

HALSEY AT LEYTE GULF: COMMAND DECISION AND
DISUNITY OF EFFORT

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Military History

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ABSTRACT

HALSEY AT LEYTE GULF: COMMAND DECISION AND DISUNITY OF EFFORT,
by Kent Stephen Coleman, 130 pages.

In October 1944, US forces executed amphibious landings on the Japanese-occupied island of Leyte in the central Philippines. Japanese naval forces, severely outnumbered by the US Third and Seventh Fleets, attempted to stop the invasion by attacking US amphibious shipping in Leyte Gulf. Due to the divided US area commands in the Pacific theater during World War II, the Third and Seventh Fleet commanders, Adm. Halsey and Vice Adm. Kinkaid, reported to separate superiors, Adm. Nimitz and Gen. MacArthur, even though both fleets were supporting the operation. Although the Japanese were soundly defeated, one of the Japanese forces, under Vice Adm. Kurita, nearly reached its objective. Many historians have criticized Halsey for ordering his carrier force to close with a Japanese carrier force that was acting as a decoy, thus leaving the US forces in Leyte Gulf unprotected. Although Halsey was effectively decoyed, the divided US naval chain of command amplified problems in communication and coordination between Halsey and Kinkaid. This divided command was more important in determining the course of the battle than the tactical decision made by Halsey and led to an American disunity of effort that nearly allowed Kurita's mission to succeed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur promised “I shall return” after escaping to Australia from his fortress of Corregidor in the Philippines in early 1942 as Japanese forces closed on remaining US and Filipino positions on the Bataan Peninsula.¹ As MacArthur fulfilled this promise by wading off an American landing craft onto the shores of the central Philippine island of Leyte on 20 October 1944, the Battle of Leyte Gulf, widely considered the largest naval battle in history, was about to be fought (see figure 1).² Over the course of several days, Japanese and American naval and air forces engaged in a series of combat actions that spanned thousands of miles of seas around the Philippine Islands (see figures 2 and 3). The Japanese made a valiant effort to stop the American landings on Leyte, but were ultimately unsuccessful.³ In the larger context of World War II in the Pacific theater, the Battle of Leyte Gulf was significant for two reasons. First, it was the initial step in the liberation of the Philippines from Japanese occupation which consequently restricted Japanese movement along supply lines to their Southern Resources Area. Second, it ended the Japanese ability to mount coordinated, effective defensive measures with air and naval forces.⁴

Although the battle resulted in victory for the US Navy, Adm. William F. “Bull” Halsey Jr. has been criticized for a tactical decision he made to move his Third Fleet north at a key moment of the action. The divided US naval chain of command at Leyte Gulf has received much less attention by historians. The effects of this divided chain of command were a large factor in Halsey’s decision to move his fleet north in pursuit of

Japanese carrier forces on the evening of 24 October. This movement resulted in two of the major actions of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. The first action, the Battle of Cape Engaño (see figure 4), was a series of engagements between part of Halsey's fleet and Japanese carrier forces under the command of Vice Adm. Ozawa Jisaburo.⁵ The second is known as the Battle off Samar (see figure 5). It occurred on the morning of 25 October northeast of the location where US transport ships, part of the US Seventh Fleet, were continuing the landing of supplies and equipment on the island of Leyte.

A relatively small US task group code-named Taffy 3, also part of Seventh Fleet, comprised of escort carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts, met an overwhelming Japanese force of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers.⁶ The engagement between these forces off Samar surprisingly resulted in a Japanese withdrawal away from the vulnerable American landing forces in Leyte Gulf.⁷ The Battle off Samar highlighted flaws in the Japanese operational plan and opened the commander of the Japanese force, Vice Adm. Kurita Takeo, to criticism for not pressing the fight while he still had the advantage in speed and firepower. Although Kurita has been disparaged, much more historical criticism has been directed at Halsey who, by moving his task force to the north in pursuit of Japanese carrier forces, arguably exposed Taffy 3, the other escort carrier groups, and the landing forces in Leyte Gulf to the danger of attack from the large guns of Kurita's force. According to Kenneth I. Friedman:

The controversy over whether Halsey made the right decisions at Leyte Gulf continues to this day. One can safely state that history's verdict on Halsey's behavior at Leyte Gulf has been, to say the least, less than complimentary.⁸

Halsey's decision, in hindsight, turned out to be wrong because he allowed himself to be decoyed by Ozawa's carrier force, which was devoid of a significant

complement of aircraft, at the expense of blocking Kurita's movement toward Leyte Gulf. The criticism directed toward him, while justified based on the evidence, is not particularly useful. Although Halsey made several unfounded assumptions and misjudged the tactical situation, his fellow fleet commander, Vice Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, who commanded Seventh Fleet during the battle, made similar errors. Historians have focused much more attention on Halsey; he was more well known and his decision to proceed north much more controversial than any of the other decisions he and Kinkaid made during the battle. Most of the criticism of Halsey also does not adequately consider that the command structure implemented by Halsey's and Kinkaid's superiors violated one of the fundamental principles of war, unity of command. Instead, the structure facilitated a disunity of command that nearly led to the destruction of US landing forces during a major amphibious operation. This disunity of command is crucial to understanding why Halsey ordered his forces north on 24 October in pursuit of the Japanese carrier force.

Most criticism of Halsey's decision is not constructive because it fails to address the primary reason why Kurita came so close to succeeding in his attack on the landing forces in Leyte Gulf: the fundamental flaws of the US armed forces command structure in the Pacific theater during World War II. These flaws, which were apparent at previous times during the war, contributed to miscommunication between Halsey and Kinkaid, which led to the Battle off Samar. Careful analysis of the orders and information available to Halsey prior to and preceding the battle, along with a review of the US command structure, reveals that Halsey's controversial decision should have been understandable and predictable, especially by superiors who allowed a fundamentally unsound command arrangement to persist throughout the war for mainly parochial

reasons. Although he did err, most significantly by not coordinating his actions more closely with Kinkaid, Halsey's errors were fostered by the US naval command structure. The two fleet commanders Halsey and Kinkaid were responsible for separate naval fleets supporting the amphibious landings at Leyte in close geographic vicinity to each other. A unified naval command structure with one admiral in command would have likely facilitated more effective employment of the US naval forces at the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

In addition to the divided command structure, the two admirals answered to different superiors. Kinkaid reported to MacArthur, the commander of the Southwest Pacific Area, and Halsey reported to Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, the commander of the Pacific Ocean Areas (see figures 6 and 7). Regarding military operations in their respective areas, MacArthur and Nimitz each technically reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in Washington, not to a single person.⁹ But because the JCS were a committee, MacArthur and Nimitz effectively coordinated with or reported to their respective service chiefs on the JCS. MacArthur, because of his seniority, coordinated with Gen. George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army. Nimitz reported to Adm. Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, US Fleet (COMINCH) and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO).

As COMINCH and CNO, King was responsible for all naval operations and administrative matters worldwide, both in MacArthur's area and Nimitz's areas. But, operations involving all services working in unison within the areas were the responsibility of the respective area commanders who answered to the JCS. King's role in directing these multi-service operations was that of only one committee member. Therefore, because no one member of the JCS had authority to speak for the committee

as a whole, the first common individual in Halsey's and Kinkaid's operational chains of command was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Even to those unfamiliar with military or naval operations, the fact that the commanders of two naval forces operating in close vicinity to each other in support of the same operation would not have a common superior closer than the president in Washington, DC, makes little sense. Unity of command was obviously not a priority.

Four months prior to the Battle of Leyte Gulf, Adm. Raymond A. Spruance faced a situation similar to Halsey's at Leyte Gulf, but in a unified naval organization where unity of command was easier to accomplish. Spruance was tasked with commanding Operation Forager, the US invasion of the Japanese-held Marianas Islands, in June 1944.¹⁰ Unlike the Leyte landings, Forager did not present the problems of coordinating operations among the forces of two separate areas. Geographically, the Marianas were well within the Central Pacific Area, part of Nimitz's Pacific Ocean Areas command. Therefore, although it was a multi-service operation involving Army and Army Air Force units, only one US fleet was involved. Spruance had both overall command of the entire operation and overall command of all naval forces. As at Leyte Gulf the following October, the Japanese fleet challenged this US move to assault a Japanese-occupied island. Like Halsey, Spruance had to balance two objectives: protection of amphibious landing forces and destruction of the Japanese fleet.

In what came to be known as the Battle of the Philippine Sea (see figure 8), Spruance initially decided to remain in the vicinity of the US landing forces at Saipan, the first island in the Marianas targeted for amphibious assault, instead of moving his carrier force to the west to decrease the range to the Japanese fleet. Spruance made this decision

because of his concern about a possible “end run” by Ozawa with part of his fleet to attack US landing forces. According to historian Samuel Eliot Morison, this concern about a separate Japanese force was probably based upon Spruance’s knowledge of previous Japanese Navy battle plans. Japanese admirals had divided their forces in many previous World War II battles, including Midway in June 1942, where Spruance commanded a carrier task group. Spruance’s decision not to proceed west led directly to what is now known as the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot, when US air defenses, both carrier-launched fighter aircraft and antiaircraft fire from surface ships, decimated four waves of Japanese air attacks from their aircraft carriers on 19 June.¹¹

Due to the massive losses of aircraft and pilots (after beginning with 430, only 35 serviceable carrier aircraft were available after the battle), this action effectively ended the Japanese fleet’s ability to employ their carriers in an offensive manner. But, because Spruance had not closed the range with the Japanese carrier forces due to his concern about a divided Japanese fleet, US carriers were unable to launch effective strikes against Ozawa’s carrier force. The Americans were successful in sinking three of the nine Japanese carriers by torpedo attack, one by air and two by submarines, but were unable to destroy the remaining six.¹² According to Spruance biographer (and staff officer during World War II) Vice Adm. Emmet P. Forrestel:

It had been an overwhelming victory for the US but the sense of elation which ran through the force was tempered by a feeling that the victory might have been greater. Though in retreat with its air striking arm almost wiped out, most of the Japanese fleet had survived without coming to grips with the US surface force and without having been subjected to full-scale air attacks. Spruance himself was keenly disappointed that the Japanese fleet had been so nearly within his reach and that he had not been able to close the distance enough to ensure its annihilation.¹³

The US victory at the Philippine Sea was not decisive. The bulk of the Japanese carrier force along with the battleships and cruisers escaped to the northeast and remained a possible threat to further US advances. The same carriers that escaped were used by Ozawa as part of his decoy force at Leyte Gulf, leading to Halsey's decision to proceed to the north and leave San Bernardino Strait unguarded. Halsey's choice was similar in many ways to that faced by Spruance at the Philippine Sea

Spruance and Halsey have both been criticized for their respective decisions. The basis for these criticisms is how each commander balanced two conflicting objectives, the protection of amphibious landing forces and the destruction of the enemy fleet. The critics have pointed out flaws in the admirals' decisions that affected the outcomes of the battles. There seems to be a general consensus among scholars that Spruance acted correctly by prioritizing the protection of landing forces and not pursuing the Japanese fleet and that Halsey acted incorrectly by pursuing Japanese aircraft carriers at the risk of the landing forces. But these opinions run contrary to doctrine that had developed for the employment of US fast carrier forces during World War II, which affirmed their offensive role and need for mobility in order to position aircraft within striking range of enemy fleets.

One of the important differences between the situations that the two admirals faced was that Spruance commanded one fleet and reported to one area commander in a unified organizational structure. This structure left little room for confusion as to whose orders were to be followed. Spruance answered to Nimitz and Nimitz, as commander of the Pacific Ocean Areas, answered to the JCS. This contrasted to Halsey's situation at Leyte Gulf where he was one of two separate fleet commanders who, even though the

operation was within MacArthur's area, each answered to a separate area commander. Spruance was the overall, joint force commander for his operation, with control of Army and Army Air Force units as well as the Navy and Marines. Halsey was, in effect, nothing more than a fast carrier force commander at Leyte Gulf, who answered to a separate operational chain of command from MacArthur. This leads to the important question of what effect the fleet organizational structure at Leyte Gulf, with two separate chains of command, had on Halsey's critical decision to proceed north at Leyte Gulf.

After Rear Adm. Clifton A. F. "Ziggy" Sprague, commander of Taffy 3, fought the running battle off the coast of Samar with his small force against the massive guns of Kurita's battleships and cruisers, the ramifications of decisions about how to organize US command and control in the Pacific became apparent. The best way to begin to formulate an understanding of how the US Pacific command structure was established is to consider the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. There were two separate US commands there, the Army's Hawaiian Department under Lt. Gen. Walter C. Short and the Navy's US Pacific Fleet, under Adm. Husband E. Kimmel.¹⁴ Although Pearl Harbor was a completely different situation than Leyte Gulf nearly three years later, it is useful to begin to understand how the command structure in place at Leyte Gulf began to develop.

As commander of the Pacific Fleet, Kimmel "had no direct responsibility for the protection of his vessels when they moored in Pearl Harbor" because, as the Navy Court of Inquiry that investigated the circumstances of the attack stated, according to doctrine "the defense of a permanent naval base is the responsibility of the Army."¹⁵ Again, a layman would be confounded if attempting to determine the logic that would allow such an understanding to develop. In order to defend a naval base with the technology

available in 1941, one would need to conduct surveillance of surrounding ocean areas, a task land forces could not adequately achieve. In addition to failures of the US government and military leadership to foresee the possibility of attack or properly analyze intelligence data, the division of responsibilities and command between Kimmel and Short were inadequate.

A similar independent relationship existed between the Army and Navy commanders in the Philippines, MacArthur and Adm. Thomas C. Hart, at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. One can argue that this relationship was even less effective than the one at Pearl Harbor due to the two commanders' collective failure to take appropriate defensive measures even after being informed of the Pearl Harbor attack.¹⁶ According to historian Louis Morton, although "the inadequacies of command by mutual cooperation and the danger of divided responsibility had been recognized before the war . . . all efforts to establish unity of command in those areas where the Army and Navy were jointly responsible for defense had foundered on the sharp crags of service jealousies and rivalries."¹⁷ Morton's use of the term mutual coordination here perfectly reflects the expectation superiors had of the relationship between Halsey and Kinkaid at Leyte Gulf. Instead of one commander being selected to lead the entire naval portion of the operation, the two were expected to establish synchronization between their operations as peers. But at Leyte Gulf, where a disparity between the two commanders' missions, purposes, and tasks existed, the intent for them to establish a shared concept of operations proved too difficult to fulfill.

After Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt ordered the JCS "to establish unified commands where they were needed."¹⁸ After several temporary measures were taken to solidify and

consolidate commands, by mid-March 1942 the Army and Navy had worked out a construct for a more permanent organization of unified commands. According to Morton:

Neither gave serious consideration to recommending appointment of a single unified commander for the entire Pacific theater, even though both services' leadership, as well as President Roosevelt, realized the importance of unity of command. MacArthur, although very popular, was as unacceptable as any other Army officer--no one but a naval officer would be entrusted to command the Pacific Fleet. At the time there was no Navy commander, including Nimitz, who had recently been appointed as commander of the Pacific Fleet as well as promoted two grades, with the popularity required to command all US forces in the Pacific theater. Thus, the expedient escape from the dilemma was taken: the theater was divided geographically.¹⁹

This decision's ramifications would eventually lead to Taffy 3 coming under the fire of a superior Japanese force off Samar.

The arrangement approved by the President on 30 March was for MacArthur to command the Southwest Pacific Area, including Australia, the Solomon Islands, the Bismarck Archipelago, New Guinea, most of the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines. Nimitz was assigned command of the Pacific Ocean Areas, all areas north and east of MacArthur's. Nimitz's area was further divided into North, Central and South Pacific Ocean Areas. Nimitz retained direct command of forces in the North and Central.²⁰ King chose Vice Adm. Robert L. Ghormley for command of the South Pacific Area, who was subordinate to Nimitz. King, who had been appointed COMINCH in December during a major shake-up of high level leadership in the US Navy after the Pearl Harbor attack, was also appointed as CNO in March 1942. As COMINCH, King was in "supreme command of the operating forces comprising the several fleets' and directly responsible to the President."²¹ As CNO, he was also "directly responsible to the President" as "principal naval advisor" as well as responsible for the "preparation, readiness, and logistical support" of US naval forces under the "direction" of the Secretary of the Navy.²²

King was a member of the JCS, which also included US Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall, Chief of the Army Air Forces Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, and Adm. William D. Leahy, the President’s Chief of Staff. These four officers were responsible for coordinating the efforts of the Army and Navy and advising the President.²³ The dynamics of the relationships between the President, the JCS, MacArthur, and Nimitz resulted in the bifurcated structure of US command in the Pacific.

Almost as soon as the two major Pacific areas were established and the JCS role was defined, friction between the area commands ensued. After the string of Japanese victories following Pearl Harbor, US forces turned the tide of the war by sinking four Japanese aircraft carriers at the Battle of Midway.²⁴ The next major battles between US and Japanese forces happened during the Guadalcanal campaign from August 1942 to February 1943. Guadalcanal is located toward the eastern end of the Solomon Islands. The Japanese chose the island as the site where an airfield would be constructed in order to extend their capability to block Allied lines of communication from the United States to New Zealand and Australia in June 1942.²⁵ After debate among the US leadership about the number of resources that should be allocated to the Pacific theater, an initial plan was devised to disrupt this Japanese movement into the South Pacific. A compromise between King and Marshall was reached for command of US operations in the vicinity of the Solomon Islands. The boundary between the South Pacific Area and Southwest Pacific Area was moved one degree of longitude to the east, thus placing the southern Solomons within Ghormley’s area.

The US campaign plan to counter the Japanese occupation of the Solomon Islands and eastern New Guinea area involved three phases. The first phase became an extended

campaign for control of the airfield on Guadalcanal that had been renamed Henderson Field after it was seized by the First Marine Division. This phase was commanded by Ghormley who was subsequently replaced by Halsey. The second and third, involving further advances against Japanese positions in eastern New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, were to be commanded by MacArthur.²⁶ While neither the Army nor the Navy leadership was completely satisfied with this arrangement, it did preserve unity of command in the Southwest Pacific Area. As events actually unfolded, the Guadalcanal campaign took place simultaneously with MacArthur's campaign to liberate northeast New Guinea from Japanese occupation.²⁷

After these two separate campaigns ended, the large Japanese base at Rabaul on New Britain became the focus of Southwest Pacific efforts. This "presented a unique command problem" because as Halsey's South Pacific forces advanced northwest through the Solomons, they would move into MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area. Old and new proposals were made to address the problem, but both the appointment of a unified commander in the Pacific theater and an additional shift of the dividing line between MacArthur's and Nimitz's areas were rejected. Instead, a plan for cooperation was developed that would place the remainder of the campaign "under overall command" of MacArthur, but with operations in the Solomon Islands "under the direct command of Halsey, operating under general directives from MacArthur." But, Halsey's forces would still be controlled by Nimitz as part of the Pacific Fleet.²⁸

Unlike Pearl Harbor, the Guadalcanal, Solomons, and New Guinea campaigns resulted in US successes, but the command arrangement was still poorly devised. It was much more of a compromise between competing services and commanders than a

deliberately planned structure to maximize the unity of command. Navy, Marine, Army, and Army Air Force units were operating in the same areas in operations that required them to constantly provide mutual support to each other and to coordinate their actions. To maximize support and coordination, it is likely that one integrated command structure would have been much more effective. The division in the US Pacific theater command structure persisted until the operation to seize Leyte. In the mean time, MacArthur's advance up the northern coast of New Guinea and Nimitz's drive across the Central Pacific, which both embodied the "leapfrogging" strategy of seizing key islands and territory and bypassing many strongly fortified Japanese positions, seemed to work well. The geographic boundaries between their areas of responsibility facilitated their separate campaigns as US combat power increased.

On 15 March 1943, as US naval forces in the Pacific grew, King established a uniform numbering system for newly designated fleets. The ships of Halsey's South Pacific became Third Fleet and those in the Central Pacific became Fifth Fleet, both part of US Pacific Fleet still commanded by Nimitz. Spruance was chosen by Nimitz to command Fifth Fleet because Halsey was still needed in the Solomons campaign. MacArthur's smaller Naval Forces, Southwest Pacific became Seventh Fleet, and remained operationally independent from the naval forces in the Pacific Ocean Areas. Kinkaid assumed command of Seventh Fleet later in the year.²⁹ Although Nimitz was commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet, he did not exercise operational command of the naval forces assigned to MacArthur's area. At times, during the dual advance of MacArthur and Nimitz, the fleets in the separate area commands operated in support of each other through coordinated actions.

The US attack on the Marianas Islands was directed by Nimitz, with Spruance in command of Fifth Fleet as well as the Army and Army Air Force elements assigned to the operation. By now, the fleet was a vast armada centered on a fast carrier task force supported by a line of new fast battleships.³⁰ As previously discussed, under Spruance this force defeated efforts by the Japanese Mobile Fleet to disrupt the American landings on Saipan in the Battle of the Philippine Sea, destroying vast numbers of Japanese carrier-based aircraft. But the six Japanese carriers that survived remained a threat to follow-on US operations and played a large part in Halsey's decisions at Leyte Gulf.³¹ Although he never passed judgment on his friend Spruance, Halsey must have believed Spruance had erred by keeping Task Force 58 close to Saipan. Historian E. B. Potter is likely correct in his assertion that had Halsey been in Spruance's position, there is little doubt that he "would have wasted no time racing after the Japanese carriers."³²

As Halsey pondered the consequences of his colleague's actions at the Philippine Sea, he and his staff were preparing for a new mission. As the South Pacific Area had shrunk in significance and operations in the Central Pacific had magnified in tempo and scope, Nimitz directed a new alternating system of command for his Central Pacific naval forces. Halsey relinquished command of the South Pacific Area but kept his title as Commander, Third Fleet, although the fleet's ships were apportioned to other naval forces. Halsey and Spruance then alternated as commanders of the Central Pacific naval forces, with one planning the next operation while the other executed the current one. The fleet's designation alternated between Third and Fifth depending on who was in command.³³ Halsey began planning operations against Japanese-occupied Palau, Yap, and Ulithi and then took command in August 1944.³⁴

While Halsey prepared for his new command, his superiors were refining plans for the continued US advance into Japan's defensive perimeter. As Nimitz's and MacArthur's separate campaigns progressed, discussions about the next objectives ensued. After much debate, MacArthur's desire to liberate the Philippines, instead of invading Formosa, was approved by the President.³⁵ Initial plans called for an invasion of the large southern Philippine island of Mindanao in November followed six weeks later by the smaller island of Leyte on 20 December.³⁶

Once the objectives were agreed upon, the issue of command structure had to be addressed once again. And, once again, the arrangements were inadequate. The Philippines were within MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area, so overall command of the operation was his. But, even before Americans landed on the Philippines, events demonstrated that the Southwest Pacific Area operations and Pacific Ocean Areas operations were already so close in vicinity that they required more than just coordination. Halsey's fast carriers, Task Force 38, commenced raids on Japanese positions in the Philippines in September in support of amphibious landings in the Palaus.³⁷ There is no evidence that large naval forces of one command operating within the area of a different command caused major concern. It seems that by this point, after so much debate about how to solve the problem of command, the concerned parties had reached the point where unification of the two commands was an absurd idea even though it was more needed than ever.

As a result of the lack of Japanese resistance to the US air strikes against the central Philippines, Halsey became convinced that the Leyte operation should be moved up and other objectives bypassed. MacArthur, with assurances from Nimitz that

amphibious forces would be transferred to him from the Central Pacific, agreed. The plans were then approved by the JCS with a target date for the landings of 20 October.³⁸ Before the operation, Halsey's Third Fleet was stripped of most of its amphibious and bombardment forces in order to provide MacArthur's Seventh Fleet, under Kinkaid, with the required combat power for the landings. This left Task Force 38, the fast carriers and their screen ships, as the sole task force in Third Fleet under Halsey.³⁹ Halsey's guidance on how to employ his fleet during the operation was an operational plan and a separate directive. These orders were issued by Nimitz, who was not in the chain of command for the Leyte landings. Because Nimitz's orders made destruction of the Japanese fleet the highest priority instead of protection of the landing forces, many historians consider his guidance to Halsey as conflicting with the operation's purpose of the occupation of Leyte. Halsey's decision to proceed north with his entire task force was undoubtedly influenced by these orders from Nimitz because they served to validate his opinion on the necessity of not tying carrier forces too closely to amphibious landing sites.

Halsey did not hesitate once his crucial decision had been made. He later described his action during the battle: "I went into flag plot, put my finger on the Northern Force's charted position, 300 miles away, and said, 'Here's where we're going. Mick, start them north.'"⁴⁰ He justified his decision in hindsight, "My job was offensive, to strike with the Third Fleet, and we were even then rushing to intercept a force which gravely threatened not only Kinkaid and myself, but the whole Pacific strategy."⁴¹ Although he never admitted his action was a mistake, he displayed a sound understanding of the underlying problem at Leyte Gulf when he pointed out the flaws in the American naval command structure in his autobiography.⁴²

To better understand why the divided command of naval forces at Leyte Gulf almost led to a Japanese victory, the Japanese operation plan, the lack of coordination between Halsey and Kinkaid, and Halsey's decision-making process must be considered. What George M. Hall describes as Halsey's "decision to abandon *direct and immediate protection* of the Allied amphibious operation at Leyte Gulf in order to pursue Ozawa's carrier task force steaming from the north"⁴³ must be seen as more than an action by an overly aggressive commander seeking glory. Fair or unfair, this description of the decision does little to inform us of the real historical context. Hall is correct by pointing out that:

Even if his decision had been the right one, Halsey should have ensured that the other two Japanese task forces already operating in the general area had retreated beyond the distance that would permit them to return to the battle area while he went after the carriers. *He did not do this, and that was his failing.* Nor would he admit that Ozawa's task force was a decoy, even after the war when the evidence became incontrovertible.⁴⁴

But his argument that "More fundamental blame can be laid at higher levels for failing to sharpen and coordinate directives" is more germane to the historical analysis.⁴⁵ The challenge is to relate the effects of the severely flawed command structure to the battle's decision points. Understanding how and why Halsey acted as he did demonstrates the importance of the principle of unity of command and the consequences of not adhering to it.

There were many other US amphibious operations in the Pacific theater of World War II where commanders faced the threat of counterattacks by the enemy fleet. Many parallels to operations that occurred in other conflicts can be drawn as well. The fundamental question in all these situations is how commanders reconcile two different

objectives: seizing control of a specific geographic location and degrading or destroying the enemy's ability to affect one's operations. These two military objectives are obviously inter-related. In certain situations, one may take precedence over the other. In other situations, one may facilitate the other. Or, in some situations, the two might be mutually exclusive. A commander's understanding of how these objectives contribute to the strategic goals of a military action is essential to a successful balance of the two. The other important aspect of balance between the two objectives is an understanding how the current operation contributes to the overarching military strategy.

Determining how the US command structure influenced the course of the Battle of Leyte Gulf is a difficult problem, but studying the battle with this question in mind can help one to better understand Halsey's decision. Many focus on Halsey's persona when analyzing the course of the battle. In one word, Halsey is normally characterized as "aggressive." He had missed the two most decisive fleet engagements of the war in the Pacific prior to Leyte Gulf, Midway and the Philippine Sea. Many believe Halsey's aggressive temperament combined with his desire to not miss a chance to lead a decisive strike against the Japanese carrier force and that this combination was the most important factor in his decisions. While these personal characteristics and experiences must have had some influence on Halsey's decisions, it is more important to determine his understanding of his superiors' intent and how that understanding was influenced by the command structure. To what extent did the division of naval forces into two separate fleets influence Halsey to prioritize destruction of Japanese carrier forces over the guarding of San Bernardino Strait? This is a complex question. But the answer is the key

to understanding the ramifications of the divided chain of command for naval forces during the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

¹Stanley L. Falk, *Decision at Leyte* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 11, 21.

²Geoffrey Perrett, *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life and Legend of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Random House, 1996), 422.

³Kenneth I. Friedman, *Afternoon of the Rising Sun: The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 2001), ix.

⁴Falk, 318-19.

⁵Japanese surnames are listed prior to given names. This convention will be used throughout the thesis.

⁶Friedman, 260-61.

⁷*Ibid.*, 339.

⁸*Ibid.*, 388.

⁹Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1974), 280.

¹⁰Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1963), 325.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 338-45.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Emmet P. Forrestel, *Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, USN: A Study in Command* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 1966), 146.

¹⁴Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 60, 67.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁶Perrett, 248-52.

¹⁷Morton, Louis, "Pacific Command: A Study in Interservice Relations," in *Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1959-1987*, ed. Harry R. Borowski (Colorado Springs, CO: US Air Force Academy and Office of Air Force History, 1988), 130.

- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 154.
- ²²Ibid., 179.
- ²³Ibid., 185.
- ²⁴E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 107.
- ²⁵Frank B. Knox, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 30-31.
- ²⁶Ibid., 34.
- ²⁷E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 209.
- ²⁸Ibid., 209-10.
- ²⁹Ibid., 203-205.
- ³⁰Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; reprint Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger, 1978), 161 (page citations are to the reprint edition).
- ³¹Ibid., 210.
- ³²Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 272.
- ³³Ibid., 268.
- ³⁴Ibid., 276.
- ³⁵Potter, *Nimitz*, 319.
- ³⁶Ibid., 321.
- ³⁷Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 276.
- ³⁸Potter, *Nimitz*, 323.
- ³⁹Ibid., 324.

⁴⁰William F. Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 217.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 219.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 227.

⁴³George M. Hall, *The Fifth Star: High Command in an Era of Global War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 168.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 173.

CHAPTER 2

TACTICS AND STRATEGY

What was Halsey trying to accomplish at Leyte Gulf? At first glance, his mission did not seem complicated. He was to protect the landing forces and destroy the Japanese fleet if the opportunity arose. The first question one would tend to ask given the same scenario is what to do in the situation where an opportunity to destroy the enemy fleet presents itself but only at some degree of risk to the landing forces. The next question that comes to mind is how to specifically define or identify the enemy fleet. How Halsey answered these questions in his mind is the key to understanding his decision and therefore the course of the battle. The first can be better understood by reviewing the predominant thinking among naval officers and strategists in the World War II era.

In his writings at the end of the nineteenth century, Alfred Thayer Mahan, who served as a US naval officer and president of the Naval War College, emphasized the need for the United States to develop a large navy with armored battleships filling the role of the fleet's capital ships, those with the greatest offensive power.¹ Mahan theorized that the objective of a navy should be to command the seas by defeating the enemy through a decisive engagement with his fleet. Mahan's theories were widely studied among the naval officers of Japan, Germany, and Great Britain and seemed to be validated by the US victory over Spain in the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the Japanese defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.²

Although Great Britain failed to ever decisively defeat the German Navy during World War I, the Mahanian objective of destruction of the enemy fleet remained the goal.

Even for Germany, the weaker naval power, operations were designed to divide the British fleet so that it could be defeated in detail. Commerce raiding was still viewed as a secondary concern even though German submarine attacks against shipping to Great Britain were the primary focus of naval warfare in the Atlantic in both World Wars I and II.³ Although American submarines were used in the same role against Japan in World War II, the strategic focus of both Japan and the US in the Pacific was to decisively defeat the other's fleet in order to gain command of the sea.⁴ Naval commanders on both sides, regardless of the operation they were involved with, always had this strategic end in mind. The evidence is clear that Halsey was no different. In his autobiography, he stated that if he could destroy the enemy carriers, "our future operations need fear no threat from the sea."⁵

The second question regarding the definition of the enemy fleet is related to the first. If a commander's duty is to defeat the enemy fleet, what does that actually mean? According to Mahanian theory, destruction of a major share of the enemy's capital ships with a resulting minor loss of one's own meant decisive victory. Naval historian Clark G. Reynolds describes the capital ship as "the largest and most powerful type of naval combatant."⁶ In Mahan's day, the capital ship was the armored battleship which developed into the dreadnoughts of World War I that fought at the Battle of Jutland. The development of aviation and its integration into naval warfare with the advent of the aircraft carrier during World War I resulted in questions about the continuing utility of the battleship as a fleet's capital ship.

The Japanese, British, and American navies all integrated air power into their fleets in different manners and at different tempos after World War I. Although many

leaders in the three navies realized the potential for attacks from aircraft to supplant the large guns of the battleship as the main striking power of a fleet, it was not until well after Pearl Harbor that fleets were reorganized to support the role of aircraft carriers as the new capital ships with battleships in support. For the Japanese, the loss of four carriers at their defeat at Midway in June 1942 demonstrated the requirement to protect aircraft carriers with circular formations of other combatants, including battleships, which would provide antiaircraft and anti-submarine protection.⁷

The Americans went through a struggle, similar to that of the Japanese, to determine the most effective manner to employ the aircraft carrier. During the 1920s and 1930s, as evidence mounted in favor of the primary role of the aircraft carrier being attack, most senior leaders believed naval aviation should be assigned the task of reconnaissance missions in support of the battleship force. Even though the striking power of aircraft was demonstrated in numerous exercises and many US naval officers changed their opinions, especially those who qualified as pilots, the view that aircraft carriers were substitutes for the battlecruisers of World War I remained.⁸ These interwar exercises demonstrated to many that the full potential of carriers could only be realized by allowing their commanders maximum flexibility and mobility. From this perspective, tying the carriers to battleships or landing forces was much riskier than allowing them to maneuver separately. If an enemy carrier force had mobility and the friendly carrier force did not, then the friendly force would be much more susceptible to attack.⁹

In his 1968 book, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy*, Reynolds states that by the fall of 1941, US “carrier doctrine was flexible but still subordinated to and part of the battle line.”¹⁰ Battleships were still regarded as capital ships because,

according to naval analyst Bernard Brodie, there were still many doubts that aircraft could strike with the “accuracy and forcefulness” required to supplant the battleship’s large caliber guns.¹¹ The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor erased any doubt among most American admirals of the revolutionary effect of the aircraft carrier on naval warfare. The demonstrated power of the Japanese air strikes as well as the fact that most of the US battleships were sunk or heavily damaged in the attack led to a new role for the carrier, defense of bases and lines of communication.¹²

As the war progressed, it became clear that the striking power of the aircraft carrier had changed “the face of naval warfare.”¹³ Battleships and cruisers became impotent in the big battles and were relegated to providing antiaircraft escort for the carriers.¹⁴ Changes to US doctrine were forthcoming and included circular formations similar to those used by the Japanese to protect carriers. Although the prevailing view of the aircraft carrier changed at the beginning of the war, its new status as a capital ship did not end debate about its proper role. The question of what tactics should be used to best employ aircraft carriers was central to the development of US strategy in the Pacific. Halsey’s understanding of carrier tactics at Leyte Gulf played an important role in his decision to pursue Ozawa’s fleet on 24 October.

The fleet tactics of World War II originated in the age of sailing ships, prior to the development of modern ships in the 1800s. Britain’s Royal Navy, which eventually dominated the world’s oceans at the height of the British Empire, developed a rigid set of codes called the Permanent Fighting Instructions to govern the command of its sailing ships. These rules demanded that naval commanders maintain their largest ships in a line (thus their identification as “ships of the line”), when engaging an enemy fleet. The tight

control of these tactics, which came to be known as “formalist,” discouraged risk-taking, initiative, and any division of forces that would decrease the concentration of the firepower of a fleet’s ships of the line. These formalist tactics were shown to be unsound by the overwhelming victories of Adm. Viscount Horatio Nelson during the Napoleonic wars.¹⁵

Nelson’s new “meleeist” tactics were riskier, but when successfully executed allowed greater concentration of firepower against portions of enemy fleets. This allowed the different portions to be defeated in detail. The culmination of these new tactics occurred at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, when the combined French-Spanish fleet was decisively defeated. But throughout the remainder of the century, as wooden sailing ships were replaced with armored steam-powered ships, the formalist school of thought again became dominant, especially after Adm. Togo Heihachiro’s victory over the Russian fleet at Tsushima Strait in 1905. Even after British Adm. Sir John Jellicoe failed to decisively defeat the German fleet at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, risk-averse formal tactics remained predominant as commanders strove to maneuver to “cross the enemy’s T.” This maneuver allowed maximum friendly fire on an enemy fleet while restricting the enemy’s ability to return fire.¹⁶ With the rise of air power, many American naval officers believed similar restrictions on the movements of carrier forces would lead to vulnerability to enemy attack. These leaders, called “air admirals” by Reynolds because most had been trained to fly, advocated that carrier force commanders use tactics reminiscent of Nelson’s meleeist school.¹⁷

Halsey, who had qualified as a naval aviator in 1935 as a captain prior to taking command of the aircraft carrier *Saratoga*, demonstrated at Leyte Gulf that he realized the

importance of maximizing the mobility of carriers. Although he had commanded carrier forces earlier in the war, including the task force from which Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle launched his B-25 air raid to Tokyo, he served as area commander of the South Pacific after taking over for Ghormley in October 1942 during the Guadalcanal campaign. Two major battles were fought between carrier forces during the campaign, the Battle of the Eastern Solomons and the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. As the Battle of Midway had the previous June, they both highlighted the importance of acquiring accurate intelligence on the enemy fleet's position in order to strike first.¹⁸ Then Vice Adm. Halsey, in a foreshadowing of his aggressiveness at Leyte Gulf, issued the command, "Attack--repeat--attack!" to then Rear Adm. Kinkaid, who was the carrier task force commander at the Santa Cruz Islands.¹⁹

Many historians note that although Halsey did have experience in carriers earlier in the war, prior to Leyte Gulf he had never had command of a carrier force in a battle with enemy carriers. He missed the Battle of the Coral Sea due to his assignment as carrier task force commander for the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, was ill during the Battle of Midway, and was then area commander during the two carrier battles during the Guadalcanal campaign. Therefore, they argue, he demonstrated a lack of understanding of how carrier tactics had developed once the US had built up enough combat power in its fleet to go on the offensive against Japan. But Halsey, even though not in tactical command of carrier forces as South Pacific Area commander, had been intricately involved in developing plans to support amphibious landings with carrier strikes. His methods were vindicated during the amphibious landings at Bougainville in early November 1943. His landing forces were protected by his use of carriers operating in an

offensive manner. He directed his carrier forces to maneuver away from the landing forces to strike the major Japanese air base at Rabaul, devastating the Japanese air forces' capability to strike back at the American forces assaulting Bougainville. These tactics were reminiscent of Nelson's risky meleeist tactics. Both Nelson and Halsey risked their forces in maneuvers designed to concentrate striking power against the enemy. These meleeist tactics contrasted sharply with the more cautious formalist tactics that had been used earlier in the age of sail and that were, in their modern form, being espoused by some American admirals who wanted to keep aircraft carriers tied closely to amphibious shipping in order to provide close protection.²⁰

Halsey had more than his personal experiences with carrier tactics in the South Pacific Area to rely on at Leyte Gulf when determining how to employ his fleet. His carrier task force commander at the battle, Vice Adm. Marc A. Mitscher, had gained extensive experience in carrier tactics during the Central Pacific offensive. Spruance, who had been one of the heroes of the US victory at Midway, was chosen by Nimitz to lead this offensive. His primary weapon would be the new *Essex*-class fast carriers that had been recently introduced to the US fleet. Having served as Nimitz's chief of staff at Pearl Harbor since the Battle of Midway, Spruance took over command of the offensive in 1943.²¹

This drive by the Central Pacific Force, later designated Fifth Fleet, was a Navy-centric operation that was the crucible for the tactics used at Leyte Gulf. It involved the capture of Japanese-held islands in the Gilberts, Marshalls, and then Marianas, which culminated in the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Throughout the offensive, tactics involving amphibious landings supported by fast carrier forces were developed. As the tactics were

refined, debate raged among American naval commanders on the proper role of the carrier forces. Although the offensive strategy involved the capture of specific islands, with Tarawa in the Gilberts islands being the first target, the hope for a Mahanian fleet engagement was on the minds of many commanders.

Nimitz “hoped the Japanese would commit their fleet in defense of the Gilberts” and thus create an opportunity to sink their carriers. This hope was not held as strongly by Spruance, who “did not relish the prospect of a naval battle.” His desire was to use the carriers to complement the battleships in support of the amphibious landings, and only then focus attention on a decisive fleet engagement.²² But Spruance understood that if the opportunity arose, the destruction of the Japanese fleet “would at once become paramount” and success “would go far toward winning the war.”²³ His battle plan for Operation Flintlock, the Tarawa operation, assigned specific defensive zones to the separate carrier groups and restricted Mitscher’s ability to maneuver.²⁴ As Spruance prepared to seize Tarawa, Halsey continued to command the US advance up the Solomon Islands toward the major Japanese base at Rabaul. At this time, most of the Japanese carriers available to counter the American offensive were based at Truk Island in the Carolines. Japanese Imperial Headquarters decided to make the defense of Rabaul their first priority. They ordered the aircraft from their carriers based at Truk to assist in the defense of Rabaul from land-based fields. Thus they were unable to use their carrier forces to counter the American landings at Tarawa.²⁵

As the planning for the Tarawa operation intensified, so did the debate between American naval leaders about plans for the use of the carrier force. Aviators argued vehemently against plans to focus on support of the landing forces and then shift to a

battle line formation to attack the enemy fleet. According to Reynolds, at this point American doctrine “did not yet regard battleships as essential to the anti-aircraft protection of the fast carriers.”²⁶ This view would change as the offensive continued and be one of the main reasons for Halsey’s decision to keep his entire force, carriers and battleships, together when he pursued Ozawa’s carrier force at Leyte Gulf. Without battleships in close vicinity to provide protection against attack with their antiaircraft guns, carriers were much more vulnerable. Even though the advantages of allowing maximum mobility to carrier forces had been demonstrated by Halsey’s strikes on Rabaul prior to the Tarawa operation, Spruance and his staff did not have time to change their plan. Reynolds is likely correct in his belief that it is unlikely they would have done so even with more time.²⁷ Although the Japanese never sortied their fleet to oppose the US landings at Tarawa, the assignment of carriers to defensive sectors was shown to be a poor tactical maneuver because it increased their vulnerability to land-based air attack.²⁸ The debate over carrier tactics continued as the fast carrier force led Nimitz’s drive across the Central Pacific while MacArthur began leapfrogging along the coast of New Guinea. As mentioned earlier, Spruance continued his formalist operations and at the Battle of the Philippine Sea maintained a defensive posture with his carrier force, effectively tying it to the amphibious landings out of striking range of the Japanese carriers.

Mitscher, Spruance’s carrier task force commander at the Philippine Sea, “was bitterly unhappy” with the results of the battle.²⁹ His recommendation to close range with the Japanese fleet had been considered but rejected by Spruance early in the battle. He stated what those involved knew well: “The enemy had escaped. . . . His fleet was not sunk.”³⁰ The aviator admirals took up this theme and ridiculed Spruance’s caution and

concern that the Japanese may have been able to maneuver a force behind Spruance's carrier force to engage Vice Adm. Richmond Kelly Turner's amphibious ships off the beach at Saipan.³¹ Spruance was heavily criticized for his decision to not close with the enemy carriers and instead move eastward away from the enemy fleet at a crucial moment in the battle. Spruance himself later remarked:

As a matter of tactics, I think that going out after the Japanese and knocking their carriers out would have been much better and more satisfactory than waiting for them to attack us; but we were at the start of a very important and large amphibious operation and we could not afford to gamble and place it in jeopardy.³²

Spruance's remarks were consistent with the writings of one of the leading British writers on naval strategy, Sir Julian Corbett. In 1911, Corbett wrote that "the paramount function of a covering force in an amphibious operation is to prevent interference with the . . . landing, support and supply of the Army."³³ This is obviously a much more nuanced view than Mahan's, and according to Morison "stems from the principle that destruction of enemy forces is not an end in itself, but merely one possible means to victory."³⁴ Spruance's actions at the Philippine Sea and statements regarding his decisions lead one to believe that his thinking was more in line with Corbett than Mahan.

King and Nimitz both defended Spruance's decision. King told him that he had done exactly the correct thing.³⁵ But some dissatisfaction was evident in Nimitz's summary of the operation because although the Marianas were successfully occupied, "there was not also a decisive 'fleet action,' in which we would naturally have hoped to have been victorious, and to have thereby shortened the war materially."³⁶ He continued to state that because the Japanese had not intended to attack US shipping at Saipan,

Spruance “could have pushed to the westward without concern for the expeditionary forces” and then destroyed the Japanese fleet.³⁷

During the Battle of the Philippine Sea, Halsey was in Pearl Harbor, recently recalled from his command of South Pacific forces and preparing to replace Spruance. Spruance’s actions and decisions, along with the ensuing criticism, obviously had an effect on Halsey. Potter stated that “from Halsey’s subsequent actions at sea one may infer that he considered Spruance’s insistence on remaining near Saipan a monumental blunder.”³⁸ Halsey was certainly in complete agreement with Adm. Jack Towers, Nimitz’s deputy, that carrier forces should not be tied to beachheads during amphibious operations. Restriction of the movement of carrier forces negated their advantage of mobility.³⁹ According to Spruance’s chief of staff, Capt. Charles J. Moore, Spruance’s experience at the Philippine Sea definitely affected Halsey’s mind-set:

I had been told, much later, that at Pearl Harbor Admiral Halsey, Admiral Calhoun, Admiral Towers and the others who were around there at the time, after their daily meetings with Admiral Nimitz, would get together during this affair and just pan the whole thing. . . .

. . . The discussions that went on there at that time, I have always thought, and I still believe, had a tremendous effect on Halsey, because in the operation plan that he wrote for the Palau attack and the Leyte Gulf attack he said . . . if a situation arises or can be created for the defeat of the Japanese fleet, that will become the major objective. In other words, the hell with everything else.⁴⁰

Moore’s perception of Halsey’s thinking seems to be accurate. Four months after the Marianas operation, Halsey faced a situation similar to the one Spruance had. At Leyte Gulf Halsey judged his situation differently than Spruance had at the Philippine Sea, accepted the risk of uncovering the amphibious landing forces, and decided to close with Japanese carrier forces that threatened the operation.

Interestingly, both Spruance at the Philippine Sea and Halsey at Leyte Gulf effectively usurped the role of Mitscher, commander of Task Force 58 under Spruance and Task Force 38 under Halsey. Normally, as commander of the fast carrier task force, Mitscher would be in tactical command and make decisions about how to maneuver the carriers. Halsey, because he had no amphibious forces in his fleet at Leyte Gulf, effectively acted as carrier force commander and did not include Mitscher in his key decision to proceed north. At the Philippine Sea, with the concurrence of his chief of staff, future CNO Capt. Arleigh A. Burke, Mitscher recommended he be allowed to close the range to the enemy carrier force on the evening of 18 June. Spruance, who was in overall command of the Marianas operation, overruled Mitscher's recommendation. Earlier in the day, Spruance had advised both Mitscher and Vice Adm. Willis A. "Ching" Lee Jr., the commander of Fifth Fleet's battleships, that: "TASK FORCE 58 MUST COVER SAIPAN AND OUR FORCES ENGAGED IN THAT OPERATION." His concerns were that diversionary probes by portions of the Japanese fleet would lead to other enemy forces reaching Saipan and that US advantages would be negated if a night action ensued. Therefore, his tactics were to proceed westward by day and then eastward at night. He issued additional guidance, "But earliest possible strike on enemy carriers is necessary." These two statements demonstrate the difficulty of balancing his two missions without solid intelligence on the disposition of the Japanese fleet.⁴¹

How did Spruance perceive the importance of decisively defeating the Japanese fleet during the Marianas operation? In a message to King prior to the operation, Nimitz stated that both he and Spruance had given extensive consideration to King's guidance that "Destruction of the enemy fleet is always the primary objective of our Naval forces."

Spruance's concern with the protection of the ships that remained off the beach at Saipan leads one to believe that his understanding of this point had been obscured. Reynolds's criticism of Spruance is valid. As the commander of the assault on the Marianas, Spruance thought too much in terms of a surface engagement and did not properly account for the striking range of US aircraft. The carriers could have moved farther west and remained within striking range of Saipan if a Japanese force attacked there. He also did not consider that the risk of a Japanese attack in the Saipan area was minimal after the US amphibious forces were moved 200 nautical miles east after reports of the Japanese carriers were received. The remaining US ships near Saipan were all combatants, including seven battleships, three cruisers, five destroyers, and eight escort carriers. Even if the fast carrier force had been unable to assist them, this force would have likely been able to match up well against any Japanese "end run."⁴²

Mitscher certainly believed that a decisive battle should have been sought and he demonstrated a better understanding of carrier tactics when he stated that risk to the landing forces would have been minimal if the fast carrier force remained within 300 nautical miles of Saipan (allowing the fast carriers to rapidly close with and strike any force approaching the island).⁴³ Spruance instead decided to continue east during the evening of 18 June, continuing to increase the distance to the Japanese carriers, and rejected Mitscher's request to turn back to the west in order to facilitate launching a morning attack against the Japanese fleet. Spruance had received a report of possible jamming of a friendly submarine's communications, leading him to believe that there might be an unlocated Japanese force attempting to outflank him to the south. He informed Mitscher that "Change proposed does not appear advisable." Spruance

explained his reasoning: “End run by other carrier groups remains possibility and must not be overlooked.”⁴⁴ After the war, Spruance admitted this decision was an error, “It would have been much more satisfactory if, instead of waiting in a covering position, I could have steamed to the westward in search of the Japanese fleet.”⁴⁵ But he qualified this statement by also stating that the possibility of a Japanese force making “an end run around our flank and hitting our amphibious shipping at Saipan” prevented him from moving toward the Japanese carrier forces.⁴⁶

When Spruance decided to keep his force in close proximity to Saipan, he did so as the commander of Operation Forager, the entire US assault of the Marianas Islands. His responsibility differed significantly from Halsey’s at Leyte Gulf. Halsey only commanded a portion of the naval forces involved in the Leyte operation, while Spruance commanded the entire operation. But, in making the decisions in question, both commanders were directing movements of their fast carrier forces in reaction to the Japanese fleet. Because the dual US command structure was allowed to persist, Halsey was placed in a position much different from that faced by Spruance four months prior-- Halsey was in command of only one part of the naval forces involved. He also had a different role. Instead of overall command of the amphibious operation, he was in command of a supporting force.

To understand how and why Halsey made the decision to proceed north on 24 October, the Japanese and American battle plans, the disposition and movement of forces prior to the battle, and the intelligence reports and staff and subordinate recommendations to Halsey must be considered. These elements, along with Halsey’s understanding of his mission and current naval tactics, specifically the employment of carrier forces in their

new role as capital ships, are keys to understanding how the divided American naval chain of command at Leyte Gulf affected the course of the battle.

¹Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; reprint Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger, 1978), 190-91, 226 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

²Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991) 163, 190.

³Clark G. Reynolds, *Navies in History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 160-65.

⁴*Ibid.*, 202-203.

⁵William F. Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 216.

⁶Reynolds, *Navies in History*, 11.

⁷Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 13.

⁸James L. George, *History of Warships: From Ancient Times to the Twenty-first Century* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 96-97. Battlecruisers were less heavily armored than the dreadnought battleships and hence were faster. Their role in a fleet engagement was to use their speed to locate the enemy fleet while not becoming decisively engaged.

⁹Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 17-18.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 21.

¹²*Ibid.*, 22.

¹³Thomas J. Cutler, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Greatest Naval Battle in History, The Dramatic Full Story, 23-26 October 1944* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 51.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 163-64.

- ¹⁷Ibid., 166-67.
- ¹⁸Frank B. Knox, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 382.
- ¹⁹E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 164.
- ²⁰Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 100-101, 166-67.
- ²¹Ibid., 51-53, 70.
- ²²Ibid., 79-80.
- ²³Ibid., 94.
- ²⁴Ibid., 95.
- ²⁵Ibid., 85-86.
- ²⁶Ibid., 93-94.
- ²⁷Ibid., 100-101.
- ²⁸Ibid., 103.
- ²⁹Hagan, 324.
- ³⁰Ibid.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 154.
- ³³Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 12, *Leyte, June 1944 – January 1945* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1963), 59.
- ³⁴Ibid.
- ³⁵Emmet P. Forrestel, *Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, USN: A Study in Command* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 1966), 146.
- ³⁶E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 303.
- ³⁷Ibid.
- ³⁸Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 272.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Edwin P. Hoyt, *How They Won the War in the Pacific: Nimitz and His Admirals* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970), 428.

⁴¹Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of US Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 8, *New Guinea and the Marianas, March 1944 – August 1944* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1953), 250-251.

⁴²Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 186, 204-10.

⁴³William T. Y'Blood, *Red Sun Setting: The Battle of the Philippine Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003), 207.

⁴⁴Morison, *New Guinea and the Marianas*, 252.

⁴⁵Ibid., 255.

⁴⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

BATTLE PLANS AND PRELIMINARY ACTIONS

As US forces prepared to assault Leyte, the Japanese Navy was preparing plans for a last, desperate attempt to stop the American offensive. It was called the “Sho-Go” plan, meaning “Victory Operation” in Japanese.¹ After the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the Japanese fleet had been divided. Because of US submarine attacks, it was difficult to maintain fuel shipments from the Japanese-occupied East Indies to the home islands. Therefore the bulk of the surface forces, including most of the battleships and cruisers, were stationed at Lingga Roads near Singapore, where they could use nearby fuel supplies to continue gunnery and torpedo training. These forces were commanded by Kurita.² To the north, in Japan’s Inland Sea, the Japanese carrier forces that had survived the Battle of the Philippine Sea were busy training replacement pilots under the command of Ozawa. New Japanese pilots were being rushed through training to compensate for the heavy losses at the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot. Because of the heavy casualties among the Japanese corps of naval pilots, compared to his US adversary, the average Japanese carrier aviator had much less experience and training at this point in the war. Fuel shortages, a lack of aviation maintenance personnel, and a shortage of factory personnel also affected Ozawa’s ability to reconstitute his carrier forces. He planned to reunite his carriers with Kurita’s fleet in late-November after training was completed.³

The Japanese Sho-Go plan had four options to use these forces in the defense of an inner perimeter, depending on the location of the next American offensive operation. Sho 1 was for the defense of the Philippines, Sho 2 for Formosa and the southern

Japanese island of Kyushu, Sho 3 for the central Japanese islands of Shikoku and Honshu, and Sho 4 for the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido.⁴ The Japanese plan called for the massing of all available air and sea power to stop the next US offensive after intelligence determined where it would occur.⁵ This plan was coordinated with the Japanese Army, which had sent reinforcements from Manchuria to Formosa and Luzon. These land forces were to act as a mobile counter-landing force to reinforce whatever local garrison was subject to US amphibious assault.⁶ Because Japanese naval surface forces were based so far to the south of Sho-Go's defensive perimeter, rapid action by land-based air forces against the US fleet was a key aspect of the plan. These aircraft, now Japan's "first line of defense," would have to be rapidly concentrated and their attacks coordinated to have maximum effect on the American fleet.⁷ There was no doubt among most Japanese military leaders that the defense of the Philippines was vital to the security of the home islands. Lt. Gen. Miyazaki Shuichi stated, "Viewed from the standpoint of political and operational strategy, holding the Philippines was the one essential [sic] With the loss of these islands, Japanese communications with the Southern region would be severely threatened."⁸

Halsey's actions prior to Leyte Gulf were critical to disrupting these Japanese plans for two reasons. First, he was the one who recommended moving up the invasion of Leyte to October, before the Japanese fleet's combat power could be regained and its separate task forces reunited. Second, he commanded successful air strikes on Japanese air bases in Okinawa, Formosa, and the Philippines that neutralized Japanese land-based air power prior to the battle. After command of Fifth Fleet was transferred to Halsey in late August and it was redesignated Third Fleet, he ordered his carrier forces to strike

airfields in the central Philippines in support of the amphibious invasion of the Palau Islands. In his biography of Halsey, Potter states that this showed Halsey did not intend to conform to previous uses of carriers to support amphibious assaults. If he had, Potter argues, he would have had his carrier force remain in the vicinity of the Palaus to provide support to the landing forces.⁹

Halsey, believing the battleships, cruisers, escort carriers, and destroyers assigned to provide the needed close support to the amphibious force would suffice, ordered the carrier force, Task Force 38 under the command of Mitscher, to strike Japanese airfields in the central Philippines on 12 and 13 September. The results, approximately two hundred Japanese aircraft destroyed along with significant destruction of Japanese installations and shipping, led Halsey to the conclusion that the Philippines were “a hollow shell with weak defenses and skimpy facilities.”¹⁰ An American aviator, who had been shot down and returned to Task Force 38 by Filipino guerillas, said that his rescuers reported that no Japanese forces were on Leyte. Although this report turned out to be false, its basic premise was correct. Japanese forces were relatively weak in the central and southern Philippines.¹¹

Halsey made the recommendation to move up the Leyte operation via urgent dispatch; he believed an accelerated timetable for Leyte was well worth the risk based on this latest intelligence. It was rapidly approved by MacArthur, Nimitz and the JCS, who were meeting with their British colleagues in Quebec at the time.¹² As his amphibious forces continued their landings at Pelelieu in the Palaus, Halsey attacked Japanese air power in the Philippines with his carriers in late September. Following these operations, his fleet was divided to facilitate the upcoming Leyte operation. His amphibious forces

were transferred to Seventh Fleet under Kinkaid's command, part of MacArthur's Southwest Pacific forces. The remainder of his ships included fleet and light carriers along with escorting forces mainly comprised of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers.¹³ Because of the reorganization and transfer of the amphibious forces, Halsey had essentially become a carrier task force commander (even though he kept the title of Commander, Third Fleet).

Although his strikes on the Philippines were within MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area, Halsey had still been under Nimitz's command. He would remain under Nimitz's command for the invasion of Leyte even though the operation was commanded by MacArthur. In his account of the battle, Morison states, "In view of the magnitude of the Leyte operation, the overall plan was fairly simple; but the command set-up was complicated."¹⁴ Nimitz (Commander, Pacific Ocean Areas) was to support MacArthur (Commander, Southwest Pacific). In addition, Gen. H. H. Arnold's Twentieth Army Air Force, composed of B-29 bombers, which operated as a separate command in the Pacific at the time of Leyte, as well as Gen. J. W. Stilwell's China-Burma-India Command, specifically the Fourteenth Army Air Force, also supported the Leyte operation.¹⁵

Halsey, although tasked with directly supporting MacArthur's landings, was not integrated into MacArthur's command. The two fleets, Seventh and Third, remained separate and reported to separate commanders. Two separate operation plans were issued, one from MacArthur and one from Nimitz. Nimitz's Operation Plan 8-44 ordered Third Fleet to "cover and support forces of the Southwest Pacific in order to assist in the seizure and occupation of objectives in the Central Philippines" and "destroy enemy naval and air forces in, or threatening, the Philippines area."¹⁶ Potter is correct in his analysis that

these orders constitute conflicting guidance, with “destroy” implying a more offensive mindset and “cover” a more defensive mindset.¹⁷ Nimitz’s intent was not clearly stated to Halsey because he did not explain the priorities regarding protection of US forces and destruction of Japanese forces.

At the least, the two phrases in Halsey’s orders left much room for interpretation, the kind expected of high ranking officers who are trained to balance risks while accomplishing multiple objectives at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Halsey’s interpretation of them must be viewed within the context of the role he was assigned at Leyte Gulf. He was commander of a supporting fleet that, because it had been stripped of forces that were reassigned to Seventh Fleet, was essentially a fast carrier task force (see appendices B and C). Halsey’s orders from Nimitz were based on a late September agreement between Rear Adm. Forrest Sherman, Nimitz’s plans officer, and Maj. Gen. S. J. Chamberlin, MacArthur’s operations officer. The agreement stated Third Fleet’s mission was:

To cover and support the Leyte Operation by: -

- (a) Striking Okinawa, Formosa and Northern Leyte on 10-13 October;
- (b) Striking Bicol peninsula, Leyte, Cebu and Negros, and supporting the landings on Leyte, on 16-20 October;
- (c) Operating in “strategic support” of the Leyte Operation, by destroying enemy naval and air forces threatening the Philippines area, on and after 21 October.¹⁸

In addition to these orders, the directive that Halsey received from Nimitz’s staff included a separate caveat in a paragraph that was not numbered or lettered as the others were. It read: “IN CASE OPPORTUNITY FOR DESTRUCTION OF MAJOR PORTION OF THE ENEMY FLEET OFFERS OR CAN BE CREATED, SUCH

DESTRUCTION BECOMES THE PRIMARY TASK.”¹⁹ The origin of this part of the order is unknown--historians have debated whether it came directly from Nimitz or was added by a staff officer and then approved by Nimitz later. At one point, King actually stated that he had directed Nimitz to include it in Halsey’s orders. Later, in a letter to Potter, King was less certain that he had directed Nimitz to include it. According to Reynolds, this part of the order that made destruction of the enemy fleet Halsey’s primary task was “issued without consultation with General MacArthur and the amphibious commanders.”²⁰

Halsey took this caveat as confirmation of his views of carrier forces as an offensive striking force. In his autobiography, Halsey stated:

There are two theories of how best to use carriers in support of shore operations: one is passive--keep them close by in a small area, as bases for CAP’s [combat air patrols]; the other is active--crush enemy air power at its source. I have always held the second theory.”²¹

Halsey confirmed his intentions to Nimitz in a letter at the end of September:

I intend, if possible, to deny the enemy a chance to outrange me in an air duel and also to deny him an opportunity to employ an air shuttle (carrier-to-target-to-land) against me. If I am to prevent his gaining that advantage, I must have early information and I must move smartly. Inasmuch as the destruction of the enemy fleet is the principal task, every weapon must be brought into play and the general coordination of the weapons should be in the hands of the tactical commander responsible for the outcome of the battle. . . . My goal is the same as yours--to completely annihilate the Jap fleet if the opportunity offers.”²²

Halsey’s letter mentions the chance the enemy might outrange him or employ shuttle tactics against him. This confirms that he did have a thorough understanding of the fundamental principles of carrier tactics even though he had been an area commander in the South Pacific for the last two years. Although US aircraft and pilots had been proven superior to those of the Japanese at the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the Japanese

still had the advantage of both search and striking ranges. Japanese carrier aircraft were lighter than American carrier aircraft because they lacked armor and self-sealing fuel tanks. They could search out to 560 nautical miles and fly an attack profile out to 300 nautical miles. American aircraft could only search out to a maximum of 350 nautical miles and attack at a maximum range of 200 nautical miles.²³

These differences would allow a Japanese carrier force, if positioned from a US carrier force at a distance between its range and the American range, to locate and then strike an American force before it could be counterattacked. Shuttle tactics, which involved the use of land-based airfields in conjunction with carrier operations, would further increase this Japanese range advantage because the aircraft would either launch from or land at the airfields. They might be able to strike from as far as 600 nautical miles away depending on the location of the US fleet with respect to the Japanese air bases. Although unsuccessful, the Japanese had attempted to use these tactics at the Battle of the Philippine Sea by using airbases on Guam to land carrier aircraft.²⁴

Halsey lacked the experience employing aircraft carriers of many other fast carrier force admirals.²⁵ In his autobiography, Halsey describes his feelings at the end of August as he prepared to take command of Third Fleet: "I hadn't been with the fleet for more than two years; I wanted to see what the new carriers and planes looked like."²⁶ Although he lacked specific experience, his prior experience as a carrier task force commander as well as his experience employing carriers as South Pacific Area commander allowed him to appreciate the Japanese range advantage and intricacies of shuttle tactics. Task Force 38's leadership, specifically Mitscher and Burke, as well as the carrier task group commanders, had plenty of experience employing carriers and were

well aware of these issues. But Halsey's Third Fleet staff, more suited to area command than fleet and carrier force command since it was essentially comprised of personnel from his South Pacific staff that had followed him, did not have the detailed knowledge needed to successfully employ carrier forces.²⁷ This lack of experience among his staff would impair Halsey's ability to react to the changing situation as the battle progressed.

Halsey's letter to Nimitz clearly indicates that he viewed the Mahanian objective of destroying the enemy's fleet, specifically the carrier forces, as paramount. There is no record of Nimitz expressing disagreement with Halsey's interpretation of his orders after he read the letter. A clause from the operation order that Halsey issued to Third Fleet prior to the Battle of Leyte Gulf confirms how he viewed his role in the upcoming landings: "If opportunity exists or can be created to destroy major portion of enemy fleet this becomes primary task."²⁸ He did not want to miss an opportunity to achieve this goal, as he believed Spruance had at the Philippine Sea, because destruction of the remaining Japanese carriers would allow follow-on operations to be conducted at much less risk with no long-range striking power available to the Japanese Navy to menace US movements. Halsey's intent had been made clear to his subordinates and he had confirmed his mission with Nimitz.

It is likely that Nimitz and King deliberately chose Halsey as commander of the covering force at Leyte Gulf in order to increase the likelihood of a decisive engagement with the Japanese fleet. According to historian Edwin P. Hoyt, this indicated their judgment of the qualities of both Halsey and Spruance. Halsey's task in the Leyte operation was "to hunt the Japanese fleet and knock out Japanese air."²⁹ Although the system of rotating the command of Central Pacific naval forces between Halsey and

Spruance was in place at Leyte Gulf, the two admirals were not interchangeable in their superiors' eyes. When Spruance was in command, he was given overall responsibility for operations such as the Marianas and, after Leyte, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Halsey was selected to cover the Leyte operation because Nimitz and King "knew that he would concentrate on the enemy navy" instead of the landings.³⁰

Nimitz knew that Halsey was an aggressive commander and gave him wide latitude. In a letter to Halsey in early October, Nimitz wrote:

You are always free to make local decisions in connection with the handling of the forces placed under your command. Often it will be necessary for you to take action not previously contemplated because of local situations which may develop quickly and in the light of information which has come to you and which may not yet be available to me. My only requirement in such cases is that I be informed as fully and as early as the situation permits.³¹

This direction clearly shows that Nimitz fully supported Halsey taking the initiative in the upcoming battle. Nimitz's orders to Halsey as well as their informal correspondence show that Nimitz knew how Halsey interpreted his mission prior to the Leyte operation. According to Reynolds, Halsey "intended to destroy Japanese carriers at the first opportunity."³² If they were not destroyed, Halsey knew they could be used to counterattack later US advances and trap land forces in the western Philippines. He felt they must be eliminated as soon as possible.³³

MacArthur issued a separate set of orders to Kinkaid as part of Operations Instruction Number 70, a "directive which consolidated all previous instructions into one integrated plan"³⁴ for the invasion. In it, Seventh Fleet was tasked:

1. To transport and establish landing forces ashore in the Leyte Gulf-Surigao Strait area, as arranged with the Commanding General, Sixth US Army.
2. To support the operation by:-

- (a) Providing air protection for convoys and direct air support for the landing and subsequent operations, including anti-submarine patrol of the Gulf and combat air patrol over the amphibious ships and craft, from his escort carriers;
- (b) Lifting reinforcements and supplies to Leyte in naval assault shipping;
- (c) Preventing Japanese reinforcement by sea of its Leyte garrison;
- (d) Opening Surigao Strait for Allied use, and sending Naval Forces into “Visayan waters” to support current and future operations;
- (e) Providing submarine reconnaissance, lifeguard service and escort-of-convoy.³⁵

Kinkaid’s orders differed significantly from Halsey’s. Kinkaid’s tasks were focused much more directly on the amphibious landings whereas Halsey was tasked with attacking Japanese land-based air forces as well as naval forces if they should threaten the operation.

A boundary designating separate operating sectors for the two fleets was never established. Their responsibilities, according to the orders to the fleet commanders, were divided by function instead of geographic area. Kinkaid’s orders implied direct support for the operation and a focus on the area close to the island of Leyte while Halsey’s implied a more expansive geographic focus in order to strike Japanese forces threatening the operation. At first glance, the orders seem to leave little room for conflict between the responsibilities of Halsey and Kinkaid. Nonetheless, events would later reveal that because the two naval commanders were operating their fleets in close vicinity to each other without clear understandings of their specific responsibilities, the naval command arrangement was poorly constructed to support the landings.

The poor coordination between Halsey and Kinkaid that would be revealed during the battle was exacerbated by the communications architecture. During World War II, ships could communicate via voice radio over short ranges and via telegraphic means over longer ranges. The telegraphic communications could be encrypted, although the

encoding and decoding added significant time to the process.³⁶ Although MacArthur, King, and Nimitz all provided guidance to Halsey and Kinkaid that directed them to closely coordinate their actions, a direct communications link was never authorized.³⁷ MacArthur had prohibited any “uninterrupted channel of communication” from the Seventh to the Third Fleet in order to maintain the independence of his command.³⁸ Instead, they were forced to rely upon a general fleet broadcast system that relayed vast numbers of messages for all ships to copy. They used this system during the battle. The alternative, a dedicated channel which would have allowed more flexibility and speed, was not implemented. During the battle, the naval radiomen based at Manus received so much message traffic with high priority that they were forced to handle many individual messages in order of receipt instead of in order of urgency. This led to long delays for important messages.

This lack of efficient communication hindered the two fleet commanders’ ability to coordinate their actions.³⁹ Who was to blame for this failure to ensure satisfactory communications? There are plenty of candidates, including MacArthur, King, Nimitz, Halsey, and Kinkaid. Historian H. P. Willmott, who does not normally defend MacArthur, makes an excellent point about the tendency of historians to fault him for these communications deficiencies. For Willmott, blaming MacArthur for communications problems between two fleets is “at the limit of credibility.”⁴⁰ Halsey and Kinkaid must have been much more knowledgeable about their communications requirements than MacArthur. Although he was the area commander and made decisions regarding communications plans for the operation, if Halsey and Kinkaid had pressed the issue with either MacArthur himself or Nimitz and possibly King, it is likely they would

have been able to ensure more rapid communications and, therefore, improved situational awareness during the battle.

In addition to the lack of effective communications between the two fleets, there was also no system to transfer operational control of naval forces between the two commanders. This ability shift forces between commanders as new developments unfold during a battle is an important aspect of military operations. Without it, commanders' flexibility in adapting to new situations is obviously hampered. Normally, the next senior common operational commander would have the authority to transfer forces from one subordinate commander to the other. But in the case of US naval forces at the Leyte operation, this next senior commander was the President, who was obviously involved in higher-level and longer-range strategic decisions. So while the command structure and orders seemed to be simple, according to Friedman, uniting that command structure "for action was a complex task."⁴¹ It was a task that was never accomplished as MacArthur prepared to fulfill his promise to return to the Philippines.

The new date for the invasion of Leyte had been set for 20 October. In preparation for the landings, Halsey went on the offensive with Third Fleet. To deny the Japanese the ability to use their land-based air forces to attack the landing forces that were being assembled, he ordered Mitscher to target Japanese airfields in the Ryukyu Islands, primarily in Okinawa, and Formosa as well as Luzon and Mindoro in the Philippines. At the same time, US Army air forces based in China and the New Guinea area struck Japanese airfields.⁴² During these operations against land-based air forces, Halsey did not lose sight of his goal of destroying the Japanese fleet. After intercepting a series of Japanese radio broadcasts boasting of destruction of the US fleet during the air battles in

the vicinity of Formosa and Okinawa, he used two damaged US ships as bait in an attempt to draw the Japanese fleet into battle. This was nearly successful in luring a cruiser force under Vice Adm. Shima Kiyohide within range of US carrier aircraft on 16 October. But, due to a communications delay in the US fleet, the opportunity to strike Shima's force was lost.⁴³

Halsey then turned his attention to Japanese airfields closer to the site of the Leyte landings, those located on Luzon and the Visayans in the central Philippines. As Third Fleet approached its covering position east of Leyte on 17 October, Halsey received reports that the advance US landings on small islands that guarded the eastern approaches to Leyte Gulf were proceeding as planned.⁴⁴ As these preliminary landings commenced, the Japanese plan for the defense of the Philippines, Sho 1, went into full effect. At a meeting between Japanese Navy and Army officers, the Army was informed that the Navy's intent was to make Sho 1 an "all or nothing" operation. Rear Adm. Nakazawa Tasuku, chief of operations for the Japanese Navy, later explained that he and many of his colleagues viewed Sho 1 as their navy's "last chance to die with honor."⁴⁵

The Japanese plan to stop the US invasion required land-based air power to attack the American fleet at sea and the landing forces on the invasion beaches while naval forces attacked US amphibious forces at the invasion site. Japanese carrier forces would act as a decoy to lure American carriers north.⁴⁶ Unfortunately for the Japanese, the plans to use land-based air power to attack the US fleet had already been severely disrupted by Halsey's strikes against Japanese air bases earlier in October. Adm. Soemu Toyoda, commander of the Japanese Combined Fleet, contributed to Halsey's success by prematurely activating the air portions of both the Sho 1 and Sho 2 plans prior to the

Leyte invasion.⁴⁷ On 12 October Toyoda had ordered his air forces to concentrate at Formosa in a response to Halsey's attacks on his bases there. His order included direction for the partially reconstituted air groups from Ozawa's carrier force to join the fight. A total of approximately 600 Japanese aircraft were destroyed in the fighting, including most of the carrier aircraft.

The Japanese response and defeat at the hands of Third Fleet effectively secured the northern flank of the Leyte operation from Japanese counterattack with air power.⁴⁸ In response to the false claims by Radio Tokyo that the Japanese counterattacks had annihilated the American fleet, Halsey sent Nimitz the following report: "The Third Fleet's sunken and damaged ships have been salvaged and are retiring at high speed toward the enemy."⁴⁹ While the Japanese air forces were expended prematurely, the naval forces were not activated until it was clear an amphibious assault had commenced. Kurita's First Striking Force left Lingga Roads on 18 October after Sho 1 had been activated in response to US Army Ranger landings on the small islands in Leyte Gulf the day prior.⁵⁰

The waters of Leyte Gulf border the eastern shore of Leyte, the site selected for the US landings of 6th Army's two corps.⁵¹ The waters of the Philippine Sea are east of Leyte Gulf. In order to reach Leyte Gulf to accomplish its mission, Kurita's naval force had to refuel at Brunei, on the northern coast of Borneo.⁵² The island of Leyte, in the eastern central Philippines, has channels between it and neighboring islands on its northern and southern ends. To the south is Surigao Strait, which is navigable by warships. To the north is San Juanico Strait, separating Leyte from Samar, which has rapid currents and is too narrow for warships to transit.⁵³ The nearest navigable channel

to the north is San Bernardino Strait, between Samar and the southeast tip of Luzon.

Surigao and San Bernardino Straits were both key geographic features that affected the course of the battle.

After refueling at Brunei, Kurita divided his First Striking Force into two separate forces (see appendices B and D). The first, identified by the Americans as the Center Force, sortied on the morning of 22 October. Kurita, who commanded this force which included the superbattleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*, would steam up the Palawan Passage, across the Sibuyan Sea, and then through San Bernardino Strait. In addition to the two new superbattleships, Kurita's force included three older battleships, ten heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and fifteen destroyers. The remainder of his force, under Vice Adm. Nishimura Shoji, was identified by the Americans as the van (forward portion) of the Southern Force. It sortied on the afternoon of 22 October and would steam across the Sulu and Mindanao Seas and then through Surigao Strait. It included two older battleships, a heavy cruiser, and four destroyers.⁵⁴

Shima's force, including two heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, and four destroyers, was still in the Ryukyus after its near destruction by Halsey's aircraft during the air battle over Formosa. It became the rear of the Southern Force and would steam west of Formosa, across the South China, Sulu, and Mindanao Seas, and then to Surigao Strait behind Nishimura's ships. The final component of the Japanese naval forces, which sortied a few hours after Nishimura left Brunei, was Ozawa's carrier force, which would be identified by the Americans as the Northern Force. It included a heavy carrier, three light carriers, two converted battleships with flight decks, and a screen of nine destroyers and three light cruisers. In addition to their few remaining aircraft, this was the Japanese

order of battle and disposition as the US landings at Leyte proceeded. The plan was for the Center and Southern Forces to attack US landing forces in Leyte Gulf in a pincer movement through the two straits while the Northern Force decoyed US forces away from the attack.⁵⁵

As Sho 1 went into effect, the US naval forces were arrayed to support 6th Army's amphibious assault. The American plan was codenamed "King Two."⁵⁶ Seventh Fleet, under Kinkaid's command, was divided into three task forces. The first two, Task Forces 78 and 79, were mainly amphibious ships that would transport and land the Army forces at two different sites on Leyte. Task Force 78 was comprised of forces previously assigned to Seventh Fleet whereas Task Force 79 was ships transferred from Third Fleet. The third, Task Force 77, consisted of supporting escort carriers, destroyers, and cruisers. Kinkaid retained direct command of Task Force 77 and divided it into several smaller task groups. The primary mission of a group of fifteen destroyers, five cruisers, and six older battleships under the command of Rear Adm. Jesse B. Oldendorf was naval gunfire support for the landings. Task Group 77.4 was comprised of eighteen small escort carriers and their screen of destroyers and destroyer escorts under the command of Rear Adm. Thomas L. Sprague. In all, Kinkaid's fleet numbered over 700 ships, including 157 surface combatants and 420 amphibious ships as well as patrol boats, minesweepers, and supply ships.⁵⁷

Halsey supported this massive force with Third Fleet. After having its amphibious ships, escort carriers, and many other ships transferred to Seventh Fleet, Third Fleet still had nine fleet carriers, eight light carriers, six battleships, three heavy cruisers, eleven light cruisers, and fifty-seven destroyers assigned. These were divided into four task

groups, each centered on a group of aircraft carriers. The battleships were integrated into the carrier task groups. Over 1,000 carrier aircraft constituted the main striking power of Halsey's fleet.⁵⁸ In addition to Seventh and Third Fleets, a small number of US submarines, normally assigned the mission of sinking Japanese shipping, were posted in key locations. Their role was to help locate Japanese naval forces. Two of the important locations were the straits leading out of Japan's Inland Sea and the Palawan Passage west of the Philippines. Two submarines, *Darter* and *Dace*, were posted at the southern end of Palawan Passage.⁵⁹

As the Japanese forces approached the Philippines, the two American fleets were spread over a large area conducting operations in support of the landings that had commenced on 20 October (see figures 9 and 10). On 22 October, Halsey detached Task Group 38.1, commanded by Vice Adm. John S. McCain, to proceed west to Ulithi to refuel.⁶⁰ Task Group 38.2, under the command of Rear Adm. Gerald F. Bogan, was scheduled to leave station for replenishment the following day. The plan was for the remaining two task groups to refuel after the return of McCain and Bogan on 29 October.⁶¹ Most of Kinkaid's forces were stationed in Leyte Gulf after the landings commenced. Task Group 77.4, which was divided into three escort carrier task units, was positioned just outside the gulf in order to provide air support to the landing forces.⁶² As the four Japanese forces under Kurita, Ozawa, Nishimura, and Shima steamed toward battle, the 6th Army continued to expand the beachhead that had been established on 20 October.⁶³ A few Japanese aircraft had begun to attack American ships in Leyte Gulf as the landings commenced, but it would take several days for Japanese air commanders to stage the approximately 400 planes still available to counter the invasion.⁶⁴ As evening of

the twenty-second approached in the Palawan Passage, the two US submarines *Darter* and *Dace* were about to fire the first shots of the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

¹E. B. Potter and Chester W. Nimitz, *The Great Sea War: The Story of Naval Action in World War II* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 371.

²Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: Disaster and Triumph in the Bloodiest Sea Battle of World War II* (New York: Jove, 1972), 7.

³Thomas J. Cutler, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Greatest Naval Battle in History, The Dramatic Full Story, 23-26 October 1944* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 52-55.

⁴James A. Field Jr., *The Japanese at Leyte Gulf: The Sho Operation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 9.

⁵Potter and Nimitz, 371.

⁶Field, 8-9.

⁷*Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁸Kenneth I. Friedman, *Afternoon of the Rising Sun: The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 2001), 19.

⁹E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 276-77.

¹⁰William F. Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 199.

¹¹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 277-78.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, 278-79.

¹⁴Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 12, *Leyte, June 1944 – January 1945* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1963), 55.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Friedman, 21.

¹⁷E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 325.

¹⁸Morison, *Leyte*, 57.

- ¹⁹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 279.
- ²⁰Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; reprint Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger, 1978), 256 (page citations are to the reprint edition).
- ²¹Halsey and Bryan, 230.
- ²²Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 279.
- ²³Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of US Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 8, *New Guinea and the Marianas, March 1944 – August 1944* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1953), 233.
- ²⁴Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 181, 190.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 257.
- ²⁶Halsey and Bryan, 198.
- ²⁷Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 257-58.
- ²⁸Morison, *Leyte*, 58.
- ²⁹Edwin P. Hoyt, *How They Won the War in the Pacific: Nimitz and His Admirals* (New York: Weybright and Talley: 1970), 429.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*
- ³¹*Ibid.*, 428.
- ³²Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 258.
- ³³*Ibid.*
- ³⁴Morison, *Leyte*, 56.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, 56-57.
- ³⁶Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf, Dramatic Full Story*, 178.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, 179-80.
- ³⁸Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 290.
- ³⁹Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf, Dramatic Full Story*, 179-80.

⁴⁰H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 124.

⁴¹Friedman, 20.

⁴²Morison, *Leyte*, 280.

⁴³Hoyt, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 34.

⁴⁴Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 286.

⁴⁵Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf, Dramatic Full Story*, 74.

⁴⁶Friedman, 27.

⁴⁷Stanley L. Falk, *Decision at Leyte* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 89.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 57-60.

⁴⁹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 285.

⁵⁰Potter and Nimitz, 373.

⁵¹Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 69.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 373.

⁵³Falk, 65.

⁵⁴Potter and Nimitz, 373-74.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf, Dramatic Full Story*, 59.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁵⁸Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 276.

⁵⁹Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf, Dramatic Full Story*, 93-95, 105-106.

⁶⁰Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 92-93.

⁶¹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 287.

⁶²Cutler, *Battle of Leyte Gulf, Dramatic Full Story*, 128-129.

⁶³Falk, 109.

⁶⁴Ibid., 104-105.

CHAPTER 4

BATTLE AND DECISION

As the American landings on Leyte continued during the early hours of 23 October, Halsey waited for further intelligence on the movements of the Japanese Navy and the intentions of its commanders. He agreed with Mitscher's assessment of the status of Task Force 38:

No other force in the world has been subjected to such a period of constant operation without rest or rehabilitation. . . . The spirit of these ships is commendable. . . . However, the reactions of their crews are slowed down. The result is that they are not completely effective against attack.¹

Halsey suspected the Japanese would probably wait until US invasions of other Philippine islands to counter this latest advance against their defensive perimeter.² Therefore, he continued with his plans to cycle his carrier task groups through Ulithi for provisions and rest. MacArthur and Kinkaid were in agreement with Halsey about Japanese intentions; neither believed the invasion would provoke a major Japanese counterattack.³ The Americans began to realize that they were wrong about Japanese intent when, early in the morning of 23 October, the two US submarines in Palawan Passage, *Darter* and *Dace*, intercepted Kurita's Center Force west of the Philippines. *Darter* promptly reported contact with the Japanese ships. Until this report, US naval intelligence had been unaware of the location of Kurita's force.⁴

After the report was received, Halsey canceled the order for Bogan's Task Group 38.2 to follow McCain's Task Group 38.1 to Ulithi. He did not recall McCain. The two US submarines attacked Kurita's force at dawn, sinking two heavy cruisers, flagship *Atago* and *Maya*, and damaging one, *Takao*. Kurita decided to assign two of his

destroyers to escort *Takao* back to Brunei. He transferred his flag temporarily to destroyer *Kishinami* and then permanently to superbattleship *Yamato* as his force continued north through the Palawan Passage.⁵

Because of Halsey's decision not to recall Task Group 38.1 on 23 October after he had received reports of Kurita's force from *Darter*, Task Force 38 had significantly less combat power available than it would have had with all its task groups available. This meant that Halsey's attacks on Kurita's force in the Sibuyan Sea the following day were conducted with much less striking power than he could have mustered. An additional ramification of this decision was that Halsey had fewer options available when considering whether to divide his forces after he received reports of Ozawa's carrier force the afternoon of 24 October. McCain's was the task group with the greatest number of aircraft, approximately two-fifths of the total of the entire carrier task force. Also, because McCain's task group had a larger proportion of attack aircraft, which included Helldiver dive-bombers and Avenger torpedo-bombers, the remaining three task groups had only a little more than half of the striking power of the task force as a whole.⁶

Willmott is correct in his assessment of Halsey's decision to detach two of his task groups prior to receiving intelligence regarding the location of the Japanese fleet. It was not "justified in terms of real need."⁷ Although Halsey and Mitscher both believed the task force was no longer operating at the highest level of efficiency, it had not suffered enough combat losses to necessitate returning task groups to rear bases. Only 112 aircraft had been lost from the beginning of the Formosa air battles on 16 October to the morning of 23 October out of a beginning total of 1,077. The decision to have McCain continue toward Ulithi reduced Task Force 38 from nine fleet and eight light

carriers with 965 remaining aircraft to five fleet and five light carriers with a total of approximately 600 aircraft.⁸

Although historians have repeatedly focused on Halsey's decision to proceed north on the evening of 24 October as one of the most pivotal moments in the battle, little historical attention has been paid to this decision on 23 October which effectively removed McCain's heavily armed task group from the fighting on 24 and 25 October. Halsey's decision to take his entire task force north on the twenty-fourth in order to maintain concentration of force was made without approximately half of his available striking power. If there had been a more unified US naval chain of command, it is likely Halsey would not have been allowed to significantly reduce his combat power until either more of the amphibious shipping had been unloaded in Leyte Gulf or better intelligence had been obtained on Japanese movements. Halsey's action increased the risk of not having enough forces to effectively prevent a Japanese counter-attack.

MacArthur and Kinkaid agreed with Halsey that a major Japanese counterattack was unlikely. Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet operations plan stated: "It is not believed that major elements of the Japanese fleet will be involved in the present operations. . . Participation of Orange [Japanese] BB [Battleships] in defense of Eastern Philippines area is not considered probable."⁹ Kinkaid's focus on the Leyte landings was different from Halsey's focus on destruction of the enemy fleet. It is likely that if the command arrangement had required either MacArthur or Kinkaid to grant Halsey permission to allow such a large portion of Third Fleet to exit the area of operations that it would have been denied. Or, if Halsey had been tasked with command of all naval forces and the responsibility for conducting the landings as well as covering them, he may have delayed

his decision to order a large part of his offensive combat power to Ulithi. Although one can never be sure what “would have” happened, the effect of the divided US chain of command is important to consider when analyzing Halsey’s decisions to divide his task force on 23 October and then proceed north on 24 October.

Based on communications with Halsey, it seems likely that if all naval forces had been under his command, MacArthur would have ordered all carrier task groups to remain on station until he was satisfied that enough land-based air power had been established to protect against Japanese counter-attacks. Halsey, believing he needed to replenish, rearm, and refuel his carrier force at Ulithi, sent the following message to MacArthur on 21 October:

MY PRESENT OPERATIONS IN STRATEGIC POSITION TO MEET
THREAT OF ENEMY FLEET FORCES ARE SOMEWHAT RESTRICTED BY
NECESSITY OF COVERING YOUR TRANSPORTS AND OTHER
OVERSEAS MOVEMENTS X REQUEST EARLY ADVICE REGARDING
WITHDRAWAL OF SUCH UNITS TO SAFE POSITION WHICH WILL
PERMIT ME TO EXECUTE ORDERLY REARMING PROGRAM FOR MY
GROUPS AND ALLOW FURTHER OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS.¹⁰

MacArthur replied the same day:

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 X
SUCH COVER IS 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
X CONSIDER YOUR MISSION TO COVER THIS OPERATION IS
ESSENTIAL AND PARAMOUNT X.¹¹

This response shows that MacArthur was primarily concerned with protection of his landing forces and that offensive operations against the Japanese fleet were a secondary concern.

MacArthur's message to Halsey indicates that he viewed Third Fleet's role as providing air superiority in the vicinity of the amphibious landings. This role had been performed by Allied Air Forces, Southwest Pacific during MacArthur's offensives in New Guinea. It was under the command of Lt. Gen. George C. Kenney, the commander of Fifth Army Air Force. But because the Leyte operation was conducted without the previously planned assault on southern Mindanao preceding it, even Kenney's longer range P-38 fighters were unable to reach Leyte from their bases.¹² The carrier doctrine that had been developed and proven earlier in the war rejected the use of carriers in defensive sectors. *Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, US Pacific Fleet* (PAC 10) had last been published in 1943. This doctrine stated that its current revision had taken into account all wartime experiences thus far and should therefore be considered more current than *US Fleet Doctrine and Tactical Orders*. Hence, PAC 10 was the Navy's primary doctrine for fleet operations in the Pacific for the remainder of the war.¹³ Regarding carrier operations, PAC 10 emphasized flexibility and, although naval doctrine was considered guidance only, demanded commanders concentrate carriers and supporting screens when under enemy air attack. Multi-carrier task forces were the formation accepted as the standard for the remainder of the war. As far as offensive carrier operations were concerned, PAC 10 left the details to the discretion of Commander, Air Force, Pacific Fleet (COMAIRPAC).¹⁴

As COMAIRPAC, then Vice Adm. Towers released a formal statement on fast carrier policy later in 1943. It stated that fast carriers were:

(1) to attack the enemy on land and sea, the carriers being the principal offensive element of the fleet, (2) to provide direct air support for amphibious

operations, and (3) to provide air support to task forces in which the carriers were not the principal element.

Towers' further guidance required carrier forces to destroy enemy air forces, conduct searches, and provide fighter cover for landing forces and the fleet. He also stipulated tactical concentration of carrier forces so as not to dissipate their strength.¹⁵ Halsey, as the commander of the carrier forces at Leyte Gulf, would have to interpret this doctrine and prioritize the different responsibilities according to his situation.

So the exchange of messages between Halsey and MacArthur on the eve of battle illustrates two important points. First, MacArthur lacked an appreciation of the finer points of naval carrier doctrine which called for maximum flexibility and mobility for carrier forces and recommended concentration of carriers and other ships to provide for air defense. His emphasis on the need for carrier forces to fulfill the normal supporting role of land-based air for the Leyte operation shows that he regarded the carriers as a defensive force rather than an offensive force. Second, the exchange further illustrates that the intents of the two separate area commanders, Nimitz and MacArthur, were not synchronized for the operation. Even though MacArthur's answer implied he did not want any carrier task groups to leave the area to refuel, Halsey was able to proceed with his plans to begin rotating his groups through Ulithi because he was under the operational control of Nimitz.

On 23 October, Halsey arrayed his three remaining task groups. From a position approximately 260 nautical miles northeast of Samar, they were called in closer to the Philippines to better effect searches for Japanese naval forces. Task Group 38.3, under Rear Adm. Frederick T. Sherman, was farthest north, off the eastern coast of Luzon.

Bogan's Task Group 38.2 was east of San Bernardino Strait and Task Group 38.4, under

the command of Rear Adm. Ralph E. Davison, was east of the southern end of Samar. This positioned the three groups northeast of Leyte in a line running from northwest to southeast with approximately 125 nautical miles between each one. They were in place the following morning.¹⁶ As he was deploying his task groups on the twenty-third, Halsey received further intelligence of Japanese movements. Nishimura's force was sighted as it transited east across the Sulu Sea by a land-based patrol plane in the afternoon.¹⁷ Then, after dark, Halsey received reports from additional US submarines that confirmed Kurita's force was proceeding toward Leyte. Its ships were sighted as they exited the Palawan Passage and entered the Mindoro Strait.¹⁸ So by the evening of the twenty-third, Halsey had good intelligence on a major portion of the Japanese fleet. But he did not know the location of the Japanese aircraft carriers; they were still his primary concern.

Three days prior, on 20 October, Ozawa's carrier force had sailed from several ports in Japan's Inland Sea. It proceeded through the Bungo Strait with a unique set of orders:

In co-operation with friendly forces, the [carrier force] . . . was to . . . risk its own destruction in a spirit of self-sacrifice in order to divert and draw enemy carrier task forces from the waters east of Luzon to the north and northwest, thereby ensuring the successful penetration of the enemy landing area by the 1st and 2nd Task Groups [Center and Southern Forces].¹⁹

Fortunately for the Japanese, the American submarines that had been assigned patrol duties at the Bungo Strait had been dispersed and their orders changed to attack Japanese shipping rather than scout and report movements of naval forces. This US error in coordinating the submarine force's priorities in preparation for the Leyte operation along with Ozawa's prudent use of limited air operations and radio silence during transit

allowed the Northern Force to avoid detection until Ozawa began to attempt to intentionally make his presence known to the US fleet on the twenty-third.²⁰ Ironically, Ozawa had executed his silent transit so well that it was not until the afternoon of the twenty-fourth that Halsey became aware of his location.

As these Japanese naval forces proceeded toward their objective, Japanese air forces concentrated at land-bases in Luzon. On the twenty-third, approximately 450 planes were flown from Formosa to the Philippines. Japanese air force commanders debated whether to use these aircraft to begin kamikaze suicide attacks the next day. Although kamikaze attacks were used later in the battle, the commanders decided that the situation was not yet desperate enough to justify this course of action. Instead, conventional attacks were used on 24 October. While American aircrews aboard their carriers prepared for search and strike missions, Japanese aviators were doing the same at air bases throughout the Philippines. They struck in three waves of approximately fifty to sixty aircraft each (see figure 11). All targeted the northernmost of the three American carrier groups, Sherman's Task Group 38.3. The attacks were soundly defeated by American fighters, leaving the Japanese little remaining offensive air power by the afternoon of the twenty-fourth.²¹ But one Japanese dive-bomber did manage to make it through the defensive screen and hit light carrier *Princeton* with a single armor-piercing bomb. Secondary explosions resulted in major damage and, after Sherman had determined that she was unsalvageable and her captain ordered all hands to abandon ship, she was sunk by friendly torpedoes later that evening.²² The loss of *Princeton* to Japanese air attack must have reinforced Halsey's desire to eliminate the remaining Japanese carriers.

While Sherman was fighting off these waves of Japanese attacks, aircraft from Bogan's task group located and attacked Kurita's force in what is now called the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea. This action took place northeast of Leyte and resulted in major damage to several of Kurita's ships. It began with the sighting of Kurita's force off the southern tip of Mindoro Island. Halsey received this report at 0822 and ordered his three task groups to concentrate on Bogan's position, which was closest to Kurita's force. At the same time, he recalled McCain's Task Group 38.1, which was now 600 miles east of the Philippines. This distance meant McCain was well out of striking range of the Japanese forces until later the next day. Shortly after the sighting of Kurita's force, aircraft from Davison's task group sighted and attacked ships of Nishimura's force in the eastern Sulu Sea.²³ But because Davison's group was ordered to strike Kurita's force, Nishimura and Shima were effectively allowed free passage of the Sulu Sea after this initial attack.²⁴ Ozawa's carriers remained unlocated throughout the morning and early afternoon of the twenty-fourth, so the main American effort was against Kurita's force (see figure 12).

Kurita's ships were subjected to multiple waves of attacking aircraft with no fighter cover. All available Japanese aircraft were attacking Sherman's task group at the time. Between 0910 and 1350, aircraft from Third Fleet launched in a series of five large strikes against the Center Force. During these engagements in the Sibuyan Sea, the superbattleship *Musashi* was sunk and heavy cruiser *Myoko* was damaged and forced to turn back to Brunei. Additionally, superbattleship *Yamato*, battleships *Nagato* and *Haruna*, and a destroyer were all damaged but able to continue with the formation. Although the damage to Kurita's force was significant, it was much less than reported by returning American pilots. As happened frequently during the war, claims were

exaggerated, duplicated, not properly collated, and not evaluated in a timely manner.²⁵ In addition to the inaccurate reports, Halsey received word that Kurita's force had changed its course from easterly to westerly in the late afternoon. Halsey was convinced that Kurita's force had been effectively neutralized in its ability to pose a threat to the landing operation. He reported this overly optimistic assessment to Nimitz and MacArthur via message that evening.²⁶

Throughout the morning and early afternoon, the answer to the question of the whereabouts of the Japanese carriers had continued to elude the American commanders. Ozawa had reached a position northeast of Luzon by the morning of the twenty-fourth. His intent was to attract Halsey's attention and decoy the American carriers to the north. But, because of the air strikes from Luzon and the damage to *Princeton*, Sherman's task group, the one positioned closest to Ozawa's carriers, was unable to conduct effective searches to the north during most of the day. After receiving confirmation of the position of Sherman's task group, Ozawa launched the majority of his offensive power, sixty-two aircraft, at 1145. These aircraft were effectively intercepted by American fighters. The pilots reported that the Japanese attackers were configured with tailhooks used for carrier operations. The report of the tailhooks combined with the fact that the attackers' ingress axis was from seaward to the north instead of from Luzon to the east led the Americans to correctly determine that a Japanese carrier force was approaching from the north.²⁷

Halsey reacted to this news by disseminating a contingency plan to his subordinate commanders at 1512. It was a warning to prepare to form a new task force from elements of his command. This new task force was to include four battleships, two heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, and two destroyer divisions. All of these were to be

drawn from Task Groups 38.2 and 38.4. The new force would be designated Task Force 34 and be under the command of Lee, who, as Spruance's commander of the battleship force at the Philippine Sea, had filled a similar role four months earlier. Both King and Nimitz were addressees on the message for informational purposes, although Kinkaid, because he was not in Halsey's chain of command, was not.²⁸

According to Halsey, the intent of the message was to prepare his forces to engage the Japanese in a battle line "*if a surface engagement offered.*"²⁹ Later, after he had received the report that Kurita had turned to the east, Halsey followed this message with a short-range radio broadcast to Bogan and Davison: "If the enemy sorties [i.e., turns back to the east and attempts to transit the San Bernardino Strait] Task Force 34 will be formed when directed by me."³⁰ This, Halsey believed, confirmed the intent of his earlier message that Task Force 34 was strictly a contingency plan and was only to be formed on his order.³¹ These two communications regarding Task Force 34, first the message that was received by all the major naval commanders and then the radio broadcast that was only received by Bogan and Davison, combined with poor future communications and the divided naval chain of command, led Kinkaid to assume that Halsey had taken responsibility for defending San Bernardino Strait against Kurita's force. But, Halsey's attention was not focused on Kurita. He remained concerned with Ozawa as he awaited reports on the Japanese carriers' location.

The reports that Japanese carrier aircraft had attacked Sherman's task group completed the operational picture for Halsey and must have been a relief to him. He believed the Japanese carriers were the primary threat to continued American offensives in the Pacific and it was his duty to destroy them. Ozawa was finally able to reveal his

presence to the Americans with his attacks, so Halsey now knew the Japanese carrier force was nearby. But he still had no way of knowing that Ozawa's attack represented the bulk of the remainder of carrier aircraft and pilots in the Japanese Navy. Reynolds defends Halsey's concern about the Japanese carrier force because he could not have known "that Toyoda had used up his main air strength, including that of the carriers, in the Formosa air battle."³² Many other historians agree. According to Willmott, "there was no way the extent of Japanese weakness could have been discerned."³³ These analyses are fair to Halsey. There is no evidence that any American intelligence assets had determined how severely the Japanese carrier air force was depleted at the time. To Halsey and the other American commanders, a group of Japanese carriers was a significant threat that had to be honored. Because of the continuing Japanese air attacks on Sherman's task group during the early afternoon, an effective search for Ozawa's force was not conducted until late in the afternoon. By the time the Japanese carriers' location was confirmed, it was too late for Halsey to order a strike without having the aircraft return after dark.³⁴

As the battle progressed on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, the scenario developed to match information in a Japanese document that had been captured by Filipino guerillas on the island of Cebu the previous March. It had been disseminated to American intelligence analysts and commanders and had been read by Halsey and many of his staff. It indicated general Japanese defensive plans in the Pacific.³⁵ One of the options discussed a strategy that was the basis of Sho 1 as it was executed. The document read:

Bear in mind that the main objectives which must be destroyed are [the enemy's] transport convoys. Surface forces will make the transport convoy their primary objective, and will deliver a sudden attack. The carrier nucleus will try as far as possible to operate outside the limits of the area [and] attack the enemy striking force on the flank.³⁶

Because Halsey did not have accurate intelligence of the strength of the Japanese carrier air forces, his focus was on preventing the Japanese from implementing the second part of their strategy. In order to do this, he would have to defend against Japanese air strikes that outranged his own ability to strike back. His solution to this tactical problem was to close the range with the Japanese carrier force. Many analysts of the battle regard Halsey's decision to move his carrier force closer to Ozawa's as prudent. But most of them, to varying degrees, criticize him for leaving San Bernardino Strait completely unguarded while doing so.

Halsey's disregard for San Bernardino Strait was based on two beliefs. First, his primary concern was the Northern force because it was the Japanese carrier force. Second, he still believed his strikes had done significant damage to Kurita's force. Even when he received a message at 2026 that a search aircraft had sighted the Center Force steaming back to the east, Halsey believed it was not a significant threat. He explained in a dispatch to MacArthur and Nimitz the following day that he believed Kurita's force "had been so heavily damaged . . . that it could no longer be considered a serious menace to Seventh Fleet."³⁷ Halsey's concern about enemy carriers outranging or shuttle bombing him the next morning along with the lack of intelligence on their minimal remaining striking power combined to wrest his attention fully away from Kurita in the Sibuyan Sea. Much criticism has been directed at him for ignoring the potential threat of Kurita's remaining forces

At this stage in the battle, Halsey and Kinkaid were operating from almost completely different paradigms. Kinkaid's operations plan contained the assumption: "Any major enemy naval force approaching from the north will be intercepted and attacked by Third Fleet covering force."³⁸ Although the message that Kurita's Center Force had turned back to the east had been relayed to him, Kinkaid was concerned about the Japanese Southern Force headed for Leyte Gulf via Surigao Strait.³⁹ As he arrayed his forces to deal with this southern threat, the message he had read earlier regarding the formation of Task Force 34 and a series of assumptions and further communications difficulties led him to believe that Halsey would take responsibility for countering Kurita's advance. Instead, Halsey was about to take his entire force away from San Bernardino Strait and leave Kurita an open path to Leyte Gulf.

In his autobiography, Halsey recounts the decision-making process he used to determine that his best course was to take all units in his three remaining task groups north as well as ordering McCain's fourth task group to proceed toward the Japanese carriers. Sherman's search aircraft had reported sighting three Japanese carriers along with their escorts and had relayed their position. Halsey laid out three alternatives and the reasoning for his decision in his 1947 book:

1. *I could guard San Bernardino with my whole fleet and wait for the Northern Force to strike me.* Rejected. It yielded to the enemy the double initiative of his carriers and his fields on Luzon and would allow him to use them unmolested.

2. *I could guard San Bernardino with TF [Task Force] 34 while I struck the Northern Force with my carriers.* Rejected. Then enemy's potential surface and air strength forbade half-measures; if his shore-based planes joined his carrier planes, together they might inflict far more damage on my half-fleet separately than they could inflict on the fleet intact.

3. *I could leave San Bernardino unguarded and strike the Northern Force with my whole fleet.* Accepted. It preserved my fleet's integrity, it left the initiative to me, and it promised the greatest possibility of surprise. Even if Central Force meanwhile penetrated San Bernardino and headed for Leyte Gulf, it could hope only to harry the landing operation. It could not consolidate any advantage, because no transports accompanied it and no supply ships. It could merely hit and run.⁴⁰

After one initially asks whether these were actually the options considered by Halsey at the time of the battle, the first question that comes to mind is whether Halsey's assumptions were sound. For instance, if he had divided his force, would the parts have been as susceptible to Japanese attacks as he thought? Hindsight says no. But at the time Halsey did not know the strength of Japanese carrier- and land-based air. He had just lost a light carrier and was obviously concerned about keeping his antiaircraft protection concentrated around his carriers. The more important question, though, is whether he could have kept his force together and then moved it only far enough to the north to ensure his carrier aircraft could still strike Kurita's force if it became a threat. By moving a limited distance to the north, he could have decreased the risk of Japanese air attacks outranging his ability to strike back as well as diminishing the chances of any units of the Northern Force sneaking around him to the south. Additionally, he would have been closer to San Bernardino Strait to guard against the Center Force. It seems Halsey did not consider this an option.

This was the point in the battle where Halsey most needed the expertise of his experienced carrier force and carrier group commanders. But he had already begun to bypass Mitscher when giving orders directly to task group commanders earlier in the day. Because Third Fleet had been stripped of its amphibious units, Mitscher's and Halsey's roles were very redundant; Task Force 38 was the only task force in Third Fleet at the

time.⁴¹ Halsey did issue the orders to proceed north via Mitscher and gave him responsibility for the movement and attack. But, Halsey did not get Mitscher's input on the decision to take the entire task force well away from San Bernardino Strait. He continued to neglect to solicit advice from his commanders throughout the evening. Many of his subordinates were surprised when they received his orders to proceed north. Mitscher's chief of staff, Burke, and operations officer, Cdr. James Flatley, both tried to convince him to advise Halsey to provide some guard against Kurita at San Bernardino Strait. Mitscher did not make his thoughts known to Halsey, replying to Flatley when pressed: "If he wants my advice he'll ask for it."⁴² Additionally, Bogan and Lee attempted to communicate their concerns about the possibility of Kurita's force becoming a factor. These concerns were not properly routed by Halsey's staff officers. Halsey's aggressive leadership style seemed to facilitate exclusion of many inputs from his staff and subordinates at this time of the battle. Therefore, he was unaware of the amount of dissension among his subordinate commanders regarding his decision to leave San Bernardino Strait unguarded.⁴³ But it seems unlikely these issues would have changed Halsey's mind because they were not based on any new intelligence and Halsey remained focused on the enemy carrier force as his primary objective.

While Third Fleet steamed toward the Japanese carriers, Kinkaid continued to assume that Halsey was protecting the approaches to Leyte Gulf from the north. Halsey had informed Kinkaid via message of his intentions as Third Fleet was beginning to form up for its move north. But this message only led to further confusion between the commanders. Because Kinkaid had misinterpreted Halsey's warning order regarding Task Force 34 as an action order, he believed there were now four major elements of

Third Fleet off the coast of the Philippines, three carrier groups and one battleship force. Halsey's message stated that he was proceeding north "with three groups" to attack the Japanese carriers.⁴⁴ Kinkaid assumed that meant that Task Force 34 was left with the mission of guarding the Strait.⁴⁵ This assumption would finally be refuted the next morning, but not before Kurita was already engaging Taffy 3 off the coast of Samar.

As Halsey steamed north in pursuit of Ozawa, Kinkaid was focused on the Southern Force that had been sighted earlier in the Sulu Sea. Early in the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, after he had received reports of the Southern Force and had determined that it was headed toward Surigao Strait, Kinkaid issued orders to block the northern exit of the strait in order to guard Leyte Gulf. Because he believed Halsey was guarding against any threat from the north, Kinkaid directed Oldendorf to take his entire Bombardment and Fire Support Group to Surigao Strait. Its mission until this point in the operation had been to provide fire support for the landing forces. Its new mission would result in the Battle of the Surigao Strait, the last battle in history between opposing groups of battleships within visual range.⁴⁶

Oldendorf arrayed his task group in a manner to facilitate the greatest advantage. Four of his six battleships were veterans of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and had since been repaired. With this battle line, he was able to "Cross the T" of Nishimura's Southern Force van, which included two battleships, a heavy cruiser, and four destroyers. This maneuver maximized American firepower via full broadsides while the Japanese ships' rear guns were masked from acquiring targets. Crossing, or capping, the T was the tactic that Togo had used so effectively against the Russian fleet at Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War and that Jellicoe had employed at Jutland against the German fleet

during World War I. With his battleships supported by patrol boats, destroyers, and cruisers, Oldendorf soundly defeated Nishimura between the hours of 0300 and 0500. Only one ship of Nishimura's entire force, destroyer *Shigure*, survived the battle.⁴⁷

Shima's portion of the Southern Force had trailed approximately forty miles behind Nishimura's formation as the battle commenced. Shima decided to withdraw his rear force upon reaching the Surigao Strait, making contact with Oldendorf, seeing the destruction that had befallen Nishimura's heavily outnumbered van force, coming under air attack by US aircraft from the escort carriers, and failing to make radio contact with Kurita.⁴⁸ Because Kinkaid was unaware that his northern flank was unguarded, Oldendorf was not required to return to Leyte Gulf. Instead, Oldendorf continued to pursue Shima south and then east, back toward the Sulu Sea. This pursuit phase of the battle lasted approximately three hours, until 0732, when a message was received that Taffy 3 was under attack.⁴⁹

While Oldendorf pursued Shima toward the Sulu Sea, Kinkaid's attention was still on the Southern Force and Halsey's was on the Northern Force. As Kurita steamed through San Bernardino Strait and out into the Pacific shortly after midnight on the morning of the twenty-fifth, he fully expected to have a fight on his hands. Surprisingly, he was able to proceed unhindered east and then south along the coast of Samar, ever closer to his objective at Leyte Gulf. Neither US fleet commander had taken any effective action since the previous evening to guard against his approach. Of the two commanders, though, Kinkaid had shown the most concern. As part of Seventh Fleet's routine search plan, PBY patrol aircraft flew to the north from Leyte Gulf late in the evening of the twenty-fourth, but failed to locate Kurita's force during its approach to San Bernardino

Strait.⁵⁰ Additionally, he ordered his escort carriers to launch early morning searches, one of them to the north. But none of these searches were ordered with a sense of urgency because Kinkaid's misunderstanding of the message from Halsey regarding Task Force 34 the previous afternoon left him no cause for concern about the Center Force. Kinkaid ordered no additional searches the remainder of the evening because he believed Halsey had left a line of battleships and supporting units guarding the Strait.⁵¹

To the north, Halsey was also not concerned with the Center Force. Although he had received the report that it had turned back to the east in the late afternoon, Halsey assumed Kinkaid had his scout planes monitoring its every movement and that Seventh Fleet units would have time to prevent it from becoming a menace to the transports in Leyte Gulf. Even after receiving a report from a night scouting aircraft from light carrier *Independence* that the Center Force was farther east than at any previous time and clearly headed toward San Bernardino Strait, Halsey continued north. More importantly, he failed to verify that Kinkaid was aware of the approaching threat.⁵² Halsey and his staff thought it highly unlikely that the Center Force would make it past air attacks from Seventh Fleet's escort carrier units as well as recently arrived US aircraft based ashore at the newly captured Tacloban airfield on Leyte. If this was not enough, the Center Force, which they believed had been heavily damaged by the previous day's action in the Sibuyan Sea, would then have to make it past the guns and torpedoes of Oldendorf's battleships, cruisers, and destroyers that they believed would have time to return from the defense of Surigao Strait.⁵³

Halsey and his staff made these assumptions about Kinkaid's priorities and never verified them. The Taffys' primary role as escort carrier units was to provide close air

support to the landing forces ashore.⁵⁴ Halsey's belief that Kinkaid had shifted their responsibility to provide air cover for the landing forces undoubtedly rested on his belief that his communication stating that he was "proceeding north with three groups to attack enemy carrier force at dawn" was clearly understood by Kinkaid.⁵⁵ Kinkaid had not understood "three groups" to mean all of the remaining units of Third Fleet, but rather all units except for Task Force 34. This failure in communication and coordination between Halsey and Kinkaid was the most important factor in the determination of the outcome of the Battle of Leyte Gulf. But it was by no means the only communications failure. Because neither Halsey nor Kinkaid had insisted on a streamlined communications system to allow them to coordinate efficiently and effectively during the operation, a series of messages between them failed to restore either one's situational awareness of what was happening off the coast of Samar until Taffy 3 was under attack.

The escort carrier group had launched patrol and search aircraft by 0627. Shortly after, escort carrier *Fanshaw Bay* reported unidentified surface contacts to the north as well as interception of radio broadcasts in Japanese. At 0647, a radio call from an aircraft from escort carrier *Kadashan Bay* reported sighting four Japanese battleships, eight cruisers, as well as multiple destroyers, which fired upon him. The pilot attacked one of the cruisers. C. A. F. Sprague, commander of Task Unit 77.4.3 (Taffy 3), asked for confirmation of the report. He believed, along with the rest of his fellow commanders in Task Group 77.4, that Task Force 34 was guarding against the approach of Kurita's force from the north; the pilot must have mistaken some of Halsey's ships as the enemy. Several minutes later, his lookouts confirmed sighting Japanese masts on the horizon as shells began to splash nearby. The Battle off Samar had begun.⁵⁶

Taffy 3 was taken by complete and utter surprise. But, because of the valiant efforts and initiative of the crews, pilots, and commanders, as well as a fortunate rain squall that masked its movement temporarily, the small unit of escort carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts was able to maneuver away from the large guns of Kurita's battleships. Sprague's aircraft and ships fought against overwhelming odds as the other two Taffy units of Task Group 77.4 closed and began to provide support. The Americans lost two destroyers, a destroyer escort, and an escort carrier during the running battle. The engagement continued until 0911, when Kurita ordered his force to break off pursuit and turn north in order to re-establish his formation. Later, after circling for three hours to the northwest of Leyte Gulf, he made the final decision to proceed back to San Bernardino Strait.⁵⁷ C. A. F. Sprague could not believe his task unit had been spared. He later recalled, "I could not believe my eyes. It took a whole series of reports from circling planes to convince me."⁵⁸

Kurita made this decision with his battleships only a short distance from his objective at Leyte Gulf. Although he had lost three heavy cruisers during the battle, his decision to halt his advance is difficult to understand. Only Halsey's decision to leave San Bernardino Strait has received more criticism. But Kurita's actions are more questionable than Halsey's. His decision to turn north seems to completely contradict his mission, which was viewed by the Japanese as a last-ditch effort to stop the American advance into their inner defenses. After the war, Kurita never provided a full account of the thinking behind his decision. Numerous analyses have pointed to multiple different possibilities. Exhaustion, confusion, concern with continued air attacks, and lack of fuel

and ammunition are some of the factors historians have discussed to explain Kurita's decision.⁵⁹

Although he failed to accomplish his mission and lost two more destroyers and a light cruiser during his withdrawal, Kurita did manage to return to Brunei with his force damaged but relatively intact. His battleships would remain a threat to further US advances as the war continued.⁶⁰ Regardless of the reason for Kurita's decision to withdraw, its ramifications were great. The monumental American blunder of allowing the Center Force to reach the approaches to Leyte Gulf in the face of overwhelming odds was negated when Kurita broke contact with Taffy 3 and then withdrew. The American transports in Leyte Gulf and forces ashore on the island remained safe from all but air attacks by the Japanese. At the time of Kurita's fateful turn away from Taffy 3, Halsey was struggling to decide what to do about a series of messages he had received regarding the action off Samar.⁶¹ These messages, between Halsey and Kinkaid and then from Nimitz to Halsey, demonstrated the futility of the divided US naval command structure and its complementary poor communications system.

Earlier in the morning, Task Force 38's night search aircraft from *Independence* had reported radar contact with Ozawa's force which was separated into two sections. Because the Japanese force was reported as only approximately 100 miles away, Mitscher recommended execution of the earlier battle plan for formation of Task Force 34 in order to provide a screen for the US carriers. Halsey concurred and issued the order to divide Third Fleet into two separate task forces.⁶² Task Force 34 consisted of all six battleships and all seven cruisers (two more battleships and two more cruisers than originally planned). This was the battle line under Lee's command. It proceeded ahead of

Task Force 38, now stripped of much of its organic antiaircraft capability, which consisted of ten fleet and light carriers and twenty-two destroyers under Mitscher.

Over sixty American ships and hundreds of aircraft were preparing to attack Ozawa's much smaller Northern Force. Fewer than thirty aircraft remained aboard Ozawa's one fleet and three light carriers. McCain's task group, when it finished refueling at sea, was to continue closing on Ozawa's position as well, thus increasing the favorable odds for Halsey. Ozawa's decoy gambit had worked perfectly. But unfortunately for the Japanese, communications problems prevented Kurita and his staff from knowing they were safe from attack from the US fast carrier force when they were fighting the battle off Samar.⁶³

Halsey, aboard his flagship, battleship *New Jersey*, sent a message to King, Nimitz, MacArthur, and Kinkaid that notified them that he had made contact with the Northern Force. But he again used the vague wording, "three groups." Thus everyone outside of Third Fleet continued to believe Task Force 34 was guarding San Bernardino Strait.⁶⁴ At dawn, Mitscher ordered reconnaissance flights launched to the north followed immediately by a 180-plane strike force and defensive combat air patrols. Halsey watched the strike force proceed north and then began to realize the reports he had received earlier in the morning had been inaccurate. The Japanese carriers were farther north than had been reported.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, he received the first of several messages from Seventh Fleet. At 0412, Kinkaid had sent Halsey a message stating that he "was engaging enemy surface force [in] Surigao Strait."⁶⁶

At the suggestion of his operations officer, Capt. Richard H. Cruzen, Kinkaid included the question, "Is TF 34 guarding San Bernardino Strait?" The suggestion was

made after Kinkaid had asked his staff “to check for errors of commission or of omission” while they monitored Oldendorf’s successful defense of Surigao Strait. Cruzen had made the suggestion after he realized that no one had ever specifically confirmed the location of Task Force 34. Reynolds makes an interesting and valid point regarding this message. To him it demonstrates that Kinkaid and his staff “gave very little credence to the possibility of a Japanese fleet transit of San Bernardino Strait.”⁶⁷ Even if they assumed Halsey would guard their northern flank, a prudent commander and his staff would not fail to monitor a situation that was so close geographically and where the outcome would have such a large effect on their own operations.

Halsey did not receive Kinkaid’s message until 0648. It was sent by the Seventh Fleet command ship *Wasatch*, which had a powerful transmitter, and would have been received directly aboard *New Jersey* had the operation’s communications plan assigned the two fleets a common coordination frequency. Instead, the message had to be copied at the naval communications facility on Manus Island, over 1,500 miles away, and then be retransmitted on Third Fleet’s frequency after a long administrative delay. Halsey responded, “Negative. Task Force 34 is with carrier groups now engaging enemy carrier force.”⁶⁸ Kinkaid was obviously shocked with disbelief. Halsey then read another message from Kinkaid about Oldendorf pursuing the Southern Force, which had been transmitted before the Seventh Fleet commander had received Halsey’s reply to his query about Task Force 34. Following this message, Halsey became the recipient of a series of increasingly frantic transmissions regarding the action off Samar. The feeling of desperation in Seventh Fleet at this time is demonstrated by log entries of Capt. Ray D. Tarbuck, a planning officer on MacArthur’s staff and later chief of staff to Vice Adm.

Daniel E. Barbey, commander of the Seventh Amphibious Force. Two of Tarbuck's entries from the section marked 0900, 25 Oct 44 read:

People here felt that Halsey's Third Fleet battleships are chasing a secondary force, leaving us at the mercy--of which there is none--of the enemy's main body.

If our analysis is faulty it is because we are the ones who are trapped in Leyte Gulf. As soon as the Jap finishes off our defenseless CVEs we're next, and I mean today."⁶⁹

The first message about the fighting off Samar that Halsey received was a plain-language voice transmission from C. A. F. Sprague stating that his group was engaged with enemy battleships. Halsey showed little alarm because he assumed Kinkaid was shifting Oldendorf's forces to assist the escort carriers. Halsey was surprised that Sprague had been unaware of the approaching Center Force. The next message, received just after 0800, was from Kinkaid. It requested that Halsey's battleships proceed to Leyte Gulf. Instead of turning his battleships south, Halsey ordered McCain to strike the Japanese force northeast of Leyte Gulf and notified Kinkaid of this action. Then, after receiving reports of his air strike group's initial success against Ozawa's force, including the sinking of a carrier, Halsey ordered Task Force 34 to pursue the Japanese carrier force. At 0900 and 0922 two more messages from Kinkaid arrived, requesting both Halsey's battleships and carrier aircraft come to the assistance of Taffy 3. The second mentioned Oldendorf's ships being low on ammunition. Increasingly frustrated with his predicament, Halsey informed Kinkaid of Third Fleet's position, over 400 miles from Leyte Gulf, in an attempt to make Kinkaid understand his inability to respond to his requests.⁷⁰ Then, after one more desperate request from Kinkaid to help prevent Kurita's force from reaching Leyte Gulf, Halsey received a message that, in his autobiography, he said made him feel "as stunned as if I had been struck in the face."⁷¹

This final message read, “WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK FORCE THIRTY-FOUR RR THE WORLD WONDERS.”⁷² It was from Nimitz, who had been monitoring many of the recent transmissions from Kinkaid. The final portion of the message, “THE WORLD WONDERS,” was padding, extra words used to confuse enemy code-breakers. The padding at the beginning of the message, “TURKEY TROTS TO WATER,” was removed by Halsey’s communications staff before they gave him the message.⁷³ But, because the padding after the message seemed that it might actually be part of the message even though it was separated by the standard double consonant, they left it in. Not accustomed to seeing padding on the message copies he received, Halsey read the message with the sarcastic tone the padding unintentionally implied. Nimitz’s intent when he sent the message had been to both confirm that Task Force 34 was indeed not guarding San Bernardino Strait and to inform Halsey that he believed it ought to be farther south.⁷⁴ Halsey took the message as the equivalent of an order from Nimitz. After nearly an hour of consideration, he ordered Task Force 34 and Task Group 38.2 to turn south. Halsey left the remaining two carrier task groups under Mitscher’s command to continue the pursuit of Ozawa’s carriers as he proceeded south with Task Force 34.⁷⁵

Mitscher continued to press the attack on Ozawa in what would become known as the Battle of Cape Engaño and sunk all remaining Japanese carriers.⁷⁶ Halsey said he had been forced to turn “my back on the opportunity I had dreamed of since my days as a cadet.”⁷⁷ Although four aircraft carriers was the highest number sunk in a single day in the history of naval warfare and the Northern Force also lost two destroyers and a cruiser, the victory rang hollow for Halsey.⁷⁸ He believed his turn to the south, which became known as “the Battle of Bull’s Run,” was his major mistake. He never admitted his

decision to turn north on the evening of the twenty-fourth was a mistake, even after enough information was available for him to realize Ozawa's force had been a decoy. He rejected every piece of evidence that it had indeed been little more than bait for him.⁷⁹

The remainder of the battle included Japanese kamikaze aircraft conducting suicide attacks against the US forces off Samar. Escort carrier *St. Lo* was sunk.⁸⁰

McCain's aircraft struck the Center Force as it sped toward San Bernardino Strait, but Task Force 34 arrived too late to block Kurita's exit. He escaped back to Brunei. During his withdrawal, only a single destroyer, left behind to pick up survivors, was sunk.⁸¹

Halsey radioed Nimitz the evening of the twenty-fifth: "It can be announced with assurance that the Japanese navy has been beaten, routed, and broken by the Third and Seventh fleets."⁸² Halsey's report was accurate. The Japanese had lost 306,000 tons of combatants. Compared to the American loss of 37,000 tons, the victory was overwhelming. The Japanese Navy had effectively been eliminated as a serious threat to further US advances. The kamikaze would be the Japanese weapon of choice when countering further US advances for the remainder of the war.⁸³ Given the odds at the beginning of the battle, one would have expected a crushing American victory. One would not have expected a Japanese force to have come so close to achieving a tactical victory as Kurita's did. Halsey's decision to proceed north is widely regarded as the primary factor in the lapse in American defenses. But after reviewing the course of the battle, and specifically the failures of Halsey and Kinkaid to coordinate their actions, it becomes apparent that the key to understanding why Kurita was so nearly successful against steep odds was the flaw in the US naval command structure.

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- ²Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; reprint Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger, 1978), 261 (page citations are to the reprint edition).
- ³Carl Solberg, *Decision and Dissent; With Halsey at Leyte Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 68.
- ⁴Stanley L. Falk, *Decision at Leyte* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 132-33.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, 136.
- ⁶H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 93-95.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 93.
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹Daniel E. Barbey, *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy: Seventh Amphibious Force Operations, 1943-1945* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1969), 236.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 269.
- ¹¹*Ibid.* "X" was used to indicate a break between phrases in military messages.
- ¹²Geoffrey Perrett, *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life and Legend of Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Random House, 1996), 410-11.
- ¹³James John Tritten, *Naval Doctrine . . . From the Sea* (Norfolk, VA: Naval Doctrine Command, 1994), 1-2.
- ¹⁴Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 72-73.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 76.
- ¹⁶Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two Ocean War, A Short History of the US Navy in the Second World War* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1963), 439-40.
- ¹⁷Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 104.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, 95.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

- ²¹Ibid., 107-108.
- ²²Ibid., 108-109.
- ²³Ibid., 106-107 and Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 291.
- ²⁴Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 110.
- ²⁵Ibid., 112-13, and Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 291-92.
- ²⁶Kenneth I. Friedman, *Afternoon of the Rising Sun: The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 2001), 134-35.
- ²⁷Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 111-12.
- ²⁸Ibid., 121.
- ²⁹William F. Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 214.
- ³⁰Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 121.
- ³¹Halsey and Bryan, 214.
- ³²Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 261.
- ³³Ibid., 120.
- ³⁴Ibid., 121.
- ³⁵Solberg, 120-22.
- ³⁶Ibid., 124.
- ³⁷Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 12, *Leyte: June 1944 – January 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 193.
- ³⁸Morison, *Leyte*, 193.
- ³⁹Ibid., 199.
- ⁴⁰Halsey and Bryan, 216-17.
- ⁴¹Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 106.
- ⁴²Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 270.
- ⁴³Morison, *Leyte*, 195.

- ⁴⁴Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 126.
- ⁴⁵Ibid.
- ⁴⁶Falk, 155.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., 155-64.
- ⁴⁸Ibid.
- ⁴⁹Morison, *Leyte*, 234-37.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., 171.
- ⁵¹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 293.
- ⁵²Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 244-45.
- ⁵³Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 295-96.
- ⁵⁴Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 244.
- ⁵⁵Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 296.
- ⁵⁶Morison, *Leyte*, 244.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., 247-97.
- ⁵⁸Falk, 188.
- ⁵⁹Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 182-92.
- ⁶⁰Falk, 193.
- ⁶¹Ibid., 201.
- ⁶²Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 299.
- ⁶³Falk, 196-97.
- ⁶⁴Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 300.
- ⁶⁵Ibid.
- ⁶⁶Falk, 172.
- ⁶⁷Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 272.

- ⁶⁸Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 300-301.
- ⁶⁹Barbey, 255.
- ⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 302-303.
- ⁷¹Halsey and Bryan, 220.
- ⁷²E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 339.
- ⁷³*Ibid.*
- ⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 339-40.
- ⁷⁵Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 304.
- ⁷⁶Reynolds, *Fast Carriers*, 157.
- ⁷⁷Halsey and Bryan, 221.
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- ⁷⁹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 304.
- ⁸⁰David Sears, *The Last Epic Naval Battle: Voices from Leyte Gulf* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 154.
- ⁸¹Potter, *Bull Halsey*, 304.
- ⁸²*Ibid.*, 306.
- ⁸³*Ibid.*, 305-306.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

According to Willmott, history is “concerned with what happened, not with what did not happen or with what might have happened.”¹ Whenever analyzing a battle such as Leyte Gulf, one is ever tempted to ask what would have happened had different decisions been made. The better questions to ask are why those decisions were made and why events occurred the way they did. Why did Kurita’s Center Force surprise Taffy 3 off Samar on the morning of 25 October 1944? The best answer is because the American naval command structure was severely flawed. Because it was flawed, it fostered a disunity of command. This was no secret, especially to several of the American commanders. MacArthur, the commander of the entire operation, stated:

I have never ascribed the unfortunate incidents of this naval battle to faulty judgment on the part of any of the commanders involved. The near disaster can be placed squarely at the door of Washington. In the naval action, two key American commanders were independent of each other, one under me, and the other under Admiral Nimitz 5,000 miles away, both operating in the same waters and in the same battle.²

When he overheard Southwest Pacific Area staff officers criticizing Halsey after the battle, MacArthur defended him: “That’s enough. Leave the Bull [Halsey] alone. He’s still a fighting Admiral in my book.”³ That a senior Army commander would come to the defense of the man who failed to provide cover for the landing forces at a key moment of the operation speaks volumes. In these two statements, MacArthur was saying that although Halsey may deserve some blame for deficiencies in how the naval forces were maneuvered during the battle, the fundamental problem was the chain of command.

In his autobiography, Halsey made a statement similar to MacArthur's regarding the chain of command at Leyte Gulf:

although our naval power in the western Pacific was such that we could have challenged the combined fleets of the world, the fact that it was not coordinated under any single authority was an invitation which disaster nearly accepted.⁴

Interestingly, Kinkaid disagreed with Halsey regarding the importance of deficiencies in the chain of command. After the war he explained his understanding of the reasons for American errors made at Leyte Gulf:

What mistakes were made during the battle were *not* due to lack of plans. Any errors made were errors of judgment, not errors of organization. The two areas coming together--the Central Pacific and the Southwest Pacific--posed a difficult problem of command, but one head would not have altered things.⁵

Although Kinkaid's analysis of what happened stressed problems with judgments made during the battle, specifically Halsey's,⁶ his identification of a "difficult problem" of command organization leads one to believe that Kinkaid felt that the divided command did indeed have some effect on allowing Kurita to come so close to success.

In addition to the hundreds of transports in Leyte Gulf, Kurita would have likely encountered a group of seventy-five amphibious ships enroute to Leyte from Hollandia in New Guinea if he had continued his advance.⁷ The likely effects of the Center Force breaking into Leyte Gulf are widely disputed by different historians. Willmott believes it would have only been a "strategic hiccup" with no major ramifications on the timeline of the continued American advance. But he also mentions the possibility of political ramifications, specifically the question of the Japanese being able to negotiate surrender on more favorable terms.⁸ At the other end of the spectrum is Morison who, in his account of the battle, states that had the Sho-Go plan worked that MacArthur's landing

forces would have been cut off with Third Fleet unable to protect its lines of communications.⁹

Although these different analyses are intriguing, they are not relevant to what happened during the battle. What is relevant is how and why the commanders on the different sides made command decisions at Leyte Gulf. While there were many errors and failures of coordination and communication by the Japanese, the battle highlighted severe problems with the US chain of command. Halsey's order for Third Fleet to proceed north in its entirety on the evening of the twenty-fourth, along with the events leading up to and resulting from his decision, demonstrate that his and Kinkaid's fleets were operating so close in function and geography that their actions needed to be better coordinated. On the face of it, Halsey's decision to go north with all his ships seems to have been a reasonable tactical as well as strategic decision. Several factors made it so.

First, Halsey's orders from Nimitz made destruction of the Japanese fleet his primary mission if the opportunity arose during the course of the battle. For Halsey and most other naval commanders who had fought in the Pacific and had seen the striking power of carrier forces demonstrated time and again, the Japanese fleet was synonymous with the Japanese carrier force. Both the Japanese and the American navies had relegated their former capital ships, their battleships, to a supporting role by 1944. Carriers had become the new capital ships because they had demonstrated the most offensive striking power. The US intelligence system did not inform Halsey of the weakness of Ozawa's carriers. The US submarines' surveillance had been poorly coordinated and the Japanese Northern Force sailed out of the Inland Sea without any American knowledge about its composition or location. By the time this force showed itself, Halsey had lost a carrier to

enemy air strikes. His decision to honor the Japanese carriers as the most significant threat to the Leyte landings was sound.

Second, Halsey's decision to go north demonstrated sound carrier force tactics. The standards for employment of carriers evolved during the war. At the time of Leyte Gulf, the doctrine had matured to include several central tenets. The two most important were offensive mobility and concentration of forces for mutual defense against air attack. Halsey considered both on the evening of the twenty-fourth. He knew he needed to use his fleet's mobility to close the range to the Northern Force. He also knew that dividing his force would weaken its defensive firepower and leave it more vulnerable to attack. Although military doctrine should never be considered dogmatic, commanders who violate its central principles without good reason have opened themselves to criticism and reprimand. At Leyte Gulf, Halsey accepted overly optimistic reports of damage to Kurita's force in the Sibuyan Sea and assumed Kinkaid would protect the northern approaches to Leyte Gulf. Therefore, he had no need to violate doctrinal principles when contemplating his next move after receiving the location of Ozawa's carriers.

The third and final reason Halsey's decision was justified given his knowledge of the situation is strategic. The Japanese carrier force represented the primary threat to further US advances in the Pacific. There was a discernable sense of disappointment in the Navy after the Battle of the Philippine Sea when Spruance's decision to not proceed west on 18 June 1944 had allowed the bulk of the Japanese carrier force to escape destruction. The term "fleet in being" is used to describe an inferior fleet that is able to execute offensive tactical operations even though it is in a strategically defensive position. If the inferior fleet has sufficient striking power to interfere with enemy

operations, then its mere existence makes it a factor in the course of the war.¹⁰ In October 1944, the Japanese carrier force filled this fleet in being role. Halsey, as well as the other American Navy commanders, knew that its destruction would likely speed the end of the war. Thus Japanese carrier forces were both a tactical and a strategic target. The need to destroy the Japanese carriers competed with the need to ensure protection of the amphibious landings on Leyte. This competition between two important priorities combined with the divided chain of command. The resultant confusion of responsibilities and priorities effectively uncovered San Bernardino Strait and the waters northeast of Samar and allowed Kurita to nearly reach his objective.

So with considerations of mission, intelligence, tactics, and strategy, Halsey's decision was sound. But in hindsight it was a flawed decision. Unprotected American transports in Leyte Gulf were exactly what Ozawa's force was intended to produce. In his autobiography, Halsey justified his decision to proceed north when he wrote, "It was not my job to protect the Seventh Fleet."¹¹ Halsey never came to terms with the fact that Ozawa's was an empty shell of a carrier force, devoid of striking power. Until his death, he rejected all evidence that Ozawa's intent had been to decoy Third Fleet to the north.¹² Therefore, he never discussed how he would have dealt with the situation had he had better intelligence or intuition about the actual situation facing him on the evening of the twenty-fourth. But regardless of what he would have done, the fact remains that the American Navy, which was so vastly superior in quantity and quality compared to the Japanese in 1944, nearly suffered an embarrassing setback.

The only way to comprehend the situation at Leyte Gulf is to go beyond the two fleet commanders, Kinkaid and Halsey, and look at the overall US command structure.

The naval chain of command at Leyte Gulf was a microcosm of what existed across the Pacific theater. The two areas, MacArthur's and Nimitz's, had two separate operational fleets. Although Nimitz was responsible for administration of the naval forces in both areas, he did not control the operations of Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet. MacArthur was Kinkaid's superior. Naval operations in the Southwest Pacific Area were therefore subordinate to MacArthur with the exception of Halsey's Third Fleet. Halsey, although operating in the Southwest Pacific Area, still reported to Nimitz. Earlier in the war, difficulties with the divided chain of command in the Pacific became apparent when operations straddled the boundary between the two areas during the Guadalcanal campaign and then later during operations in the Solomons. But the problems were managed relatively well through coordination. When the two arms of the dual advance across the Pacific converged at Leyte, the need to integrate the two separate commands became critical. After the battle, it was apparent that one naval commander exercising authority over both fleets would have allowed better execution of the missions of the naval forces.

The principle of unity of command was clearly violated at Leyte Gulf. This happened for no better reason than the leadership of both the Army and the Navy being unwilling to cooperate and make sacrifices that might affect specific services for the good of the war effort. Reynolds's observation that "Halsey had no direct, automatic communications link with MacArthur and Kinkaid" is particularly germane regarding this point.¹³ If the parochial concerns of the services dictated a division of naval command between two fleets for the operation, then the negative ramifications could have been somewhat mitigated through close coordination and communication. But no one,

including MacArthur, King, Nimitz, Halsey, or Kinkaid, ensured that this happened.

Reynolds accurately describes the system where:

every message between the two fleets had to be specially routed, with copies not going automatically to interested parties along any distribution list or chain of command. Such an inefficient system created communications delays, lack of information, misunderstandings, and occasional mistakes.¹⁴

This was the result of a fundamentally flawed system that made it difficult to achieve unity of effort among the separate services. Again, Reynolds's summary is accurate:

There could be no unity of command in the Pacific, for Nimitz would never trust MacArthur with fast carriers that might be carelessly exposed or sacrificed, and MacArthur insisted that such a large-scale operation as Leyte was strictly Army business. This system--or lack of it--invited confusion and possible disaster.¹⁵

The Army and Navy commanders in the Pacific, whose names are so well known and who have been so honored as the architects of American victory over Japan, failed to ensure that one of the basic tenets of warfare, unity of effort, was achieved. One of the problems that allowed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to succeed was disunity of effort between the Navy and the Army. Nearly three years later, at Leyte Gulf, similar problems with disunity of effort were apparent. Senior commanders in the Army and the Navy did not implement an effective chain of command.

Nimitz, when monitoring the battle from Pearl Harbor, had decided that Halsey had erred in proceeding north with his entire fleet. His message to Halsey asking the location of Task Force 34 was the result of his realization that extraordinary circumstances dictated that he needed to interfere with Halsey's authority as tactical commander.¹⁶ Nimitz believed Halsey had not effectively employed his fleet. But Halsey's decisions were undoubtedly influenced by both Nimitz's orders to destroy the Japanese fleet and the lack of coordination between Third and Seventh Fleets. The flawed

command structure and communications plan that facilitated the poor coordination were partly Nimitz's responsibility. While much of the historical analysis of the battle focuses on Halsey and why his decision demonstrated poor situational awareness and tactical understanding, little has focused on Nimitz or King and their roles in the outcome of the battle.

Nimitz's son, Lt. Cmdr. Chester W. "Chet" Nimitz Jr., a submarine commander who was in Pearl Harbor on the twenty-fifth visiting his father, drew attention to the flawed chain of command at Leyte Gulf when he told his father that the near disaster off Samar had been a direct result of the way Halsey's orders had been written. This comment was dismissed by Nimitz. Although King and Nimitz both immediately defended Halsey in public after the battle, they each expressed their dissatisfaction with his performance. In a classified letter, Nimitz criticized Halsey for leaving San Bernardino Strait unguarded. In his autobiography, King criticized both Halsey and Kinkaid for their actions.¹⁷ So Nimitz and King, Kinkaid's and Halsey's superiors, who shared responsibility for the Pacific theater and Leyte operation command structures, focused on tactical decision-making as the problem at Leyte Gulf. Their analysis of the battle was short-sighted. The primary factor that affected the outcome of the battle was the divided chain of command, a problem that they had responsibility to correct.

Regardless of whether he would have reported directly to MacArthur or to Nimitz, if there had been one naval commander with authority to direct the movements of both fleets at Leyte Gulf, many problems would have likely been avoided. Napoleon once wrote, "One bad general would be better than two good ones."¹⁸ The two fleet commanders at Leyte Gulf had responsibility and authority in the same geographic area

for similar functions and missions. They made assumptions about each other's intentions as well as the enemy's. In the confusion of battle, with poor communications and coordination, the unfounded and unverified assumptions nearly led to disaster for the US Navy. A vastly inferior Japanese force nearly achieved a tactical victory because the American chain of command was not unified. Napoleon's statement was validated by what happened at Leyte Gulf.

¹H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 171.

²Douglas A. MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 230.

³Geoffrey Perrett, *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Random House, 1996), 428.

⁴William F. Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 227.

⁵Hanson W. Baldwin, *Sea Fights and Shipwrecks* (New York: Hanover House, 1955), 163.

⁶*Ibid.*, 165-174.

⁷Daniel E. Barbey, *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy: Seventh Amphibious Force Operations, 1943-1945* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1969), 270.

⁸Willmott, *Battle of Leyte Gulf*, 241-42.

⁹Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 12, *Leyte: June 1944 – January 1945* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1963), 337.

¹⁰Clark G. Reynolds, *Navies in History* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 62.

¹¹Halsey and Bryan, 219.

¹²E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 342.

¹³Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; reprint Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger, 1978), 256 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Potter, *Nimitz*, 339.

¹⁷Ibid., 343-45.

¹⁸Peter Paret, “Napoleon and the Revolution in War,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 130.

APPENDIX A

ILLUSTRATIONS

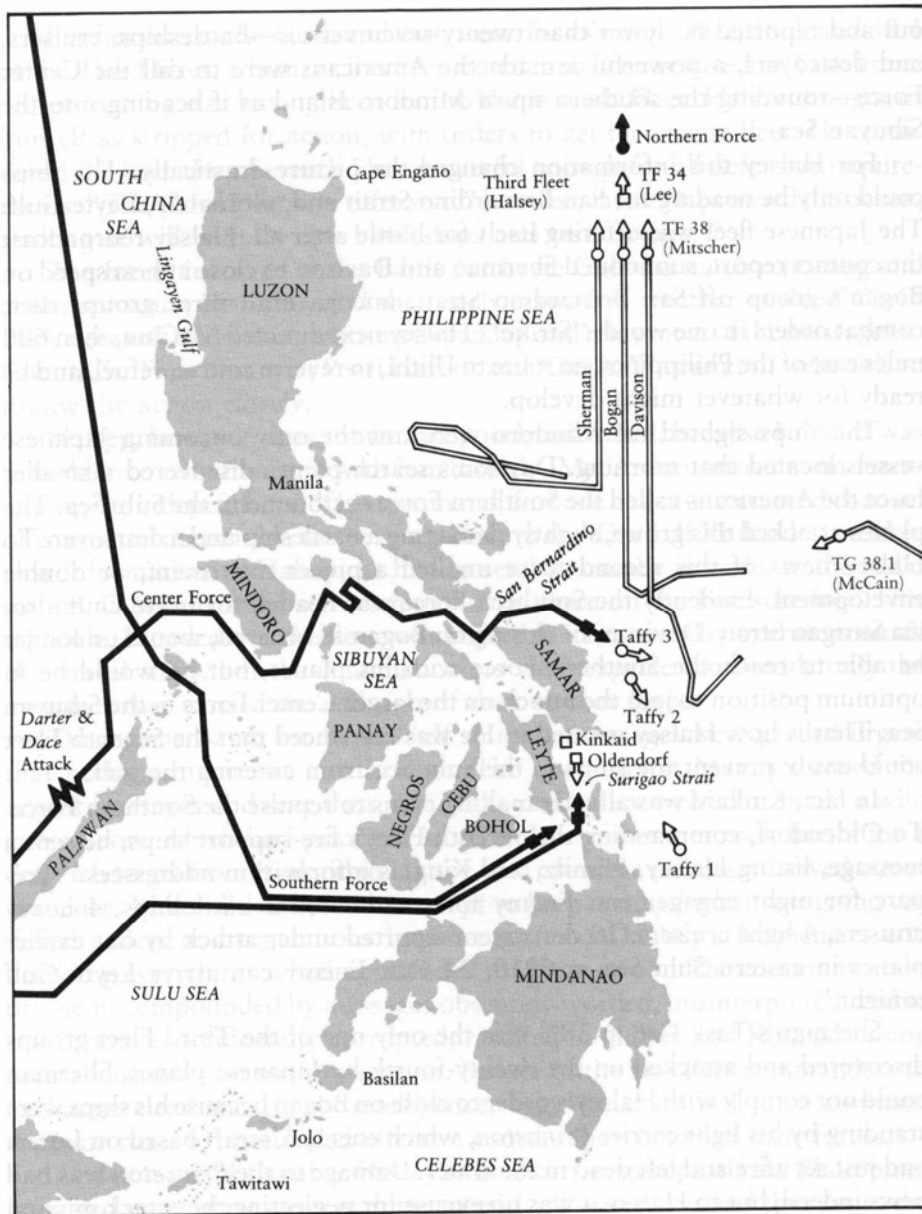


Figure 1. The Battle of Leyte Gulf, 23-25 October 1944

Source: E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 292.

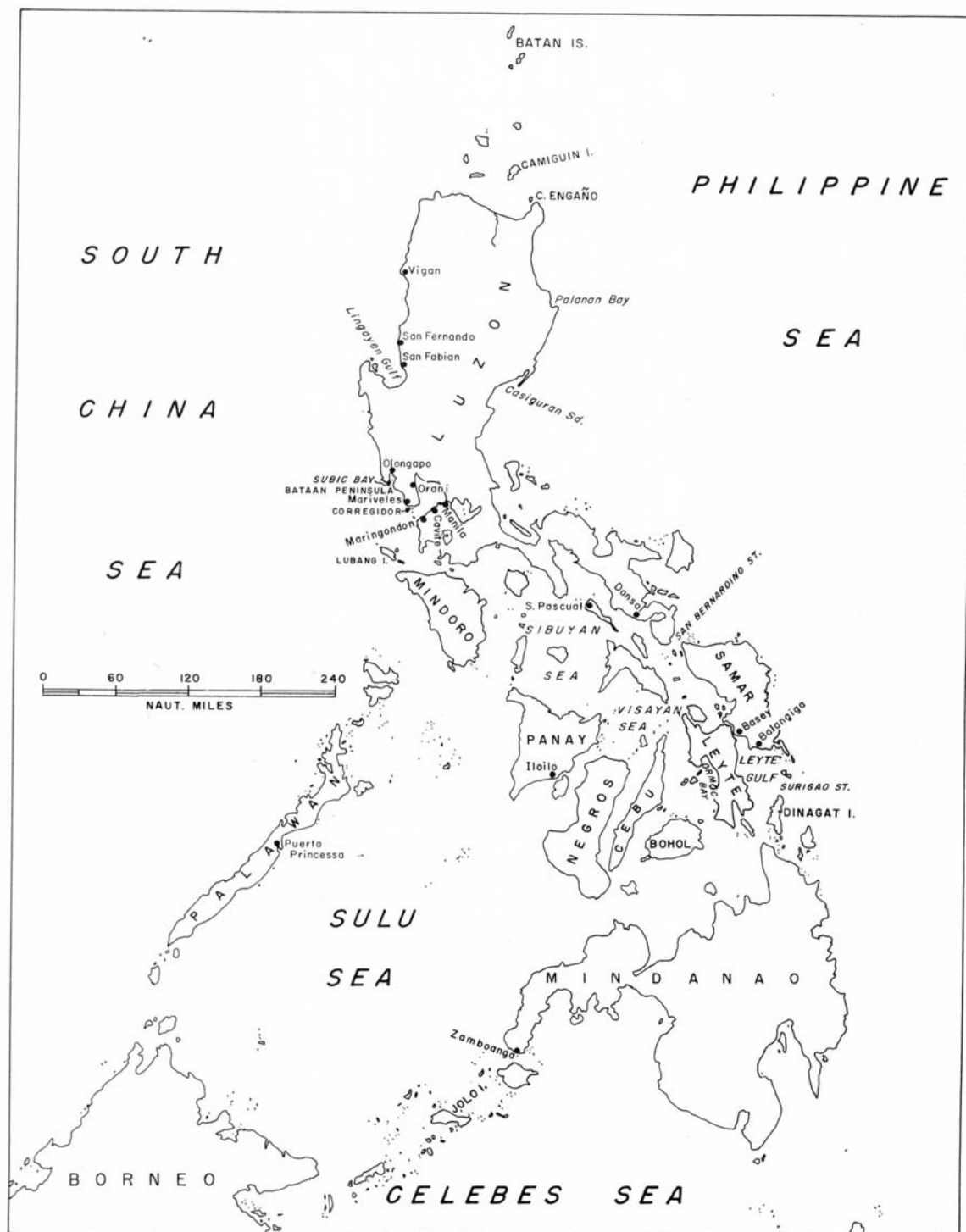


Figure 2. The Philippines

Source: Jack Sweetman, *American Naval History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 287.



Figure 3. Southeast Asia (1941 political boundaries)

Source: Jack Sweetman, *American Naval History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 288.

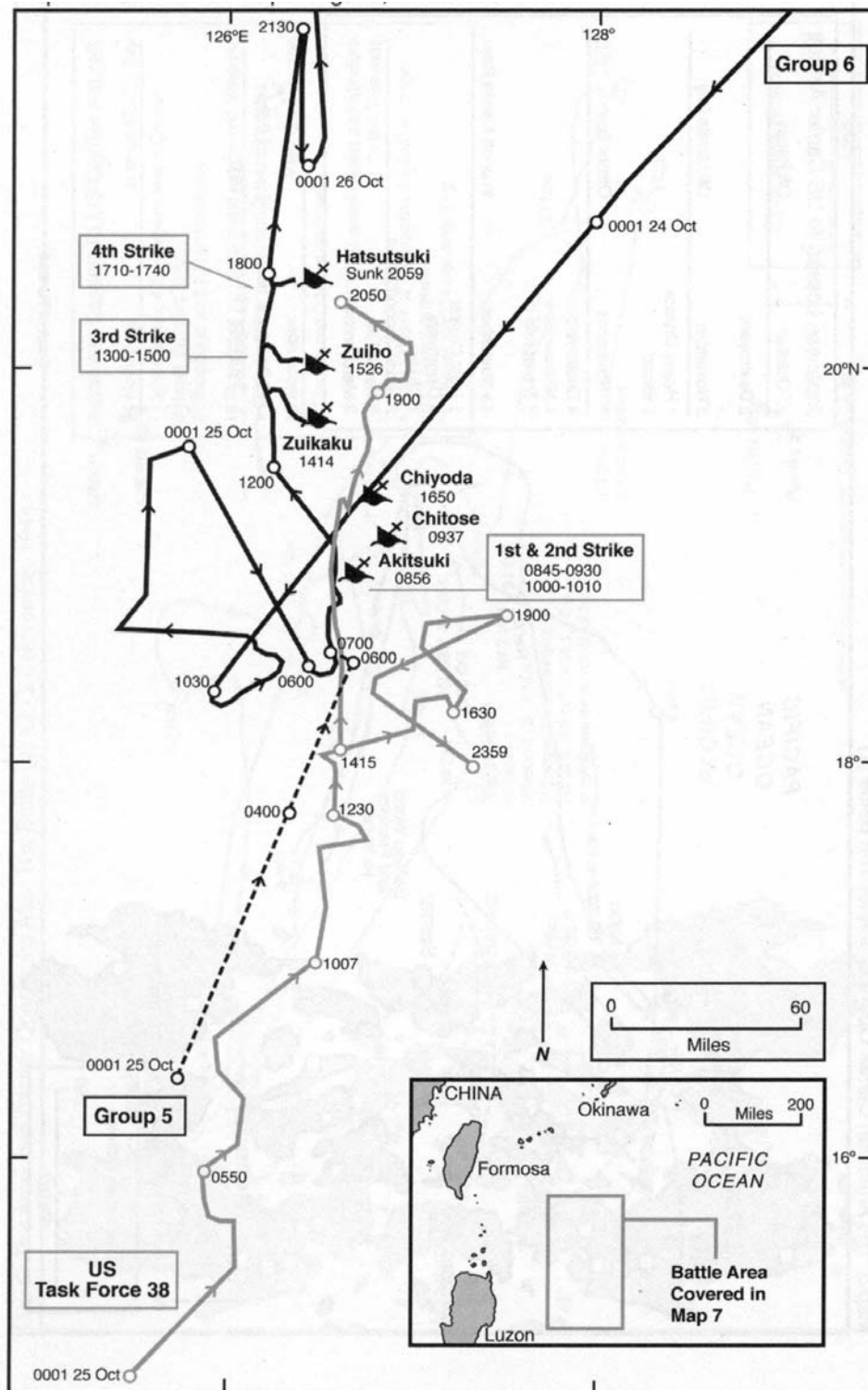


Figure 4. The Battle of Cape Engaño, 25 October 1944
 Source: H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 263.

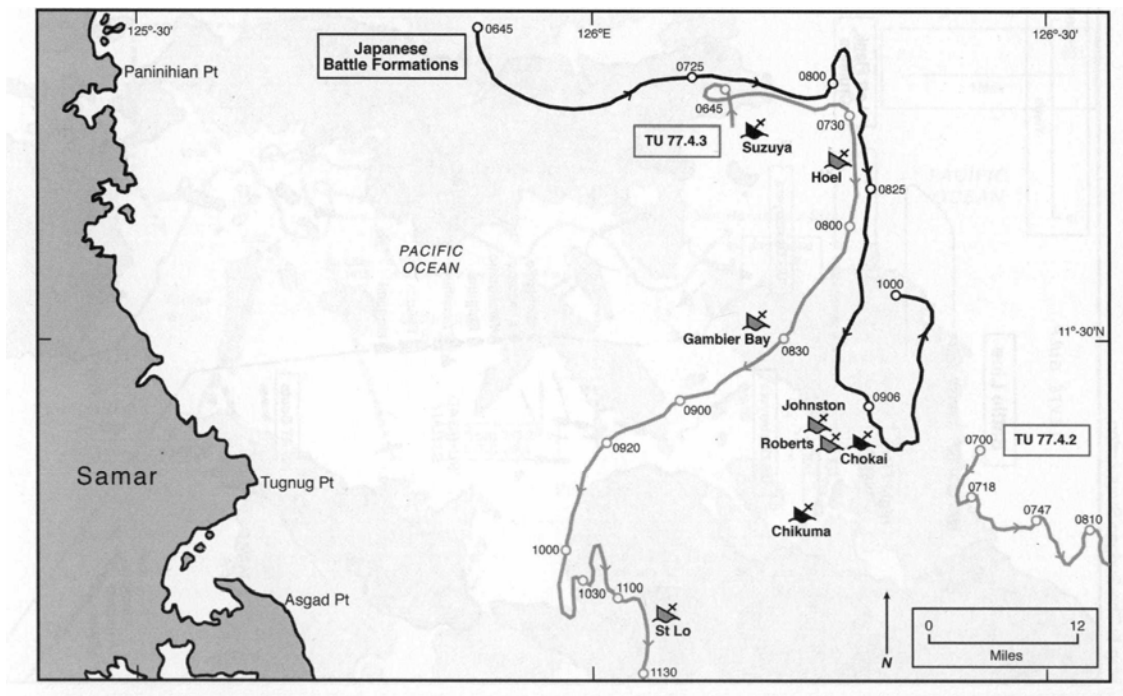


Figure 5. The Battle off Samar, 25 October 1944

Source: H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 262.

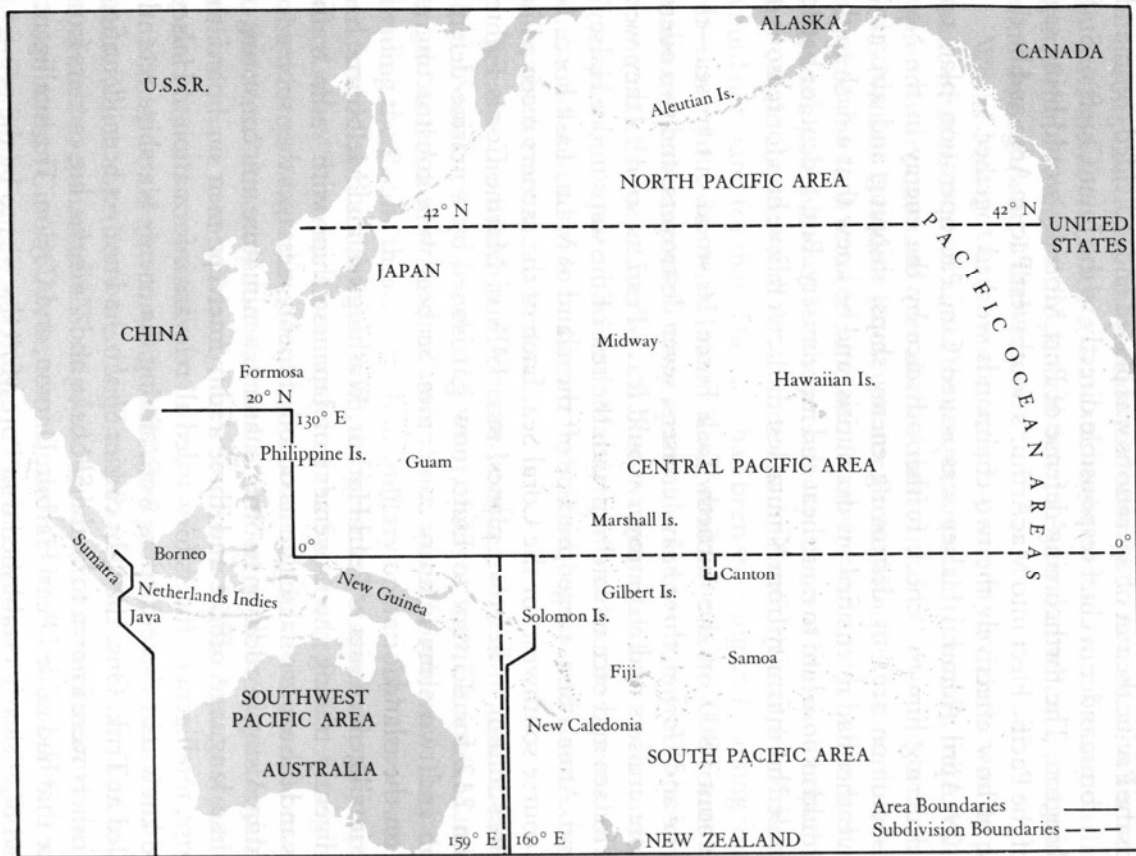


Figure 6. The Pacific Areas

Source: E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 70.

Note: The broken vertical line is the boundary between South Pacific Area and Southwest Pacific Area as revised on 1 August 1942.

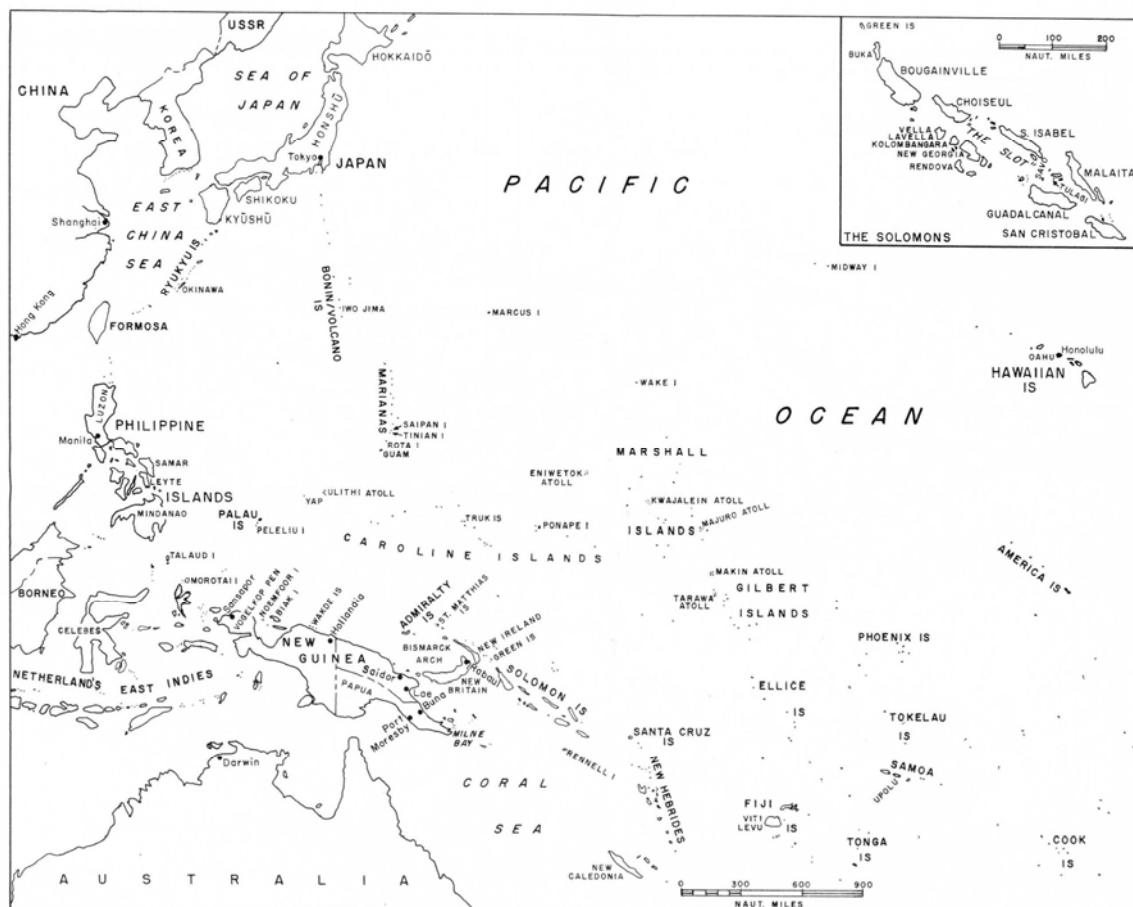


Figure 7. The Pacific Theater (1941 political boundaries)

Source: Jack Sweetman, *American Naval History* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 286.

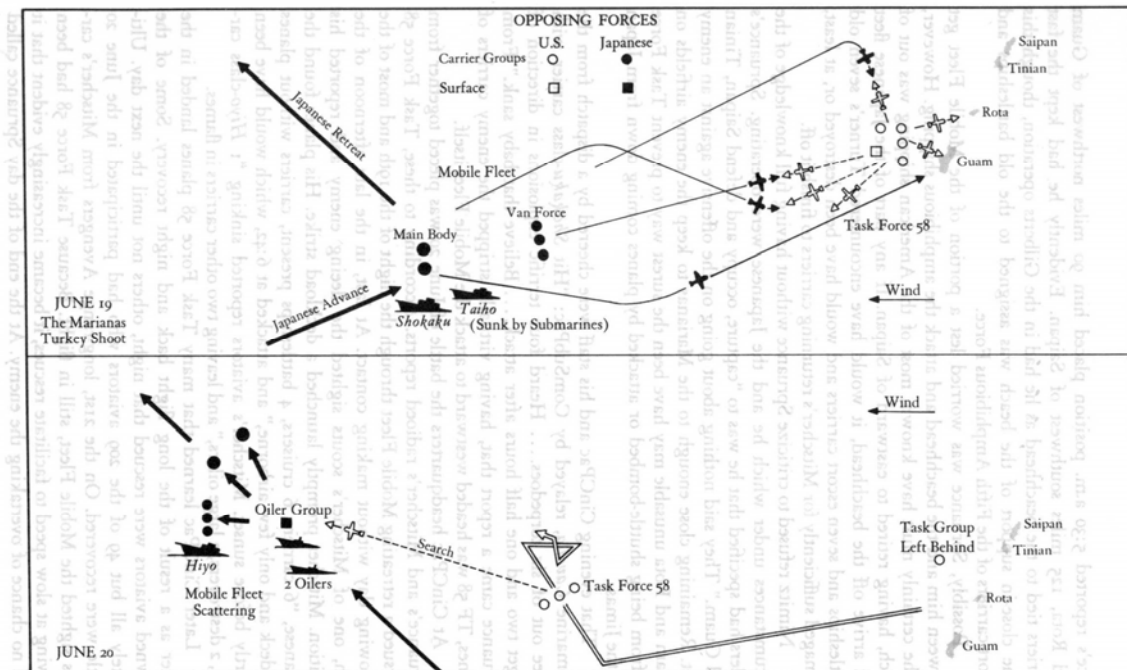


Figure 8. The Battle of the Philippine Sea, 19-20 June 1944
 Source: E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 301.

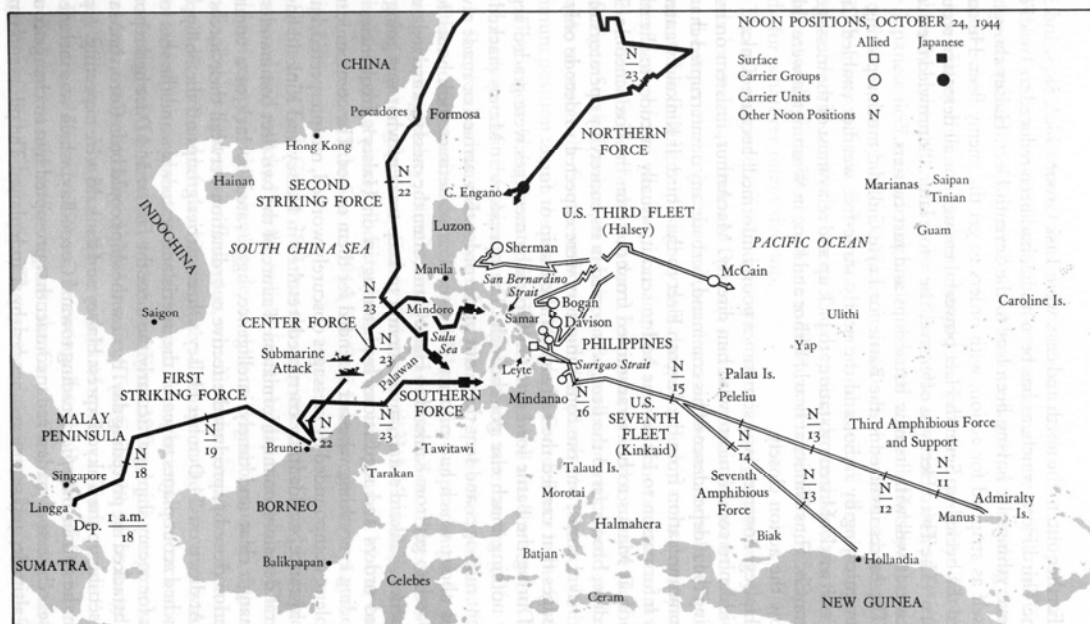


Figure 9. Approach of the Fleets to Leyte Gulf

Source: E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 289.

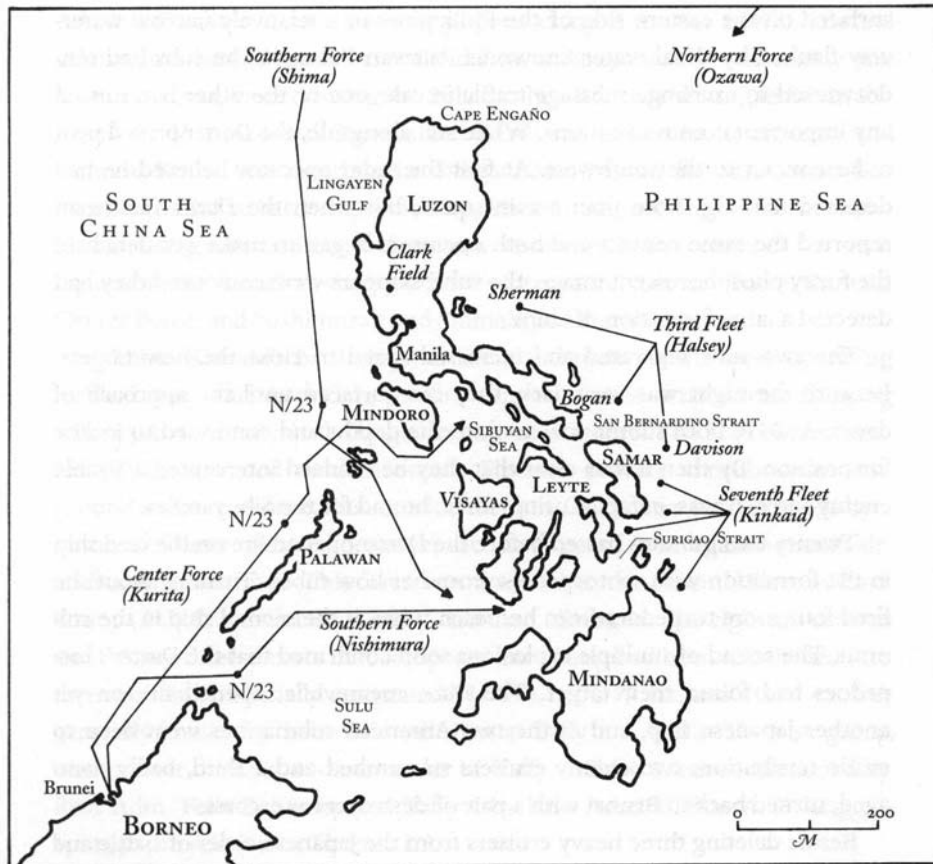


Figure 10. Fleet Locations and Movements at the Battle of Leyte Gulf
Source: Thomas J. Cutler, "The Battle of Leyte Gulf," in *Great American Naval Battles*, ed. Jack Sweetman (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 349.

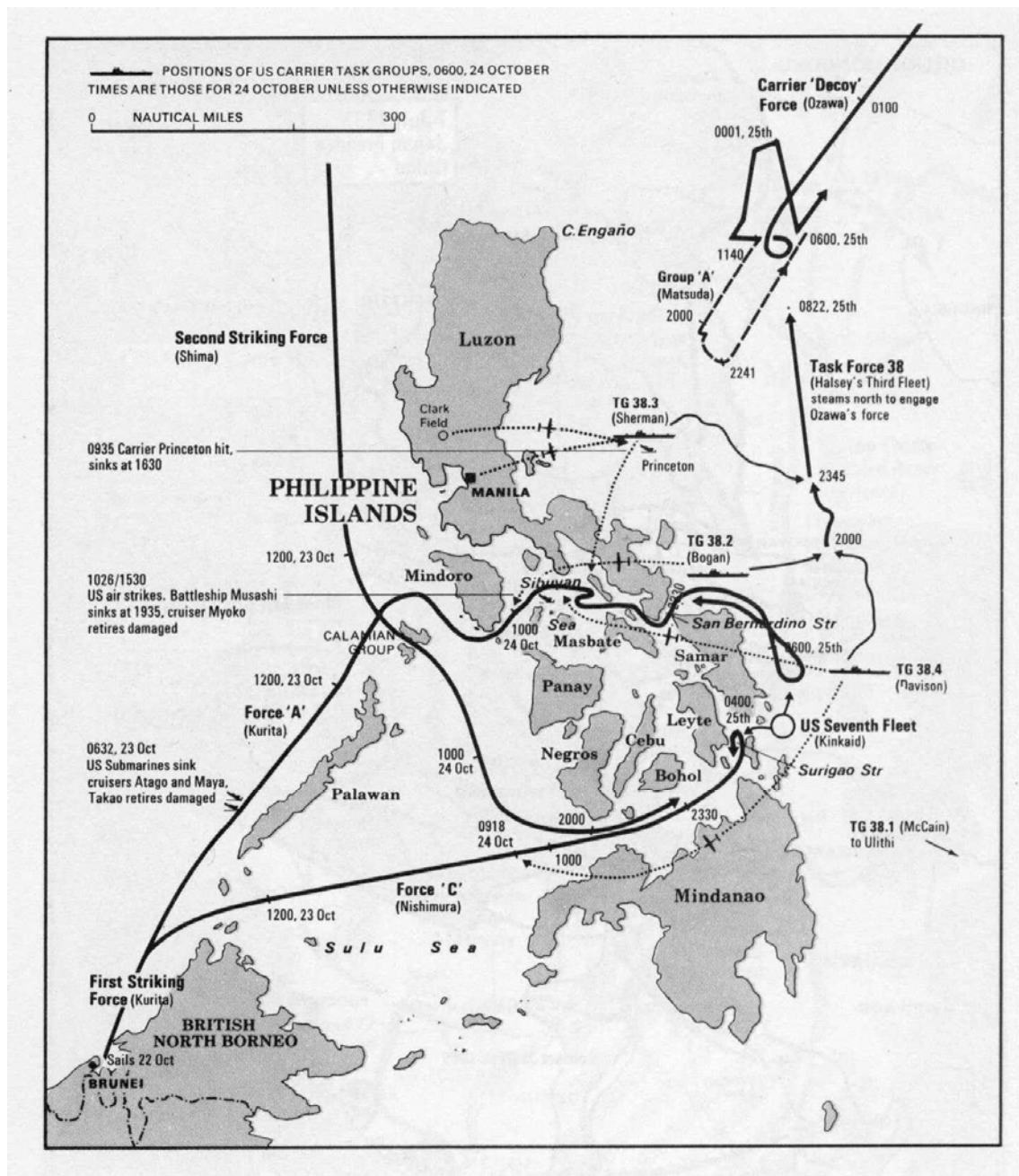


Figure 11. Fleet Maneuvers at the Battle of Leyte Gulf
Source: John Costello, *The Pacific War* (New York: Quill, 1982), 672.

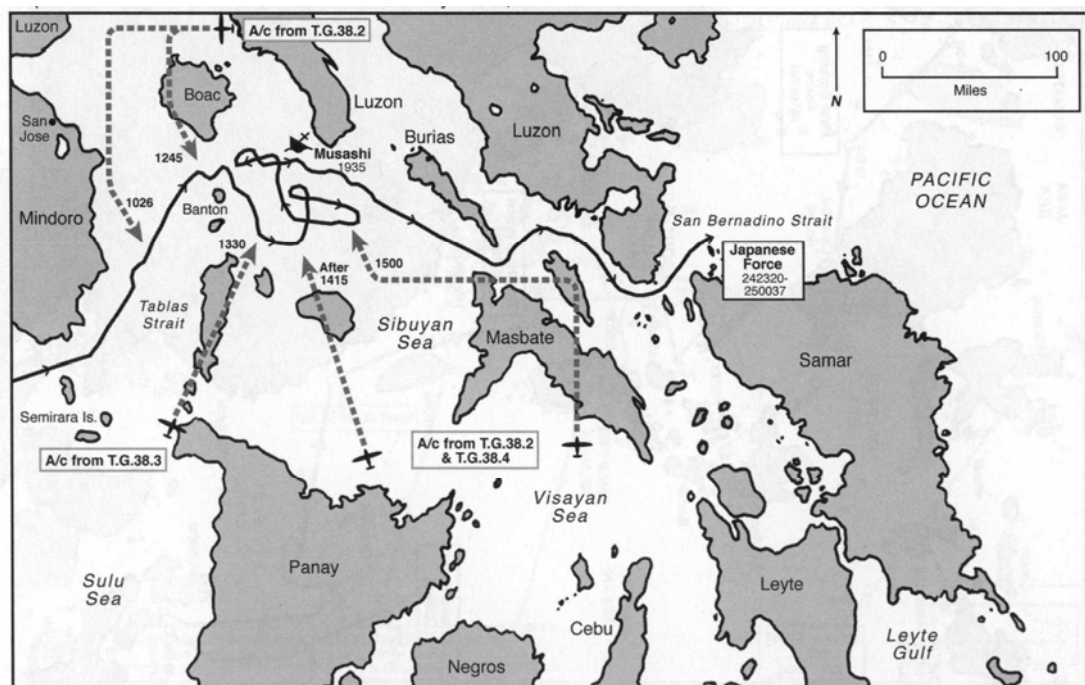


Figure 12. The Battle of the Sibuyan Sea, 24 October 1944

Source: H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 260.

APPENDIX B

LEYTE GULF ORDERS OF BATTLE

	CV	CVL	CVE	A/C	BB	CA	CL	DD	DE	PF
US Navy										
3rd Fleet										
TF 38										
TG 38.1	2	2		244		4	1	15		
TG 38.2	3	2		339	2		4	17		
TG 38.3	2	2		253	2		4	14		
TG 38.4	2	2		241	2	2	2	11		
7th Fleet										
TF 77			18	507		2	3	20	17	
TF 78					3		2	30		10
TF 79					3	3	1	38		
Imperial Japanese Navy										
N Force	1	3	2	116			3	9	6	
C Force					5	10	2	15		
S Force:										
Van					2	1		4		
Rear						2	1	7		
	CV	CVL	CVE	A/C	BB	CA	CL	DD	DE	PF
US Total	9	8	18	1584	12	11	17	145	17	10
Japan Total	1	3	2	116	7	13	6	35	6	

Notes:

1. TF = Task Force; TG = Task Group; N = Northern; C = Center; S = Southern; CV = fleet carrier; CVL = light carrier; CVE = escort carrier; A/C = aircraft; BB = battleship; CA = heavy cruiser; CL = light cruiser; DD = destroyer; DE = destroyer escort; PF = patrol frigate.
2. Composition listed for Task Force 38 is prior to restructuring of Task Force 38 and detachment of Task Group 38.1 to Ulithi on 23 October (which changed Task Group 38.1 composition to 3 CVs, 3 CVLs, 4 CAs, 2 CLs, and 14 DDs).
3. Composition listed for Third Fleet is prior to formation of Task Force 34 (Third Fleet Battle Line) on 25 October.

4. Composition does not include 39 US PTs (motor torpedo boats) of Task Group 70.1 that supported Task Forces 78 and 79 at the Battle of Surigao Strait on the morning of 25 October.
5. Composition does not include 29 US submarines of Task Force 17 that supported the operation that were under the command of Vice Adm. Charles A. Lockwood Jr. at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (commander of Submarine Force, US Pacific Fleet).
6. Japanese forces are designated with names common in US historical analyses of the battle; the Japanese Navy used different terminology to designate their forces (see appendix D).
7. For Japanese listing, CVE category includes two BB/CVs (battleships converted to hybrid battleship-aircraft carriers that were capable of carrying a complement of aircraft similar to that of a US CVE).
8. Two of the Japanese battleships listed under C Force were superbattleships with larger caliber guns.
9. Composition does not include US and Japanese land-based aircraft and logistics ships or US landing, auxiliary, mine warfare, and various smaller ships.
10. Composition does not include ships in units assigned to the fleets involved which did not affect the course of the naval battle.

Sources: H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 73, 276, 315 and Jack Sweetman, ed., *Great American Naval Battles* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 352.

APPENDIX C

US NAVAL CHAINS OF COMMAND

Southwest Pacific Area

Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur

Seventh Fleet (Naval Forces, Southwest Pacific Area)

Vice Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid

Task Force 77

Vice Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid

Task Group 77.4

Rear Adm. Thomas L. Sprague

Task Unit 77.4.1 (TAFFY 1)

Rear Adm. Thomas L. Sprague

Task Unit 77.4.2 (TAFFY 2)

Rear Adm. Felix B. Stump

Task Unit 77.4.3 (TAFFY 3)

Rear Adm. Clifton A. F. Sprague

Task Force 78

Rear Adm. Daniel E. Barbey

Task Force 79

Vice Adm. Theodore S. Wilkinson

Bombardment and Fire Support Group

Rear Adm. Jesse B. Oldendorf

Pacific Ocean Areas (supporting Southwest Pacific Area) and US Pacific Fleet

Adm. Chester W. Nimitz

Third Fleet

Adm. William F. Halsey Jr.

Task Force 34 (formed on 25 October from units of Task Force 38)

Vice Adm. Willis A. Lee Jr.

Task Force 38

Vice Adm. Marc A. Mitscher

Task Group 38.1

Vice Adm. John S. McCain

Task Group 38.2

Rear Adm. Gerald F. Bogan

Task Group 38.3

Rear Adm. Frederick C. Sherman

Task Group 38.4

Rear Adm. Ralph E. Davison

Notes:

1. Seventh and Third Fleets included other task organizations not shown.
2. The task organizations shown were also divided into smaller organizations. Only the task organizations required to understand the course of the battle are listed.
3. In Seventh Fleet, two commanders are listed as commanding multiple organizations (Kinkaid and Thomas L. Sprague). In many cases, officers commanded higher-level task organizations while they continued to directly command subordinate organizations. This was the case with Kinkaid and Thomas L. Sprague.
4. Nimitz commanded both the Pacific Ocean Areas and the US Pacific Fleet. Kinkaid's senior commander was MacArthur (as Southwest Pacific Area commander); all Seventh Fleet operations were subordinate to MacArthur. Kinkaid's naval forces were administratively supported by Nimitz in his role as commander of Pacific Fleet.
5. Several times during the battle, Halsey bypassed Mitscher and issued orders directly to subordinate units of Task Force 38.

Sources: H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 306-312, Jack Sweetman, ed., *Great American Naval Battles* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 352, and Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 12, *Leyte, June 1944 – January 1945* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1958), 55.

APPENDIX D

JAPANESE NAVAL CHAINS OF COMMAND

Combined Fleet

Adm. Toyoda Soemu

Northern Force (Main Body, then Mobile Force)

Vice Adm. Ozawa Jisaburo

Center Force (Forces A and B, First Striking Force)

Vice Adm. Kurita Takeo

Southern Force Van (Force C, First Striking Force)

Vice Adm. Nishimura Shoji

Southern Force Rear (Second Striking Force)

Vice Adm. Shima Kiyohide

Notes:

1. Japanese forces are designated with names common in US historical analyses of the battle; the Japanese Navy used different terminology to designate their forces (see terms in parentheses). Ozawa's force was designated as Main Body and then as Mobile Force. Kurita commanded the First Striking Force. Nishimura's force was a detachment of Kurita's force designated Force C. Shima's units were designated Second Striking Force. There was no effort by either the Combined Fleet or Kurita to synchronize the movements of the Southern Force Van and Rear; although US nomenclature leads one to believe Nishimura and Shima were one Southern Force, they were employed independently.

2. Ozawa, although senior, relinquished tactical command to Kurita because Kurita's force was the primary Japanese effort; so technically the Northern and Southern Japanese forces, as well as the Center Force, were under the command of Kurita during the battle. But communication and coordination difficulties among the Japanese commanders resulted in the forces acting independently.

Sources: H. P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 56, 73, 276, 315 and Jack Sweetman, ed., *Great American Naval Battles* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 50, 352, Richard Natkiel and Antony Preston, *Atlas of Maritime History* (New York: Facts on File, 1986), 224, and Kenneth I. Friedman, *Afternoon of the Rising Sun: The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 2001), 42, 49.

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