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**Admiral Spruance and The Battle of Philippine Sea:
A Brilliant Victory or a Bungled Opportunity?**

Core Course (5) Essay

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CORE COURSE 5
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THESIS

This paper, through historical analysis, supports the argument that Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Commander Fifth Fleet and Central Pacific Area, accurately assessed the complex circumstances at the Battle of Philippine Sea, and made the correct command decision to defend the amphibious forces, ensuring the success of the amphibious operation.

INTRODUCTION

The American victory at the Battle of Philippine Sea (19-20 June 1944) is regarded by military historians as one of the great naval engagements. Perhaps for this reason military experts continue to analyze the battle, focusing on the controversial command decision by Admiral Spruance not to seek and destroy the Imperial Japanese Navy in a "decisive battle." Rather, Spruance chose to place highest priority on covering and defending the United States (U.S.) amphibious forces that were in the initial phase of the invasion of Saipan.

The result of the Battle of Philippine Sea was the near destruction of the Japanese navy's air arm, reducing the Japanese aircraft carrier fleet to a state of impotence. Yet, six of the nine Japanese carriers that participated in the battle remained afloat and operational with the potential to fight another time.

The following comments by Vice Admiral Mark "Pete" Mitscher, commander of the fast carrier forces (Task Force 58) under Admiral Spruance, and Fleet Admiral Earnest King, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), highlight the controversy surrounding the Battle of Philippine Sea. Admiral Mitscher's comments are critical of Spruance's tactics while Fleet Admiral King's comments reflect strong support.

"The enemy escaped. He had been badly hurt by one aggressive carrier strike, at the one time he was within range. His fleet was not sunk."

Vice Admiral Mitscher
Commander, Task Force 58

"As the primary mission of the American forces in the area was to capture the Marianas, the Saipan amphibious operation had to be protected from enemy interference at all costs. In {Admiral Spruance's} plans for what developed into the battle of the Philippine Sea, Spruance was rightly guided by this basic obligation."

Fleet Admiral King, CNO

In addressing the "Spruance debate" several areas will be reviewed that lend perspective and objectivity to Admiral Spruance's decision. They include:

- * An overview of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Central Pacific campaign strategy.
- * A summary of U.S. and Japanese campaign objectives in the Marianas.
- * A brief characterization of key American and Japanese commanders.

Following discussion of the above items, Spruance's tactical conduct of the battle is analyzed. Finally, an assessment of Spruance's decision is provided.

CENTRAL PACIFIC OPERATIONS: THE MARIANAS CAMPAIGN

The conduct of war is the "art of war."¹ Sun Tzu believed the "art of war" consisted of five elements: measurement of space, estimation of quantities, calculations, comparisons and chances of victory.² These elements are the basic essentials by which strategies are developed, plans are formulated and tactics executed. But, most important to the conduct of war is the commander who conceptualizes the operational vision and, subsequently, the commander who implements the vision and achieves operational success. This is the art in war.

Admiral Spruance's campaign for the Marianas was derived from the Joint Chiefs of Staff Central Pacific Campaign strategy. What follows is a brief overview of the Central Pacific Strategy, a summary of U.S. and Japanese campaign objectives and a brief characterization of the key commanders who crafted and executed the operations.

CENTRAL PACIFIC STRATEGY: The origin of the strategy was based on planning

conducted after World War I when American strategic planners sensed the potential for future conflict with Japan in the Western Pacific and Far East. Known as the ORANGE plans and developed jointly by the Army and Navy (1924 through 1938), the strategy envisioned was primarily naval in concept. The concept of operation Plan ORANGE was "isolation and exhaustion of Japan, through control of her vital sea communications and through aggressive operations against her armed forces and her economic life."³

In June 1944 Plan ORANGE would be the foundation for Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) direction for Central Pacific operations. In conjunction with the Pacific strategic concept developed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff (U.S. Joint Chiefs under the President plus British counterparts), the JCS ordered Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief, U. S. Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas (CINCPACFLT), to occupy the Southern Marianas beginning 15 June 1944. As stated by the JCS in a message to Nimitz on 12 March 1944, the objective was "...to secure control of sea communications through the Central Pacific by isolating and neutralizing the Carolines and by the establishment of sea and air bases for operations against Japanese sea routes and long range air attacks against the Japanese home land."

THE MARIANAS CAMPAIGN

Admiral Nimitz, having received orders from the JCS on 12 March 1944 that directed him to occupy the Southern Marianas beginning 15 June 1944, tasked Spruance to begin planning. The amphibious invasion of the Southern Marianas would be called Operation FORAGER. Admiral Nimitz's direction to Spruance "was to capture, occupy and defend Saipan, Guam and Tinian and develop air bases in these islands."⁴ Nimitz's orders said nothing about going on the offensive against an enemy fleet.⁵

Admiral Spruance as Commander Fifth Fleet would be in overall command of the operation. His principle supporting commanders would be Vice Admiral Mitscher,

Commander, Task Force 58 (Fast Carrier Forces) and Vice Admiral Richmond K. Turner, Commander Task Force 51 (Joint Expeditionary Force).

Forces under Spruance consisted of more than 535 combatant ships and auxiliaries carrying and supporting nearly 128,000 troops, of which over two thirds were Marines. This was the largest and logistically most complex operation ever before planned. The nearest advance base at Eniwetok was over 1000 miles from Saipan and Pearl Harbor some 3500 miles from the Southern Marianas.⁵

On 15 June 1944, Operation FORAGER commenced. The following Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) Communique summarizes the event:

"Assault troops have effected landings on Saipan Island...Landings are being continued against strong opposition under cover of supporting bombardment by our air and surface forces." CINCPAC COMMUNIQUE NO. 49, JUNE 15, 1944

Later on 15 June, Spruance received intelligence confirming that a large formation of Japanese warships was steaming eastward from the Philippines toward the Marianas. Spruance's attention now shifted to preparing for a major sea action with the Japanese Fleet.

JAPAN'S COUNTER-STRATEGY

In 1944 Japan's greater Pacific strategy focused on three areas: protecting the home islands, retaining access to oil resources in Sumatra and Borneo, and protecting Japanese merchant shipping supporting forward deployed operations.⁷ Supporting this strategy the Japanese Navy focused on rebuilding and retraining its naval combatant forces. The Imperial Navy had adopted a "conservation of assets" philosophy after its defeat at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Japan's naval plan was to "keep its powder dry until a chance to fight a decisive battle with the United States Fleet presented itself."⁸

By May 1944 Imperial Headquarters realized that the opportunity for the awaited fleet

action was approaching. Operation A-Go was ordered. The basic concept of A-Go was to lure the American Fleet into open water west of the Marianas, and then overwhelm the U.S. Fleet with Japanese land and carrier based aircraft.

The Japanese, by March 1944, recognized that the aircraft carriers had replaced battleships as the most important ships in the Navy. For this reason the Japanese Fleet reorganized placing all combatant ships (destroyers, cruisers, battleships) under the command of Vice Admiral Ozawa, an experienced carrier aviation tactician. Vice Admiral Ozawa, Commander, First Mobile Fleet, would lead the attack against Spruance at the Battle of Philippine Sea.

Air power was the essential tactical element the Japanese Navy relied upon to defeat the U.S. Fleet. Special importance was placed on land based naval aircraft, known as the First Air Fleet. The A-Go plan expected the First Air Fleet to destroy at least one third of Spruance's carrier force.⁹ The land based naval support would prove to be particularly ineffective during the actual battle.

THE PLAYERS

Battles are fought by great men -- victors and vanquished alike. The war plans, once brought to life, test the genius of the strategist and the commanders. Genius, Clausewitz noted, is a unique and rare quality that reveals itself in the commander only in war. Clausewitz believed this was true because the realms of war (danger, physical exertion and suffering, chance/uncertainty) truly challenged a commander's mental physical being to extreme limits.¹⁰ The most difficult command decisions are often required in circumstances of extreme limits.

The "players" who were challenged by the realms of war in the Marianas campaign and Battle of Philippine Sea are characterized below. They include Fleet Admiral King

(architect of the Central Pacific strategy); Admiral Nimitz (principle planner for the Central Pacific Campaign); Admiral Spruance (responsible for successfully executing Central Pacific area operations); Vice Admiral Mitscher (under Admiral Spruance, officer in tactical command of fast carrier forces); Vice Admiral Ozawa (Spruance's counterpart and officer in tactical command of Japanese naval forces).

Fleet Admiral King. Considered a thinker and active leader by his peers and navy leadership throughout his career, King served all of World War II as Chief of Naval Operations. A Naval War College graduate and student of the ORANGE Plans of the 1920's, King was responsible for gaining acceptance amongst the JCS for the Central Pacific Campaign.

Admiral Nimitz. A warm and friendly man who placed great emphasis on knowing his people, Nimitz had a well earned reputation for never forgetting a name or face. Admiral Nimitz took great pains to support his subordinate flag officers and was a master at defusing controversial decisions or personality conflicts. Strategically, Admiral Nimitz was skilled at maintaining perspective of overall war objectives. He refused to let himself get involved with details.

Admiral Spruance. He is best known for his power and coolness in action. He never let himself become harassed. Spruance shared Nimitz's style of concentrating on the strategic picture and delegating authority. A quiet and extremely modest man, Admiral Spruance never sought recognition or publicity. His inward manner and rigid, neat, business like manner caused some junior officers to call him "Old Frozen Face."¹¹ Admiral Spruance was a strong believer in the Naval War College and its preparation of men for the conduct of war. His attendance in 1926 had focused his attention on Japan as his future enemy. Samuel E. Morison summarized Admiral Spruance this way: "[His] leading characteristics

were attention to detail, poise, and power of intelligent decision....{Spruance} envied no man, regarded no one as rival and won the respect of all with whom he came in contact..."¹²

Vice Admiral Mitscher. A pioneer of naval aviation, Mitscher was a admiral who knew the power of carrier warfare. Considered a simple, unassuming man with a soft voice and quiet manner, he, like Spruance, avoided publicity and recognition. However, his leathery, wizened face and his trademark lobsterman's cap made him a popular press personality. Admiral Mitscher was loved by his men because of the compassion he displayed for their well being and safety. Rescue operations for downed pilots were for Mitscher as important as the battle itself.¹³ Always aggressive for meeting the enemy in fleet action, Mitscher was consistently ready to seek out and pursue the Japanese Fleet.

Vice Admiral Ozawa. He combined many of the traits of Spruance and Mitscher. Scientifically minded, Ozawa was considered a thinker and talented strategist. He dared to try new ideas, and although not an aviator by experience, Admiral Ozawa recognized the significance of carrier warfare. He had initiated offensive use of aircraft carriers. Intellectually, Admiral Ozawa was a formidable opponent for Spruance and Mitscher but, as the Battle of Philippine Sea showed, Ozawa's air arm lacked the experience to pose a credible threat to the United States Fleet.

BATTLE SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Operation FORAGER commenced on 15 June 1944 with Vice Admiral Turner signaling the order to land the amphibious expeditionary force. The same day Spruance received confirmed intelligence that Vice Admiral Ozawa's Mobile Fleet was steaming eastward from the Philippines toward the Marianas. Operation A-Go had been activated. A decisive fleet action would occur within a few days.

In comparing the U. S. and Japanese fleets, Spruance outnumbered Ozawa's naval

force in every way except heavy cruisers. In addition, Mitscher had twice as many carrier aircraft as the Japanese.¹⁴

As the battle approached Ozawa retained three tactical advantages. First, he planned to initiate combat at a range that would maximize support of his 90 to 100 land based aircraft at Guam, Rota and Yap. Land based air support would reduce the aircraft numerical disadvantage and provided divert fields for Japanese sea base air to rearm and refuel. Second, Ozawa's air had greater range for both search and attack missions. This would allow the Japanese to attack outside the range of U.S. carrier air. And, third, Ozawa had the advantage of launching his aircraft while he closed for the attack.¹⁵ Mitscher would have to alter course into the wind for launch and recovery operations, maneuvers costly in time and tactics.

Offsetting Admiral Ozawa's advantages were the lack of experience and limited training of Japanese aviators. Most of Japan's seasoned pilots had been lost in combat. Conservation of fuel and lack of training facilities disabled the Japanese training program. Most pilots had few flight hours and little or no combat experience. In contrast Mitscher's pilots were combat proven, well trained and anxious to fight.

Between 15-18 June Admiral Spruance pursued intelligence about the location and disposition of the enemy force. Air searches failed to locate the Japanese fleet. Uncertain of Japanese movements Spruance cancelled the invasion of Guam scheduled for 18 June, and gave his commitment to Admiral Turner that he would protect the landing in progress at Saipan.

Spruance assumed Ozawa would give priority to defeating the U.S. amphibious force and that Ozawa would achieve his mission by splitting his fleet in an attempt to draw Spruance's carriers to sea. This would permit Ozawa to make an "end run" on the U.S. Fleet

in order to attack the amphibious force. Spruance's prediction of Ozawa's tactics was reinforced by a recently captured enemy document containing current Japanese naval doctrine.

Tactical discussion ensued between Spruance and his chief of staff as to Japanese intentions on 17-18 June. Intelligence on location and disposition of Japanese force remained sketchy. But Spruance remained convinced about his assumption that Ozawa's primary objective would be the U.S. amphibious force at Saipan. Spruance issued the following battle orders to Mitscher. "*Task Force 58 must cover Saipan and {protect} our {amphibious} forces involved in that operation.*"¹⁶ In the back of Spruance's mind was the desire to sink the Japanese fleet, but only if the opportunity arose without risk to Turner's amphibious transport ships.

During the night of 18/19 June Spruance received two pieces of conflicting intelligence information: one from CINCPACFLT giving the location of Ozawa's flagship as 350 miles southwest of Task Force 58; and one from a submarine that implied the Japanese fleet was somewhere south of Task Force 58. That same night Mitscher sent Spruance a message recommending that Task Force 58 steam west, closing the Japanese fleet, and conduct an early morning air attack.

Shortly after midnight on 19 June Spruance evaluated the intelligence information and retained conviction in his view that Ozawa's force was split, and that a Japanese flanking maneuver remained possible. Spruance replied to Mitscher that he disagreed with his proposal, ordering that Mitscher's Task Force 58 remain near Saipan in a defensive posture..

On 19 June the Japanese air attack occurred. History has recorded the defeat suffered by the Japanese. Known as the "Marianas Turkey Shoot" the Japanese lost nearly 400 aircraft. U.S. forces suffered few aircraft losses and only minor damage to one ship.

However, the ships of the Japanese Navy, which had remained out of range of air strike, remained operational. As 19 June ended the Japanese Fleet was retiring west. More damage would be inflicted on the Japanese Mobile Fleet before the battle concluded on 20 June. However, six of nine enemy carriers would successfully outrun Spruance's fleet.

SPRUANCE'S DECISION: RIGHT OR WRONG?

The controversy over Spruance's decision to defend the amphibious force at Saipan in lieu of seeking the offensive against Ozawa's fleet remains a judgement call for those who examine it. Several questions are considered below to draw a conclusion about whether or not Admiral Spruance made the correct tactical decision.

Was Admiral Spruance's mission just to defend the amphibious force? Was he too cautious a commander? Did the fog of war impair his intellectual skill to properly evaluate intelligence information? Spruance's direction, as provided in CINCPACFLT Operations Order that covered Operation FORAGER, specifically stated his objective was "to occupy Saipan, Guam and Tinian."¹⁷ Spruance correctly interpreted that the priority of his mission was to ensure the success of the amphibious assault. He was not, however, restricted in his methodology of how he ensured the success of occupying the Marianas. It is entirely possible that Spruance could have concluded that offensive pursuit of the Japanese Fleet was the best means to protect the amphibious landing at Saipan. But, based on past enemy tactics at Guadalcanal where Japanese forces were split to accomplish an "end run" on U.S. landing forces, Spruance's decision to take a defensive posture was a prudent choice. Perhaps had he interpreted his intelligence differently and been willing to suffer potentially higher losses, Spruance's decision might have been different. However, the fog of war combined with Spruance's personality and awareness of his command responsibilities, probably motivated him to make the decision with the least risk involved. After all as commander he was solely

accountable for the success or failure of the operation, and nearly 128,00 marines and soldiers were entrusted to his command.

Did Spruance understand the power of carrier aviation? By June 1944 Spruance was the most successful naval commander in the Pacific. Nearly all his operations involved carrier air. But Spruance had grown up in the Navy as a battleship officer and he was an easy target for aviation admirals who were critical of the Navy's policy about assigning too few aviators to key operational commands. Particularly critical of Spruance was Admiral John Towers, considered in most naval circles as the father of modern carrier warfare. Admiral Towers, chief of staff and deputy CINCPACFLT at the time of the Battle of Philippine Sea, fueled the fire of criticism levied at Spruance. Towers felt an aviator in Spruance's situation would have reacted differently. Towers wanted Spruance relieved, but Nimitz would not hear of it. However, Spruance might have considered using a portion of his carrier force offensively to surprise the Japanese Fleet with an early morning attack on 19 June. In contrast, dividing Task Force 58 might have reduced remaining force effectiveness enough to increase potentially greater damage to U.S. assets by Japanese aircraft. In addition, the degree of success that U.S. carrier aviation enjoyed by its sheer advantage in number might have been decreased, resulting in substantially fewer Japanese aviation losses.

Was Admiral Spruance open to tactical suggestions from subordinates? This is a difficult issue because Spruance is portrayed as a quiet, confident, intellectual commander who always remained cool and calm under pressure. Like Nimitz, Admiral Spruance was quick to grasp the strategic picture and easily understood details, but disliked involving himself in actual planning of operations. For Spruance, no action was required just because it was written in an operations order. Pragmatic response to surrounding circumstances would dictate Spruance's actions. This kind of attitude reflects a commander who is receptive to

differing views and ideas, and in Spruance's case he was bold to make tactical decisions that took into consideration the thoughts of other commanders. Spruance probably thought long and hard about Mitscher's recommendation to take the offensive against the Japanese fleet. Under the uncertain and confusing circumstance that existed Mitscher's plan required corroborated intelligence about the location of the Japanese fleet to persuade a change in Spruance's defensive plan.

Did Spruance know his enemy? This is an area that Spruance has been faulted because his assumption about Admiral Ozawa's intentions was wrong. However, Spruance's concern about the potential of the Japanese to make an "end run" was valid. Spruance had to consider the enemy scenario that could be most damaging to his overall mission and develop his battle plan to meet that threat. Spruance had good reason to adopt such a perspective. First, the Japanese had shown a repeated habit of splitting their forces as a means to lure main task force bodies to sea so that enemy forces could reach amphibious operating areas. Second, information from a recently captured Japanese document indicated that enemy doctrine advocated splitting their force. Third, Spruance had made a commitment to Vice Admiral Turner to protect the amphibious force. Turner had been left in the lurch at Guadalcanal and was concerned about the same thing happening again. However, from a critical perspective Spruance's perceived knowledge about enemy actions may have caused him to see intelligence information in only a way that supported his assumption. In a situation where the two forces were evenly matched, making assumptions, particularly inaccurate ones, that were not supported by factual information might lead to negative results and even loss of a battle.

In summary, Admiral Spruance made the correct decision by taking a defensive posture. He was commanding a massive operation that required success to support national

wartime objectives. His decision was calculated, well evaluated given the fog and uncertainty of war, and based on yielding the largest victory with minimal losses. Although sinking the Japanese Fleet would have been a more glamorous victory, there is no doubt that the losses suffered by the Japanese Navy were nothing short of a decisive defeat. Spruance's decision was prudent, and his victory was spectacular. As Fleet Admiral King told Admiral Spruance in July 1944, "Spruance, you did a damn good job in the Marianas. No matter what other people tell you, your decision was correct."¹⁸ I concur.

ENDNOTES

1. Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 128.
2. Sun Tzu, The Art of War, (New York: Oxford UP 1963) 93.
3. Philip A. Crowl, Campaign in the Marianas, (Washington: Dept of Army 1960) 11.
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5. E. B. Potter, Nimitz, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1976) 302.
6. Samuel E. Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. VIII, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1953) 160.
7. John Reynolds, "The Marianas Campaign," World War II Commemorative Symposium, Washington, 5 April 1994.
8. Dan van der Vat, The Pacific Campaign, (New York: Touchstone 1991) 318.
9. Morison, US Naval Operations, 218-219.
10. Clausewitz, 101.
11. Potter, 228.
12. Thomas B. Buell, The Quiet Warrior, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1974) xxx.
13. S. E. Morison, The Two Ocean War, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1963) 334-335.

14. Morrison, Two Ocean War, 333.

Tabular Comparison of Forces

Ships

	<i>Fleet Carriers</i>	<i>Light Carriers</i>	<i>Battle- ships</i>	<i>Heavy Cruisers</i>	<i>Light Cruisers</i>	<i>Destroyers</i>
Japanese	5	4	5	11	2	28
United States	7	8	7	8	13	69

Aircraft Strength

Japanese	473
United States	956

15. Morison, History of Navy, 233-234.

16. Buell, Quiet Warrior, 291.

17. Granite II Campaign Plan, 10.

18. Thomas B. Buell, Master of Sea Power, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1980) 466.