ships, planes, and men since Pearl Harbor, the fleet they would deploy to defend the Philippines against American invasion was still an awesome force to be reckoned with. It had one fleet carrier, three light carriers, six battleships, 13 heavy cruisers, six light cruisers, and 35 destroyers for a total of 67 ships.

The Americans assembled an even more powerful force of ships, aircraft, men and materiel to attack the Philippines. Leading the way would be the Third Fleet under Halsey's command with eight fleet carriers, seven light carriers, six fast battleships, six heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers, and 61 destroyers. The Seventh Fleet, under the command of Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, would support the landings with a powerful force of six battleships, 16 escort carriers, four heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, 48 destroyers or destroyer-escorts, and 39 PT boats. The total number of American warships was 213 or a 3:1 advantage in ships over the Japanese fleet.

## A Divided Command

As anyone who has studied military history knows, it is not the power of the forces that determine a battle's outcome; it is how they are lead that makes the difference between victory and defeat. The Japanese command structure was highly unstructured that reflects the desperation they faced at this time in their war against America. The orders that each Japanese commander received were not more specific than to destroy the American landings. There was no person in overall command. The SHO-1 plan relied on precise timing of each force's movements. If anything should happen to change that timing, there was no forethought for any changes in the plan. That task would be the responsibility of each commander. Since Japanese naval training never provided for contingency planning if something should go awry, to ask each Japanese commander to change his plans without specific orders was counter to how they had been

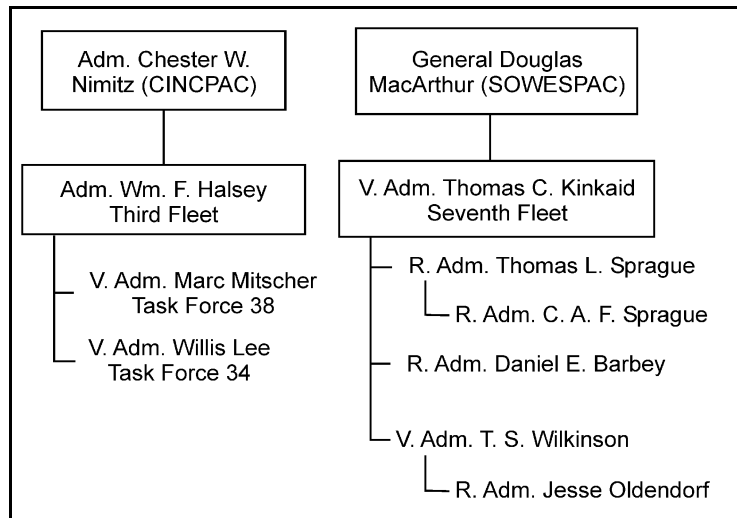
trained.

The American situation had its own problems. Their command structure had two senior commanders in charge of the operation: MacArthur and Nimitz. Reporting to Nimitz was Halsey who commanded the Third Fleet. Halsey had two key commanders reporting to him: Vice Admirals Marc Mitscher and Willis Lee. Mitscher was a naval air power advocate who had a highly distinguished record as commander of the carriers throughout the Pacific war from the taking of the Gilbert islands to the fantastic American victory in the Philippine Sea off the Marianas islands. Willis Lee, who had the nickname of “Ching,” had served with distinction from those difficult days at Guadalcanal as commander of battle lines through the Battle of the Philippine Sea.

MacArthur commanded the forces responsible for the actual invasion of Leyte Island and to directly support the landings. Reporting to MacArthur was Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid as commander of the Seventh Fleet, who had been in command of what

had been known as “MacArthur’s Navy” during the General’s historic drive up New Guinea’s northern coast. Before that assignment, Kinkaid had commanded the *Enterprise* in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands during the Guadalcanal campaign. Reporting to Kinkaid was Rear Admiral Thomas Sprague, who commanded three escort carrier task groups with the call signs of Taffy 1, 2, and 3, which would provide air support to the ground troops and one of which, Taffy 3, would play a pivotal role in the upcoming confrontation. Another commander reporting to Kinkaid was Rear Admiral Daniel E. Barbey, who commanded the ships that would provide fire support for the invasion. The landing force itself was under the command of Vice Admiral Thomas S. Wilkinson with Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf commanding the Battle Line that would later achieve an overwhelming victory in Surigao Strait.

The combined American naval force was the most powerful ever assembled since the invasion of France in June 1944. As the ships from both sides prepared for the impending conflict, American submarines moved their assigned patrol stations to watch out for the approaching Imperial Japanese Navy.



American Command Structure

## Pursuit in Palawan Passage

Palawan Passage is a narrow body of water that runs to the northwest of Palawan Island in

the eastern Philippines. Ships sailed through its waters under great peril because of a hazard called the Dangerous Shoals, which lay on the eastern side of the passage. Over the past centuries, Dangerous Shoals became the graveyard of dozens of lost ships that had the terrible luck of running aground on its hazardous rocks.

After receiving the signal to execute the SHO-1 plan, Kurita's Center Force left Brunei on October 22 to meet its destiny. As the last great surface fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy sailed out of Brunei Harbor into the open sea, its great battleships looked like old dowagers making their last appearance at an early 20<sup>th</sup> century cotillion ball. It was eerily like looking back in time at an event that would never happen again. In some sense, this is what was exactly happening.

The critical fuel oil shortages caused by the highly successful American submarine campaign and incessant attacks by the Third Fleet now forced Kurita to move his force through Palawan Passage's treacherous waters since this was the shortest route to the Sibuyan Sea and through the San Bernardino Strait to the Leyte Beaches. Kurita sailed on a zigzag course to minimize the threat of submarines at a speed of 16 knots. Trying to conserve precious scarce fuel, Kurita then ordered his force to stop zig-zagging.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was here that two American submarines, *Darter*, under the command of Commander David H. McClintock, and *Dace*, commanded by Commander Bladen D. Claggett, had taken their stations on October 20, 1944. As General MacArthur kept his dramatic promise of "*I Shall Return*" by stepping ashore on the beach of Leyte Island, *Darter* and *Dace* spent a quiet day in Palawan Passage to wait for any Japanese ship that should come their way. On October 23, 1944 at 12:23 a.m., they were moving southward in the Palawan Passage toward Balabac Strait. It was then that *Darter*'s radar picked up a large contact. The radar contact showed up on the bridge's repeater screen, surprising McClintock. His thoughts quickly surmised – Japanese ships! In what seemed to be an immediate answer to what he was thinking, the radar operator reported that the contact were indeed Japanese ships.

The Japanese fleet was to the submarines' starboard side. The large numbers of ships surprised the Americans. The Japanese ships steamed on a course of 39-degrees at a speed of 16 knots. The Americans confirmed they had contacted five Japanese battleships, ten heavy cruisers, and two light cruisers. Twelve to fourteen destroyers screened the convoy on the formation flanks and center.

McClintock noticed to his surprise that the Japanese ships did not zigzag as he expected, and no destroyers were ahead of the fleet screening for submarines. He did not know that Kurita was trying to conserve precious fuel because of a shortage of that critically vital commodity. If McClintock had known this, it would not have affected his decision to ask his running partner, Commander Claggett, to accompany him and go after these highly tempting targets. The two submarines increased their speed to 19 knots to close the range. The Battle of Leyte Gulf was about to begin.

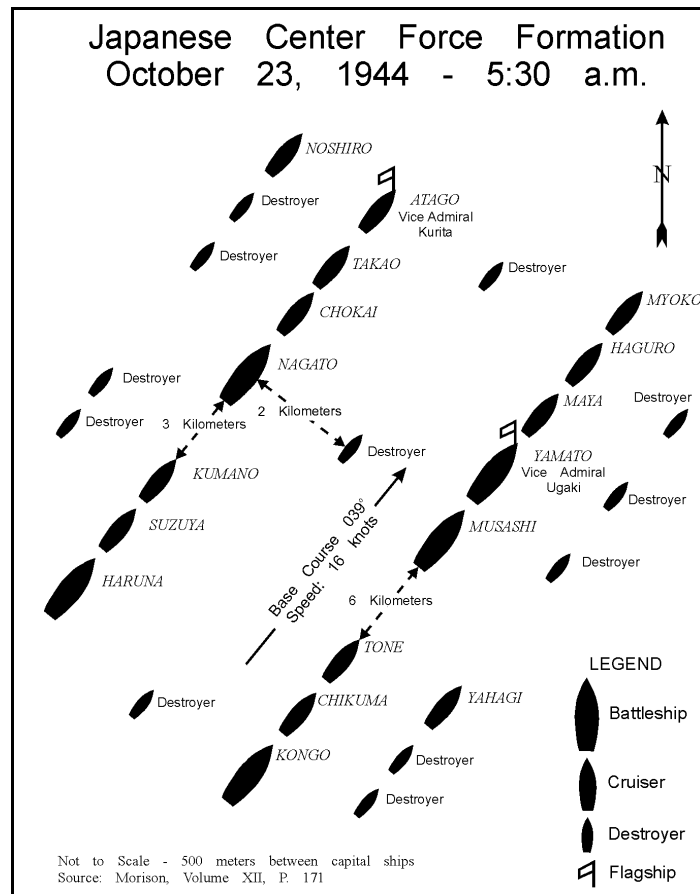
Shortly before 5:30 A.M., *Darter* and *Dace* had moved ten miles ahead and to the left of the Japanese ships. The submarines reduced speed to keep pace with the Japanese and decided to attack at dawn. McClintock dove the submarine and ordered "Up periscope" and peered into it. The dawn's light appeared over the eastern horizon in a cloudless sky. After lowering the

periscope, he ordered *Darter* to dive to 300 feet to check the water’s density and then took the submarine to periscope depth. Ordering the periscope raised, he again peered into it.

A large gray shape appeared in the lens with the entire columns of ships bearing down on him. The entire Japanese Center force loomed in the periscope’s lens. The dream of every submariner was now in front of him – a large, and powerful fleet of capital warships headed straight toward *Darter*.

*Darter* attacked the leading ship – a large, powerful heavy cruiser. McClintock knew was an *Atago*-class heavy cruiser and figured it was the fleet commander’s flagship because an admiral’s

flag flew from its foremast. It was indeed the heavy cruiser *Atago*, and Kurita was aboard her. McClintock fired six torpedoes toward the doomed ship. Just as McClintock fired at a second target – the heavy cruiser *Takao* – from his stern tubes, a large, heavy explosion erupted through the water. *Atago*, now engulfed in massive explosions and belching massive balls of fire and columns of smoke, sank in a matter of minutes, thereby dunking Kurita and much of his staff into the waters of Palawan Passage. McClintock took *Darter* deep to escape the depth charge attack that was about to come as the Japanese escorts tried to exact revenge for their comrades’ travails.



Kurita’s Formation in Palawan Passage

Now it was *Dace*’s turn. Claggett watched large columns of smoke belch from *Atago* and turned the periscope to another target that led another column of ships. She was the heavy cruiser *Maya* – a sister ship of *Atago* and *Takao* – a sea tiger whose life would soon end. *Dace* fired six torpedoes and took his submarine deep. The first torpedo struck the big cruiser on the port side near the

chain locker, the second opposite the number 2 main turret, the third in the number 7 boiler room, and the last in the port after engine room. She rapidly listed to port, exploded, and sank in several pieces.

*Takao* survived the attack but had to be towed and later escorted to Brunei. Kurita, after being unceremoniously dunked into the water, was rescued and brought aboard the battleship *Yamato*, which became his flagship. But the adventures of the *Darter* and *Dace* did not end.

After escaping the searches by the Japanese escorts, the submarines proceeded through the 25-mile wide channel where *Darter* ran aground on a shoal. After several unsuccessful attempts to free her, *Dace* tried to sink her with torpedoes and gunfire so she would not fall into Japanese hands. Her crew stripped *Darter* of anything that could be valuable to the Japanese, abandoned ship, and came aboard *Dace* for a long, crowded trip back to Brisbane.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first battle in the Battle of Leyte Gulf was now over. The Japanese had lost three heavy cruisers and the Americans one submarine. Kurita returned his Center Force to its planned course toward the Sibuyan Sea to meet the full fury of American naval aviation.

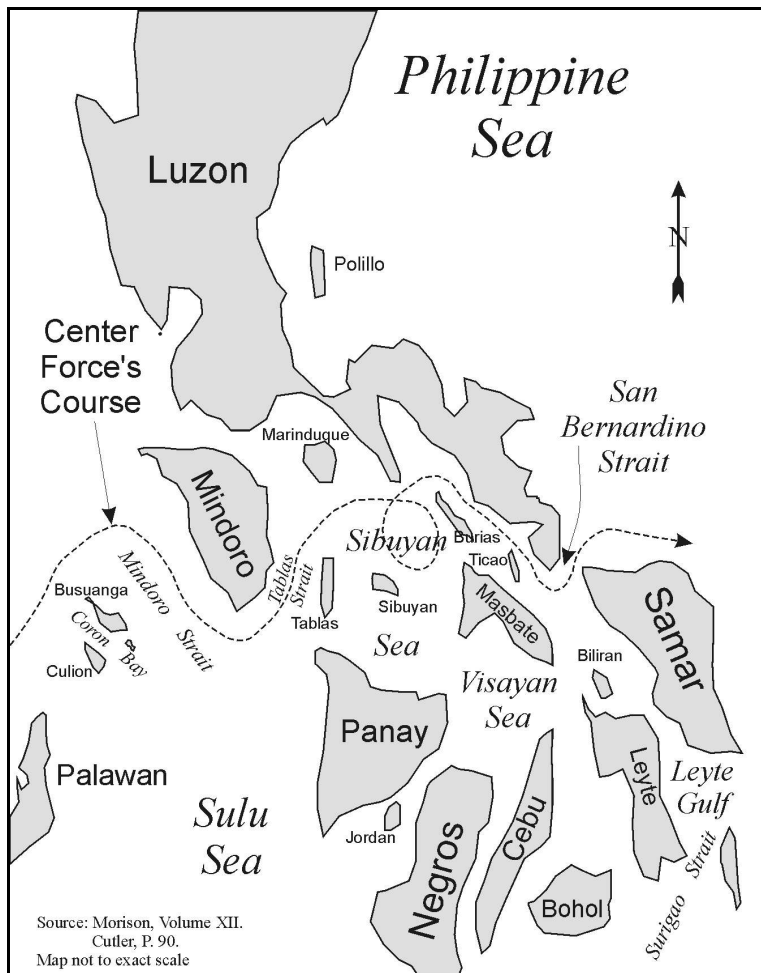
### The Third Fleet Attacks Kurita in the Sibuyan Sea

Kurita’s Center Force steamed through the Palawan Passage, traversed the Mindoro Strait and entered the Sibuyan Sea on the morning of October 24<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, Rear Admiral Forest P.

Sherman’s Task Group 38.3 had lost the light carrier *Princeton* to Japanese air attacks from land-based aircraft. Sherman also sent out search aircraft to look for Kurita’s force after receiving *Darter*’s sighting report earlier that evening. The American search planes found Kurita in the Sibuyan Sea, and Halsey ordered all his carriers to launch air attacks against the oncoming surface fleet.

Six powerful waves of American aircraft relentlessly pounded Kurita’s Center Force and inflicted severe damage. They sank the super battleship *Musashi* – the sister ship to the *Yamato* – but the great ship did not go down without a fight. She sank beneath the waves after the last wave of aircraft relentlessly pummeled her. It was a severe loss to the Japanese in that it reduced its battleship power that would be needed later.

The ship’s sinking also added to Kurita’s ever increasing worries



Source: Morison, Volume XII. Cutler, P. 90. Map not to exact scale

Kurita’s Course in the Sibuyan Sea

about his force's ability to carry out its mission – the destruction of shipping on Leyte's beaches. He had been dunked into the ocean when his first flagship sank beneath him. Now he had lost one of the two most powerful battleships in the Imperial Japanese Navy. Several of his ships streamed huge columns of smoke after sustaining heavy damage. After the Americans' last attack, Kurita reversed his course westward so he could reform his force. As he did this, the American strike leader radioed a message to Halsey that the Japanese force was retreating to the west. This observation would lead to one of the most controversial command decisions ever made by a senior American commander in World War II.

## Halsey Makes a Deadly Decision

Pilots returning from their air strikes in the Sibuyan Sea reported they had inflicted very heavy damage on the Japanese Center Force. The Japanese seemed to be retreating to the west and removing themselves from the battle. Almost every air crew member seemed to be confirming the one fact that was music to Halsey's ears.

The threat of the Japanese surface forces was moving away from endangering the Leyte beaches. Halsey believed that the only credible danger was the Japanese carriers the Americans believed to be approaching from the north. Halsey had one irresistible urge that he believed would be the crowning jewel in what had been an illustrious naval career – to meet and obliterate a powerful force of Japanese carriers with the overwhelming power of the rebuilt American navy. It was like a fire lit into his soul that could not be extinguished.

The Japanese Northern Force was indeed approaching southward with only one purpose – to lure Halsey's Third Fleet away from the Leyte area so the Center and Southern forces could descend upon the hapless American landing forces and destroy them without any fear of retribution. Vice Admiral Ozawa's toothless force had only one purpose – be the bait for the ruse. Ozawa became concerned that Halsey may not know his Northern Force was actually out there. So, he ordered that his radio operators to flood the airwaves with message traffic so that Halsey would have no doubt the Northern Force was approaching.

Halsey's Third Fleet staff scrutinized the returning aircrew's battle reports and concluded that Kurita's Center Force was indeed retreating. The only question that remained was what to do next. They analyzed several alternatives that included the following:

1. Guard the San Bernardino Strait with the entire fleet.
2. Guard the San Bernardino Strait with Task Force 34. The first time this force entered any realm of reality was with a "planning" message sent by Halsey to his commanders to collect all the battleships and most of the heavy cruisers into a classic battle line under the command of Vice Admiral Willis "Ching" Lee. The task force (called Task Force 34) would be formed by Halsey's orders only. However, this became the basis of one of the most confusing and controversial orders ever issued in the history on the United States Navy.
3. Leave San Bernardino Strait unguarded and attack the approaching Japanese carriers. Since the Center Force appeared to be retreating and no longer a force with which to be

reckoned, this was the favorite choice of Halsey and his staff.

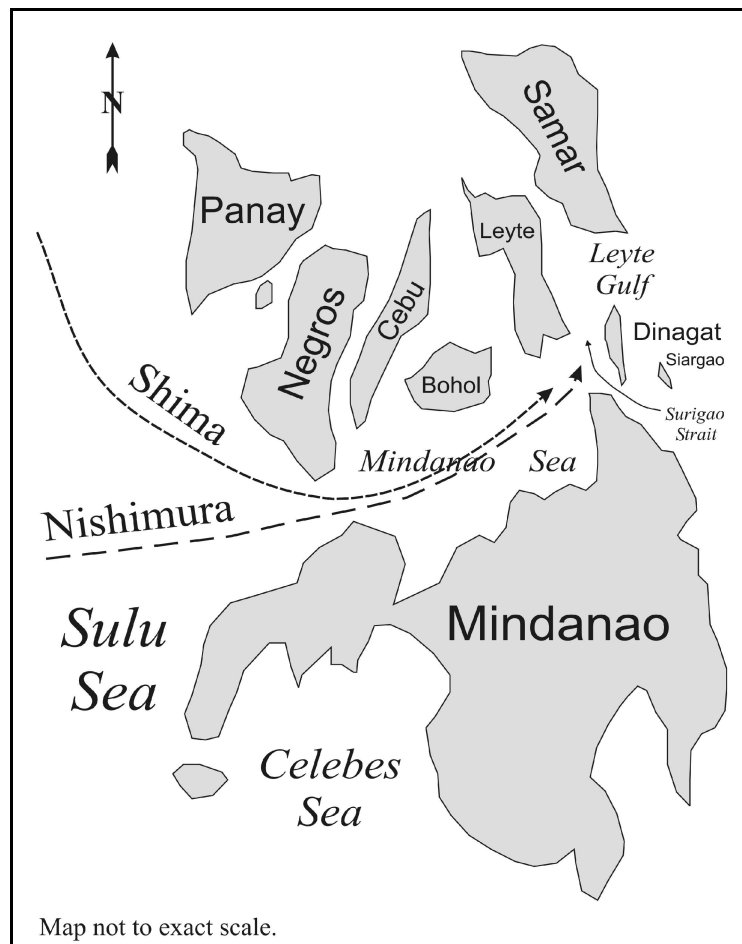
So Halsey made the fateful decision to move north. San Bernardino Strait was now wide open for any force to come through it. Meanwhile, Kurita was no longer moving westward. After gathering his forces after the devastating American air attacks, he reversed the course again and now steamed toward San Bernardino Strait.

Meanwhile, a fight was now building south of Leyte. Vice Admiral Nishimura's Force "C" of two old battleships, one heavy cruiser and four destroyers were moving through the Mindanao Sea. Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima's haphazardly formed force of cruisers and destroyers now planned to follow Nishimura and steam toward the Surigao Strait. What followed was the last time battleships would fire upon battleships and the classic crossing the "T" maneuver be used. An overwhelming American victory now was ready to happen.

## Ambush in the Surigao Strait

Nishimura's force continued steaming in the Mindanao Sea when American naval aircraft attacked his ships. More important, they reported Nishimura's position, course and speed to the Third and Seventh Fleets' commands. Now the Americans knew there was a force of two battleships, one heavy cruiser and four destroyers coming from the south. The Japanese ships were the two old prewar battleships *Yamashiro* and *Fuso*, the heavy cruiser *Mogami* plus the four destroyers *Mitsushiso*, *Asagumo*, *Yamagumo*, and *Shigure*.

Vice Admiral Thomas Kinkaid ordered Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf to position his force of battleships, cruisers, destroyers and PT boats to stop the approaching Japanese from penetrating Surigao Strait and fall upon the Leyte beaches. Using the classic technique of positioning a fleet against an opposing force steaming up a narrow body of water that had been taught at



Nishimura Moves into Surigao Strait

naval academies since the days of sail, Oldendorf placed his 13 groups of PT boats (37 total) along the southern approaches to Surigao Strait. Oldendorf had 27 destroyers that he positioned to patrol the northern end of Surigao Strait as a screen to the battleships and cruisers. The battleships and cruisers steamed across the northern mouth of the strait where they could cross the Japanese "T." All they had to do was to wait for Nishimura and Shima. And they would not to wait for long.

Nishimura's force entered the Surigao Strait in the early evening hours of October 24, and the American PTs waited for them. At 10:54 P.M., the *Yamashiro's* surprised lookouts saw the PTs. The guns of the destroyer *Shigure* spit flames in the night and for that moment the night became day. The Battle of Surigao Strait was on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Each of the 13 PT groups increased their speed and attacked the oncoming Japanese with torpedoes and gunfire. While they did not inflict any damage on Nishimura's force, they served two purposes. First and most important, they notified Oldendorf the course, speed, and position of the approaching Japanese to his command. Second, they harassed the Japanese into delaying their passage up the Surigao Strait such that Oldendorf had plenty of time to get ready for them.

Now, it was the destroyers' turn. And these American denizens of destruction would do more to inflict damage on Nishimura's force than anyone thought they were capable of. The destroyers attacked in two groups with assaults down the eastern and western sides of Surigao Strait on the Japanese ships' flanks. The first group included the destroyers *Monssen*, *Mcdermut* on the western side and *Melvin*, *McGowan*, and *Remey* on the eastern side.

The American destroyers fired torpedoes at the approaching Japanese and scored hits. Blinding light from at least six explosions bloomed in the night sky as the American torpedoes found their targets. The battleship *Fuso* took one hit as one of *Melvin's* torpedoes struck her. Japanese shells fell all about the American destroyers but none found any targets.

Then the second destroyer assault descended upon the beleaguered Japanese. There were more destroyers in this attack. They were *Beale*, *Killen*, HMAS *Arunta*, *Bache*, *Daly*, *Hutchins*, *Bennion*, *Leutze*, *Edwards*, *Grant*, *Leary*, *Newcombe*, *Bryant*, *Halford*, and *Robinson*. *Fuso* took more hits, exploded into two pieces and sank. The Japanese destroyers *Michishio* and *Yamagumo* exploded and disappeared beneath the waves. The Japanese destroyer *Asagumo* took heavy damage and had to retreat to the south. The Americans had whittled Nishimura's small and rapidly depleting force. Now it was the big boys' turn.

\* \* \* \* \*

The six American battleships waiting for the Japanese were older pre-World War II vessels, five of which survived the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7<sup>th</sup> – *California*, *Tennessee*, *West Virginia*, *Pennsylvania*, and *Maryland*. The other battleship, *Mississippi*, was the sixth one in the battle line. It was now time to exact revenge for Pearl Harbor.

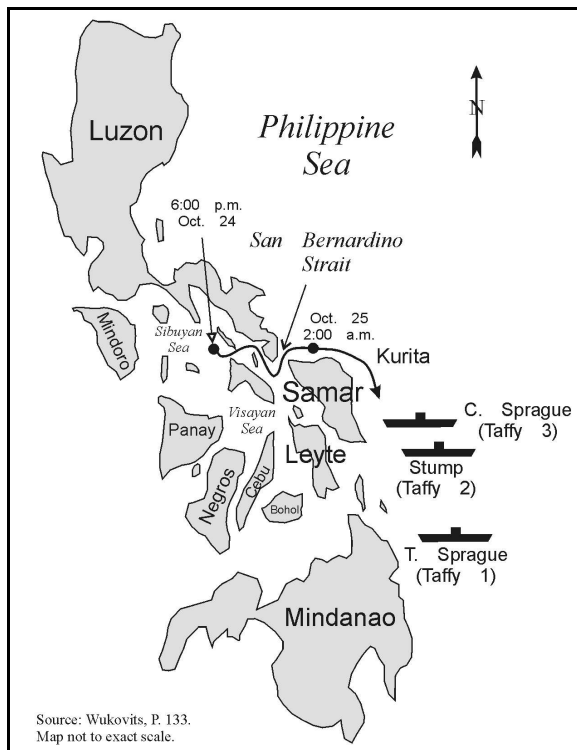
Nishimura command continued steaming to the north in Surigao Strait to its eventual oblivion. Oldendorf's battleships and cruisers opened fire when the heavy cruiser *Louisville's* six forward 8-inch guns' muzzles exploded with flame and sent their shells arcing into the dark. The other American ships began firing immediately. Sixteen-, fourteen-, eight-, and six-inch shells were on their way to inflict utter destruction to anything and anyone moving into their path. It did

not take long before this bombardment's effects were seen, felt, and heard. The night sky exploded with blinding light and enormous blasts as the American shells found their quarry.

Shell after shell pummeled *Yamashiro*. She slowed, turned and began sinking. Nishimura, always dedicated to the creed of the Bushido warrior, decided to die with her. The only two survivors of this holocaust, the heavy cruiser *Mogami* and the destroyer *Shigure*, reversed and sought escape southward down the Surigao Strait. Shima's force belatedly tried to follow its colleague northward but retreated when notified that Nishimura's force had been destroyed.

By the use overwhelming firepower, the battleships, cruisers, destroyers and PT boats of the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet stopped the threat from the south to the Leyte beaches. The Japanese force had been obliterated, and its commander went down with his ship. Nevertheless, the threat to the Leyte beaches had not been totally eliminated. Kurita's Center Force, still a mighty fleet capable of inflicting enormous damage to anything that should stand in its way, had steamed through the narrow waters of the San Bernardino Strait, turned south, and headed for Leyte. Because Halsey had taken the Third Fleet with him along with its modern, fast battleships, leaving the eastern exit of the San Bernardino Strait wide open, there was nothing to stop the Japanese – except for the six escort carriers, three destroyers, and four destroyer-escorts of Taffy 3 commanded by an outstanding leader, Rear Admiral Clifton A. F. Sprague.

## Heroism off Samar



Kurita Threatens Leyte Gulf

In the early hours of October 25, 1944, the ships of Taffy 3 patrolled off Samar's east coast and had been supporting the troops that had invaded Leyte Island. As the sun rose in the eastern sky, Sprague ordered search planes aloft to search for Japanese submarines.

At 6:30 A.M. the Center Force steamed on a 170-degree course. The water had a light chop. The lookouts in the *Yamato*'s crow's nest peered over the horizon. Suddenly, ships' masts that seemed belong to carriers appeared in the lens of the lookout's binoculars. The Japanese lookouts had never seen masts of escort carriers before. So, they supposed these ships had to be the carriers of Halsey's Third Fleet. When Kurita received these reports, he was flabbergasted. Nonetheless, here was a heaven-sent opportunity to destroy the mainstay of the American navy. He immediately ordered the Center Force's guns to open fire. The *Yamato*'s guns thundered and belched smoke and flame, sending its 18-inch missiles toward the

American ships.

An American search plane piloted by Ensign William C. Brooks was the first to sight the Center Force and report its presence to Sprague. Sprague could not believe that the Japanese were out there. The truth of that fact became immediately clear as huge columns of colored water blossomed around the admiral's flagship, the escort carrier *Fanshaw Bay*. Asking for confirmation these ships were indeed Japanese, the answer came back from Taffy 3's lookouts, "The ships have pagoda masts," the characteristic feature unique to Japanese battleships.

Sprague now knew his small, outnumbered, and outgunned force was in dire straits, and he knew he had to quickly decide what to do. To the east of Taffy 3 was a rain squall that could provide Taffy 3 some temporary shelter. He also had to throw every weapon at his disposal at the oncoming Japanese ships. Sprague was not in an optimistic mood that his force would survive as he made some critically important decisions.

With the Japanese ships just 15 miles away, Sprague immediately ordered Taffy 3 eastward toward the rain squall. He launched every aircraft he had to attack the Japanese with any weapon whether it be machine guns, bombs, or just fake attacks with no armament at all. Using the wind to their advantage, the destroyers poured smoke into the sky that blinded the Japanese lookouts from clearly seeing Taffy 3. Realizing that time was so precariously short, he called for help in plain English. Nevertheless, the Japanese rapidly closed the range and moved in for the kill.

The rain squall and the destroyers' smoke hid Taffy 3 for a short while and gave Sprague time to organize whatever defensive maneuvers he had left. With his aircraft attacking the onrushing Japanese from every direction and increasingly causing confusion among the Japanese senior commanders, Sprague ordered his destroyers to attack and turned Taffy 3 to the south and then in a southwesterly direction to place itself between the Japanese and the Leyte beaches.

The destroyers *Johnston*, *Hoel*, and *Heerman* steamed through the carriers' formation and attacked the oncoming Japanese ships with gunfire and torpedoes. The destroyer escorts *Samuel B. Roberts*, *Raymond*, *Dennis*, and *John C. Butler* joined the fray. Using tactics that could only lead to their destruction, the small ships fired everything they had and inflicted serious damage on the Japanese. The ferocity of their attacks made the Japanese believe they were being attacked by cruisers instead of destroyers. Since the Japanese had never seen escort carriers before, Kurita reasoned that the Americans would never sacrifice destroyers in such a desperate way unless the carriers were the cream of the American navy – the fast fleet carriers of the Third Fleet.

The frantic, suicidal assaults also caused the Japanese formation to crumble. The heavy Cruiser *Chikuma* turned away from the attack and headed eastward. The battleships *Yamato* and *Nagato* turned northward away from the battle, and since Kurita was in *Yamato*, his flagship, taking Kurita with them. The Japanese commander had now been removed from the battle and lost command and control over his forces.

Confused and becoming more disoriented, Kurita ordered his fleet to retreat. Sprague could not believe his eyes. His command had been saved. But, this was not without costs. The destroyers *Hoel* and *Johnston* and the destroyer-escort *Samuel B. Roberts* gallantly sank. *Johnston's* commander, Commander Ernest Evans, went down with her and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. The escort carrier *Gambier Bay*, full of holes and pummeled by relentless Japanese salvos, sank.

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Meanwhile, Sprague's anxious pleas for help were going unheeded. Nimitz wanted to know what was happening in the struggle off Samar and what Halsey was doing about it. His impatience became thin; so he sent a message that became one of the great controversies of World War II. Anxious to know where Halsey's battleships were, he sent the following message:

TURKEY TROTS TO WATER GG WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK FORCE 34 RR  
THE WORLD WONDERS

A clerk in *New Jersey's* coding room stripped the header and, thinking the trailer "The world wonders" contained relevant information decoded the message and transmitted the following to Halsey:

WHERE IS TASK FORCE 34 RR THE WORLD WONDERS

Believing this a slap in the face from Nimitz, Halsey threw a temper tantrum and was brought under control by his staff. However, the message had one effect. Third Fleet had been heading northward in search of Ozawa's carriers. American aircraft found them, and Halsey launched aircraft to attack. Halsey ordered Task Force 34 to turn around and head southward to come to Taffy 3's aid. But, it was too late. The damage and death of American sailors had been already done. Halsey's service record would be forever tainted for leaving San Bernardino Strait unguarded, and the controversy continued after the war's end and after Halsey's death.

## Finishing Touches

The Battle of Cape Engaño (Engaño comes from the Spanish word *engañar* – or to be fooled) became almost a footnote in what would be become known as the Battle of Leyte Gulf since by that time, the issue had been settled when Kurita retreated. Halsey's Third Fleet moved north trying to find the Japanese carriers. The search was no longer fruitless. Ozawa tried every technique he knew trying to be found. After all, his mission was to be the bait that Halsey could not resist. Halsey had taken the lure in his teeth and, like a fish on a hook, went pell-mell after Ozawa. So Ozawa had accomplished his mission and awaited his fate.

Finally, American aircraft found the toothless Japanese carriers. Halsey ordered an all-out attack. After several waves of attacking aircraft pummeled the Northern Force, the American planes sank the Japanese carriers *Zuikaku* – the last remaining carrier of the force that had attacked on Pearl Harbor –, *Zuiho*, *Chitose*, and *Chiyoda*. Ozawa was the only senior Japanese commander to survive the attack and remain a highly respect veteran after the war. He was the only Japanese admiral to accomplish his mission at Leyte Gulf while serving with honor. Nonetheless, with the loss of the Japanese carriers, Japan ceased to be a naval power.

## The Legacy of Leyte Gulf

The Battle of Leyte Gulf proved to be the last great naval battle the world would ever see. Great fleets would never confront each other as had been at Trafalgar, Jutland, Punta del Este, Dogger Bank, and Surigao Strait. The battleship – once the primary symbol of a nation’s power – had been rendered irrelevant. While they remained part of naval fleets, they would be relegated to bombardment platforms in support of landing operations and as a powerful artillery platform. Eventually they would be moth-balled, turned into scrap, or transformed into museums. World War II changed the balance of naval power to where naval aviation and the submarine would dominate the future of naval warfare. No longer would battleships form battle lines and hurl huge shells at each other. Future naval battles would be between ships and submarines, ships and aircraft, and aircraft and submarines.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf provides one valuable lesson. Human decisions played the most important part in this great confrontation between the two greatest naval powers in war in the Pacific, not the size of the fleets and the power of the ships. The fallibility of human beings’ judgments makes the study of this battle one of the most intriguing subjects of naval history. And the course of naval history changed forever.