

TARNISHED VICTORY: DIVIDED COMMAND IN THE PACIFIC AND ITS  
CONSEQUENCES IN THE NAVAL BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF

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## ABSTRACT

TARNISHED VICTORY: DIVIDED COMMAND IN THE PACIFIC AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN THE NAVAL BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF, by LCDR James P. Drew, 75 pages.

The Battle for Leyte Gulf in October 1944 was the largest naval battle of World War II both in terms of the number of ships involved, and the expanse of area the battle covered. The battle was a decisive victory for the Allied Forces, who effectively crushed the might of the Japanese Navy for the remainder of the war. The Joint Chiefs made the decision to keep command in the Pacific divided in the early months of the war. The Joint Chiefs were presented with opportunities to resolve this problematic command structure as the war progressed, but they chose to perpetuate the division. This decision, directly contributed to disunity of effort, differing objectives, poor communication, and tragically, unnecessary loss of life during the Battle off Samar.

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## ACRONYMS

ABDA	Australian, British, Dutch, American Theater
ANZAC	Australia, New Zealand, America Canada
AOR	Area of Responsibility
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
CINC	Commander in Chief
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
COMINCH	Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet
IGHQ	Imperial General Headquarters
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
POA	Pacific Ocean Area
SWPA	Southwest Pacific Area
TF	Task Force
TG	Task Group
TU	Task Unit

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Battle for Leyte Gulf in October 1944 was the largest naval battle of World War II both in terms of the number of ships involved, and the expanse of area the battle covered. The battle was a decisive victory for the Allied Forces, who effectively crushed the might of the Japanese Navy for the remainder of the war. The battle was a decisive victory for the Allied Forces, who effectively crushed the might of the Japanese Navy for the remainder of the war. The Joint Chiefs made the decision to keep command in the Pacific divided in the early months of the war. The Joint Chiefs were presented with opportunities to resolve this problematic command structure as the war progressed, but they chose to perpetuate the division. This decision, directly contributed to disunity of effort, differing objectives, poor communication, and tragically, unnecessary loss of life during the Battle off Samar.

The sudden and unexpected attack on Pearl Harbor thrust the United States into a conflict of unprecedented scale. In order to meet the requirements of conducting a truly global war, the American defense establishment had to rapidly mobilize and conduct a two theater war. It was evident from the start that close cooperation with Allied nations was necessary, and previous advisory organizations like the Joint Board would be inadequate to conduct planning with America's principal ally, Great Britain. To facilitate planning and cooperation between the two nations, the United States created the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This body, which would not be formally chartered until the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, was created to meet the exigencies of war and to provide President Franklin Roosevelt a body of senior military officials to advise him on strategy and the prosecution of the war.



Significant challenges confronted the Joint Chiefs from the moment of their inception. In addition to the daunting task of determining strategy for the two theater war, the Joint Chiefs, in conjunction with the British Chiefs of Staff, had to divide the globe into theaters of command responsibility. The theater that proved most challenging to the Joint Chiefs for the duration of the war was the Pacific theater.

In the immediate aftermath of the Pearl Harbor raid, Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet (COMINCH), Admiral Ernest J. King forcefully urged his fellow members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to place a Navy officer in overall command of the Pacific Theater. The Pacific, dominated by vast expanses of open ocean seemed ideally suited to be a Navy command, but General George C. Marshall lobbied to place the entire Pacific Command under General Douglas MacArthur, who was already on duty in the Army's Far East Command in the Philippines. The Army would not allow MacArthur to be placed under the command of a Navy officer, and Admiral King just as adamantly would not allow the precious and few ships of the Pacific Fleet to be placed under MacArthur's command.

To break the impasse, the Joint Chiefs decided to divide command of the Pacific between General MacArthur and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz by creating two separate Areas of Responsibility (AOR). General MacArthur commanded the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), and Admiral Nimitz commanded the Pacific Ocean Area (POA). This arrangement worked well for most of the war, with Nimitz forces advancing toward the home islands of Japan through the central Pacific, and MacArthur's forces progressing toward Japan from the Southwest Pacific Area. These dual drives would put the Japanese Empire in a vast pincer, which gradually severed Japan's line of supply with its southern resource area.

As the war progressed, it became apparent that close cooperation between the theaters was required to mount an effective offensive against the Japanese. Both theaters agreed that the Solomon Islands were the logical place to start rolling back the Japanese. The Solomon Islands straddled the dividing line between MacArthur's and Nimitz's theaters, and thus presented the Joint Chiefs with a challenge: Who would command? The Joint Chiefs could have taken this opportunity to unify command in the Pacific, or at least unify command of the campaign, but they did neither. Instead, they shifted boundaries and established nebulous relationships of cooperation and support, but not command. Several opportunities presented themselves to resolve the division of command, but The Joint Chiefs continued to balk at the decision.

The flaws of the divided command arrangement became evident at the Battle for Leyte Gulf. In this battle, the forces of General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz were required to operate in close coordination to seize and occupy the island of Leyte. However, the two commanders brought different objectives to the campaign. The commander of Seventh Fleet, Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, reported to General MacArthur. The commander of Third Fleet, Admiral William F. Halsey, reported to Admiral Nimitz. Because of the divided command, Halsey and Kinkaid approached the Battle for Leyte Gulf with disparate views on missions and objectives for the campaign.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf required the two theaters and the two fleets to act in concert to a degree and on a scale that they had not had to previously. SWPA forces were accustomed to executing operations under air cover provided by land based fighters and bombers. In the initial stages of the Leyte campaign, land based air cover would not be available to SWPA forces because the Philippine archipelago was outside the effective range of SWPA's aircraft. As such, carrier aircraft provided by fast carrier forces of Halsey's Third Fleet were required to provide

necessary cover to ensure the Allies gained a firm lodgment in the Philippines. Prior to the invasion of Leyte, it was understood by MacArthur and Admiral Kinkaid that Halsey would cover and support the invasion force. However, Halsey was given another mission set from his superior Admiral Nimitz which was to destroy the remnants of the Japanese fleet if an opportunity presented itself. These apparently mutually exclusive mission sets led Halsey to make decisions at the battle that remain controversial to this day, and were abetted by the shared command responsibilities between General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz.

The division of command further obstructed the free and timely flow of communications from one fleet to the other. During the battle, this lack of communication caused each fleet commander to make ill-informed assumptions about the intentions, capabilities, and force disposition of the other. Because neither commander had a full understanding of what was occurring in the Leyte battlespace, the Japanese were able to successfully send a heavy surface force into the waters off the island of Samar, where it sunk five U.S. ships, resulting in the loss of hundreds of American lives. Fortunately, the Japanese commander did not exploit the advantage he gained; otherwise, the death toll could have been significantly greater. The tragedy behind the great victory at Leyte Gulf is that a divided command structure directly caused many lost lives that otherwise could have been spared.

## CHAPTER 2

### ORIGINS OF THE DIVIDED COMMAND STRUCTURE

In establishing a dual command relationship in the Pacific in the early months of World War II, the Joint Chiefs of Staff disregarded a fundamental principle of war. The Joint Chiefs adopted the dual command structure in an atmosphere of interservice rivalry and personality clashes between senior military leaders. The Joint Chiefs neglected to take advantage of opportunities to clarify the command structure or establish a supporting/supported command arrangement between General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) forces and Pacific Ocean Area (POA) forces under Admiral Nimitz. The JCS recognized that this compromise decision might eventually cause problems as SWPA and POA forces were required to act in concert as the march across the Pacific progressed, but they did not act on that concern. Their refusal to unify command in the Pacific led to difficulties in planning for the invasion of Leyte Gulf, and furthermore, led to serious command and control problems at the operational level during the execution of the Leyte campaign. With two coequal theater commanders responsible for providing forces to accomplish the objectives of the Leyte Operation, each felt their particular objectives took priority over the other. These problems were most clearly seen in the naval engagements which occurred in the waters of Leyte Gulf and the surrounding straits from October 23, 1944 to October 25, 1944.

In order to arrive at the reasons behind the adoption of shared command responsibilities in the Pacific, it will be necessary to give some historical background on how the Joint Chiefs of Staff came to be, and also to consider how parochial interests and interservice rivalry among the different service chiefs may have contributed to their mutual acceptance of the arrangement.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor and United States entry into World War II, it became necessary to reorganize the US defense establishment to enable the United States to conduct war on a global scale. One of the first measures that needed to be taken was to establish an advisory body of senior military officials to provide strategic advice to the Commander in Chief, President Roosevelt. Prior to World War II, the United States did not have such an organization in place. As far back as 1903, a Joint Board had been established by mutual agreement between the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy. The purpose of this board, according to Admiral King, was to: “effect coordination between the Army and Navy in matters of operational planning... This board which never had any legislative basis and was described in its original charter as advisory to the two secretaries, originally consisted of four high-ranking officers from the Army and four of the Navy.”<sup>1</sup> In 1939, however, the Joint Board was placed “under the direction and supervision of the President as Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy.”<sup>2</sup>

When the United States entered the war on the Allied side, it was apparent that close cooperation was required between the British and Americans to bring the war to a successful conclusion. One of the first examples of this was at the ARCADIA conference, held in Washington, D.C. from December 24, 1941 until January 14, 1942. The Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) began to wrestle with the decision on how to divide the globe into theaters, or areas of command responsibility. On 25 December, General Marshall advanced an idea that was deemed controversial to Prime Minister Churchill and others on the British Chiefs of Staff. As Admiral King recalled: “. . . Marshall brought up the subject of command, making a very forceful presentation of the merits of unity of command for operations in the field. . .”<sup>3</sup> As the idea was first advanced by an American, Prime Minister Churchill may have viewed it as an American ploy to get British troops to serve under American command.

In order to make the idea more palatable to the British delegation, Marshall suggested that General Sir Archibald Wavell be named Supreme Commander of a new Australian, British, Dutch, American (ABDA) theater. The naming of a British officer to the post helped, but it took a personal appeal by Marshall to Prime Minister Churchill to garner British acceptance.<sup>4</sup> In his first War Report to Secretary of War Henry Stimson in 1943, Marshall stated:

A development of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Combined Chiefs of Staff organizations is the unity of command principle which places the responsibility and authority for a contemplated operation under one commander directly responsible to the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Combined Chiefs of Staff. When a joint or combined force commander has been designated and the units composing his force are assigned, his command responsibilities are the same as if the forces involved were all of one service or one nation.<sup>5</sup>

Admiral King, recalling the conference in 1952 said: “Obviously, effective operations would be impossible if three services, representing four different countries, should operate on their own without some immediate superior in the area. The final outcome of the discussions was the acceptance by the United States and Great Britain of the principle of unity of command in the field.”<sup>6</sup> Despite Admiral King’s apparent acceptance of the unity of command concept, events would show that this idea was much harder to put into practice.

The unity of command agreement was an important first step at laying the groundwork for how America and Great Britain would fight the war. Still, the ARCADIA conference highlighted the weaknesses of the Joint Board. The composition of the Joint Board was inadequate to conduct the necessary planning with a partner nation. In order to facilitate planning with British counterparts, a new solution was required. Admiral Leahy states:

When Prime Minister Churchill and his aides came to Washington shortly after the war began in December, 1941, it was apparent that the Joint Board had to be revised, given more power, and placed on the basis where it could work side by side with the already functioning British Chiefs of Staff. Thus was created the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, which held its first meeting in February, 1942, and which absorbed the functions of the old Joint Board.<sup>7</sup>

Leahy's words imply that the United States was playing catch-up and had to create a body similar to the already functioning British Chiefs of Staff

The American Joint Chiefs of Staff originally consisted of General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army, Lieutenant General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Corps, Admiral Harold R. "Betty" Stark, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), and Admiral Ernest J. King Commander in Chief United States Fleet (COMINCH). Admiral Stark's tenure on the Joint Chiefs would not last long. Admiral King's title of Commander in Chief United States Fleet (COMINCH) carried significant authority. King viewed his responsibilities as largely redundant to those exercised by Admiral Stark as CNO. In addition, Admiral Stark had come under criticism for allegedly failing to forward intelligence on Japanese Fleet movements to then Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC), Admiral Husband E. Kimmel in the days prior to Pearl Harbor. To streamline the Navy's command structure and possibly to reduce bad publicity generated by Stark's presence on the Joint Chiefs, President Roosevelt took action. King's biographer Thomas Buell states: "The President's solution came in early March [1942]. King would be both COMINCH and CNO. Stark went to London to an expediently created post, Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe."<sup>8</sup> As a result of King's assumption of the title as CNO, he became responsible for both the administrative and operational oversight of the entire U.S. Navy.

Stark's transfer to Europe offset the delicate symmetry of the JCS. It was apparent to General Marshall that another Navy member was needed. Marshall's biographer Edward Cray states: "Marshall proposed that the president name retired Admiral William D. Leahy, a former chief of naval operations, to be the president's personal chief of staff. Bearing that title, Leahy would also serve as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and give each of the two services two votes

on the panel.”<sup>9</sup> The addition of Admiral Leahy to the Joint Chiefs set the membership that existed until the end of the war.

The Joint Chiefs existed to provide the President with strategic advice on how best to prosecute the war, and to convey orders to theater commanders to execute the President’s military strategy. However, like the Joint Board before them, The Joint Chiefs of Staff had no formal charter or statute that specifically defined what their duties and responsibilities were.

Admiral Leahy writing in 1950 stated:

The Joint Chiefs became the principal agency for Army– Navy–Air Force coordination. Its duties during the war never were defined precisely. I have heard that in some file there is a chit or memorandum from Roosevelt, setting up the Joint Chiefs, but I never saw it. The absence of any fixed charter of responsibility allowed great flexibility in the JCS organization and enabled us to extend its activities to meet the changing requirements of the war.<sup>10</sup>

Leahy’s description was entirely accurate. The Joint Chiefs of Staff assumed great powers during the conduct of the war, but as a body they proved incapable of establishing unity of command in the Pacific theater.

Regardless of whether the Joint Chiefs had a codified charter that specifically delineated their responsibilities, the tasks ahead of them were daunting. One of the first tasks was to assign command responsibilities in the geographic areas where it would be necessary to fight. Some preliminary moves had been made even prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. On July 27, 1941, General Marshall acting in his capacity as Chief of Staff of the Army created a command designated as the United States Army Forces in the Far East to be headquartered in Manila. The command was given to General Douglas MacArthur, who had served in the Philippines since 1935 as military adviser to Filipino President Manuel Quezon. Since his assignment to the Philippines, MacArthur had accepted the post of Field Marshall of the Philippine Commonwealth on August 24, 1936. Additionally, MacArthur chose to retire from active service



in 1937 at the rank of General. Marshall's order of July 27, 1941 effectively brought Douglas MacArthur back on active duty. Although he was brought back on the active list at the rank of Lieutenant General, he was soon elevated to his former rank of General.

The Navy was no less active in setting themselves up for success in the war. On December 7, 1941, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel was the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC). Headquartered in Pearl Harbor, Kimmel took much of the blame for the attack that dealt a severe blow not only to American warships berthed there, but also for the loss of numerous Army Air Corps planes that were destroyed. Looking to restore confidence in the demoralized Pacific Fleet, Admiral King appointed Admiral Chester Nimitz to take his place. Nimitz's assumption of command took place on December 31, 1941. As of that date, his responsibilities were limited solely to exercising command of the United States Pacific Fleet.

The Japanese did not sit idly by while problems of command were sorted out. They had carried out an awesome offensive that had resulted in the capture of Thailand, the Gilbert Islands and Guam. Japanese troops had landed on the Philippine archipelago, and threatened to overrun the grossly outnumbered garrison commanded by MacArthur. British troops in Malaya were retreating, and Hong Kong was about to fall under the Japanese onslaught. Edward Cray observes: "By February 25, [1942] the first of George Marshall's unified commands was a shambles. The Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington agreed to put the misbegotten ABDA command out of its misery."<sup>11</sup> The ABDA Command, having proved a failure, required the Combined Chiefs to arrive at a better solution.

With the ABDA Theater effectively dissolved, a new command had to be established to give the Allies a credible defense against the Japanese. General MacArthur in the embattled Philippines seemed the logical choice to head such an effort. MacArthur was ordered to Australia

to assume command of a new Southwest Pacific Theater. Marshall envisioned even greater responsibilities for General MacArthur, however, as Edward Cray states: “Marshall, always a strong advocate of unified command, wanted MacArthur in charge of the entire Pacific theater.”<sup>12</sup> MacArthur was an officer with unmatched combat credentials, and was the senior officer on duty in the Pacific. It was natural for many in the Army to assume that overall command of the Pacific would be given to him. For a time, President Roosevelt agreed. Cray continues: “On March 7, President Roosevelt cabled Prime Minister Churchill a proposed redivision of operational responsibilities. The United States, Roosevelt suggested, would take over all operational responsibilities in the Pacific area. The supreme commander in the Pacific would be an American--MacArthur, in fact...”<sup>13</sup> Roosevelt’s desire to see MacArthur in command of the entire Pacific theater soon ran in to objections by the U.S. Navy.

Senior naval officers and Admiral King in particular, did not want to see naval forces under the direction of an Army officer. King saw the war in the Pacific as one where amphibious operations and fleet on fleet engagements would decide the victor. To him, it was only natural that command in the Pacific should be given to a naval officer. Thomas Buell noted: “The Pacific Fleet would never be under the General’s [MacArthur’s] operational control, King vowed, if for no other reason than that King believed that MacArthur knew nothing about sea power.”<sup>14</sup> Admiral Nimitz was already in place as CINCPAC in Pearl Harbor, and King felt that Nimitz would be up to the task. While MacArthur claimed years later that he would gladly have subordinated himself to another officer in the effort of achieving unified command, it seems unlikely that he felt that way at the time.

It effectively fell on General Marshall and Admiral King to work out how responsibilities were to be divided in the Pacific. Several proposals were considered, but the one that was

eventually agreed upon was one that Admiral King himself devised. King, despite his stated acceptance of the unity of command principle espoused by Marshall, took action to effectively divide the Pacific into land and sea spheres of influence. To him, Australia, New Guinea and the Netherlands East Indies represented areas that the Army would be best capable of affecting, presumably with the assistance of land based aircraft. The rest of the Pacific he saw as largely a naval sphere, where objectives could be attacked by means of amphibious forces transported in naval ships, and supported by carrier based aircraft. King's proposal met with the acceptance of General Marshall with one caveat. Marshall requested that the Philippines be included in MacArthur's area, to which King agreed.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in an atmosphere of interservice rivalry, the two commands that would successfully carry out the war in the Pacific were created. President Roosevelt approved King's proposal on March 31, 1942. Buell continues: "Unity of command would be disregarded because there would be two area commanders, presumably Nimitz and MacArthur. And to whom would they report? To the JCS said King. The JCS--not a single person--would exercise supreme command in the Pacific."<sup>16</sup> This disregard of the unity of command principle, although expedient, would lead to unnecessary loss of life at the Battle for Leyte Gulf.

Nimitz's Area of Responsibility was further divided into a North Pacific Zone, a Central Pacific Zone, and a South Pacific Zone. It was apparent that forces from POA might have to operate in or lend support to SWPA forces and vice versa. SWPA representatives and the Commander of POA's South Pacific Zone would coordinate the details of this support if the need arose. In the event that circumstances required South Pacific forces to enter into or operate in support of SWPA, The Combined Chiefs adopted another expedient command arrangement. Nimitz's biographer E.B. Potter states: "The Combined Chiefs of Staff directed

that the Pacific Fleet should remain under Nimitz's control, even if strategic considerations required it to enter MacArthur's Southwest Pacific area."<sup>17</sup> Strategic considerations would require Nimitz's forces to enter MacArthur's SWPA AOR.

In order to provide General MacArthur with some organic naval capability, naval units from what used to be the Australia, New Zealand, America, Canada or ANZAC Striking Force were placed under MacArthur's operational control. The overwhelming preponderance of American naval power in the Pacific still rested in the hands of Admiral Nimitz's POA forces. Eventually, a Seventh Fleet would be created and placed under MacArthur's command to provide SWPA forces with a more robust naval capability. Kinkaid would be under the operational control of General MacArthur at the Battle of Leyte Gulf. The operational arm of Admiral Nimitz's forces would be the Third Fleet under the command of Admiral William F. Halsey.

Thus a divided command became the primary mechanism by which the United States would begin to confront the Japanese in the Pacific. The Joint Chiefs were responsible for the decision. The inherent flaws in the divided command would remain dormant as long as SWPA and POA forces did not have to cooperate with one another. The divided command concept would be put to the test early in the war. In the campaign to take back the Solomons, questions of unity of command would occupy the Joint Chiefs again. When the decision was made to liberate the Philippines, however, it became increasingly evident that greater cooperation between the divided theaters would be necessary to bring about Japan's defeat. However, the dual command structure fostered a non-collaborative planning environment between SWPA and POA staffs, in which information was not always shared. As the war progressed, further symptoms of divided command became apparent and finally manifested themselves at Leyte Gulf.

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest J. King and Walter Muir Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1952), 365.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>4</sup>Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 273-274.

<sup>5</sup>Walter Millis, ed. *The War Reports of General George C. Marshall, General H.H. Arnold and Admiral Ernest J. King* (New York: J. B. Lipincott Company, 1947), 117.

<sup>6</sup>King and Whitehill, 362-263.

<sup>7</sup>William D. Leahy, *I Was There: The Personal Story of the Chief of Staff to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman Based on his Notes and Diaries Made at the Time* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), 101-102.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Seapower: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 178.

<sup>9</sup>Cray, 279.

<sup>10</sup>Leahy, 102.

<sup>11</sup>Cray, 299.

<sup>12</sup>Buell, *Master of Seapower*, 190.

<sup>13</sup>Cray, 300.

<sup>14</sup>Buell, 190.

<sup>15</sup> Buell, *Master of Seapower*, 192.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>17</sup>Elmer B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 45.

## CHAPTER 3

### COMMAND UNIFICATION OPPORTUNITIES DEFERRED

The Joint Chiefs' inability to unify command in the Pacific in 1942 became the subject of enduring controversy and the source of challenges that had to be worked through in order to bring about the defeat of Japan. As these challenges arose, the Joint Chiefs had opportunities to correct the flawed command arrangement, but instead they adopted a course of piecemeal correction that perpetuated the division rather than shored up its inherent weaknesses. Admiral Nimitz, under the direction of Admiral King, developed plans for a central Pacific offensive that envisioned bypassing the Philippines and seizing Formosa. General MacArthur, who pledged to return to the Philippines, planned to do exactly that by advancing up the island chains of the southwest Pacific. These separate courses of action worked against the Japanese, effectively putting the Japanese Empire in a vice that inexorably closed from the central and southwest Pacific. However, the inherent differences in Nimitz's and MacArthur's objectives would require the mediation of no less a figure than Franklin Roosevelt himself.

Obviously, the first opportunity to correct the arrangement was at its inception, but as discussed above, this was not done. The Joint Chiefs had an additional opportunity during the planning process to recapture the Solomon Islands, specifically Guadalcanal and Tulagi. After the Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal additional questions about command relationships would arise when South Pacific Area forces under the overall command of Admiral Nimitz were required to operate in General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area. The recapture of the rest of the Solomons required the combined resources of POA and SWPA forces. Instead of placing POA forces directly subordinate to MacArthur, the Joint Chiefs adopted nebulous lines of support and cooperation that did not bare the force of command. These ideas of support and

cooperation would persist through the planning and execution of the return to the Philippines, and would have a direct operational impact on the naval engagements that constituted the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

As a result of the Battle of Midway, the Japanese advance through the central Pacific was effectively checked. The United States had mounted a very effective defense of the island outpost, and the conditions for transitioning to the offensive against Japan were falling into place. The Japanese captured the Solomon Islands with the intent of constructing airfields and seaplane bases throughout. SWPA and POA planners both agreed that transitioning to the offensive in the Pacific required the recapture of the Solomon Islands, but there was disagreement over who would command the operation. Marshall's biographer Edward Cray describes:

For the past month General MacArthur and Pacific Fleet commander Chester Nimitz had been jockeying for command of the first American offensive in the Pacific. Both favored hitting the Solomon Islands. As the farthestmost point of the Japanese advance, it was the logical place to strike. They could not agree, however, on which of the two should command the campaign, and just which of the Solomon Islands they should target.<sup>1</sup>

Already at this early stage of the war, the fissures in the divided command arrangement started to show.

Both POA and SWPA planners agreed that the Solomons were the logical objective, but the simple matter of the island chain's geography provided the first major test of the dual command arrangement. When the divided command arrangement was adopted, Nimitz's Pacific Ocean Area was further subdivided into South, Central, and North Pacific Areas. Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley commanded the South Pacific Area. The western boundary of Ghormley's (and by extension Nimitz's) South Pacific area was fixed at the 160th line of east longitude. The

160th line of east longitude effectively cut the island of Guadalcanal in half, the western half resided in MacArthur's SWPA theater and the eastern half resided in Nimitz's POA theater. With the preponderance of the Solomon Island chain residing in SWPA's AOR, MacArthur believed he should be placed in overall command of the recapture of the Solomons. Shortly after the Battle of Midway, General MacArthur requested that a division trained in amphibious warfare be made available to him along with a naval task force of two aircraft carriers for this purpose.<sup>2</sup> With this force in addition to the three army divisions he already commanded, MacArthur proposed to strike at New Britain and seize the heavily fortified Japanese base at Rabaul. Admiral Nimitz's plan was to strike first at the seaplane base at Tulagi in the eastern Solomons. King agreed with the concept of starting the offensive in the eastern Solomons and advancing northwestward to eventually seize Rabaul.

Not surprisingly, Admiral King was of the opinion that any operation to recapture the Solomons had to be under the command of Admiral Nimitz. For one, the only amphibious forces capable of executing a landing in the Solomons were the Marine troops already under Nimitz's command. In addition, Nimitz, in his capacity as the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, controlled the amphibious ships that could carry the Marines ashore and the carriers and escorts that could provide cover for an amphibious landing. As the resources were already under Nimitz's command, it stood to reason that he would be in overall command.

General MacArthur believed he should command the Solomons campaign, and under the initial command arrangement had the better justification for insisting on it. With regard to the Tulagi plan favored by Nimitz, Admiral King would later recall: "Marshall was favorably impressed by the idea, but proposed that it should be under the command of MacArthur rather than of Nimitz, as the Solomons were very close to the boundary line that had been established



between the two theaters.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, the majority of the Solomon Island chain rested within MacArthur’s SWPA AOR; however, the idea of placing elements of the Pacific Fleet under MacArthur’s operational control was so abhorrent to King that he threatened to undertake his own operation against the Solomons without the support of SWPA’s Army forces.<sup>4</sup> General MacArthur, sensitive to the proposed infringement on his territory stated: “It is quite evident in reviewing the whole situation that Navy contemplates assuming general command of all operations in the Pacific theater, the role of the Army being subsidiary and consisting largely of placing its forces at the disposal and under the command of Navy and Marine Officers.”<sup>5</sup> The only body that could mediate this dispute was the Joint Chiefs, and more specifically, General Marshall and Admiral King.

Although both service chiefs had their own opinions on the matter, it was obvious that the offensive in the Solomons could not be held up on account of interservice squabbling. On 2 July 1942, Marshall and King decided on a compromise. Instead of unifying the Solomons campaign under one theater commander, they divided the Solomons campaign and the command thereof up into three phases or tasks. To facilitate the accomplishment of Task I, the western boundary of the South Pacific Area was moved further west to the 159th line of east longitude, thus placing Tulagi and Guadalcanal in Nimitz’s AOR:

Task I. The seizure and occupation of the Santa Cruz Islands and Tulagi, under the command of Nimitz, with a target date of 1 August.

Task II. The seizure and occupation of Lae, Salamaua and the northeast coast of New Guinea, to be under the command of MacArthur.

Task III. The seizure and occupation of Rabaul and adjacent positions in the New Guinea--New Ireland area, to be under the overall command of MacArthur<sup>6</sup>

If the Solomons campaign did not provide a workable opportunity to unify command in the Pacific once and for all, it at least afforded the JCS an opportunity to unify command of the Solomons campaign at the operational level. Marshall and King deserve credit for their

willingness and ability to compromise, but they settled on a stop-gap measure that preserved an atmosphere where service interests dominated over what was militarily sound. When the JCS initially made their decision to establish a divided command in the Pacific, it is unlikely they foresaw it having an impact at the operational level. However, when they compromised on the division of tasks and command for the Solomons campaign, this realization could not have escaped them. In effect, they decided to resolve the issue later.

Having decided on a course of compromise instead of command at this opportunity, it made it easier and more acceptable to do so for future operations. Task I of the Solomons campaign which actually began on 7 August 1942 would not be accomplished until February 1943. The campaign ground on for so long that Nimitz relieved his COMSOPAC, Vice Admiral Ghormley, and replaced him with Vice Admiral William Halsey on 18 October 1942. Halsey, an able and aggressive commander, was able to see Task I to a successful conclusion.

As it became evident that Task I was drawing to a close, however, the details of Tasks II and III came under scrutiny by the Joint Chiefs again.

But it remained to be determined what precise form of support should be given him [MacArthur] by Halsey, who had the continuing duty in his own area of maintaining the security of the Hawaii-Australia line of communications. As the African campaign was absorbing more than had been anticipated, forces were short. This problem of Pacific command was discussed with the President by Leahy, Marshall, King and Harry Hopkins on 13 February [1943], and it continued to occupy their attention for some weeks.<sup>7</sup>

Marshall advocated once again that the direction of the war in the Pacific should be placed under MacArthur, with Admiral King just as adamantly insisting that it fall under Nimitz. On 28 March 1943, a JCS meeting was held to arrive at a final decision. Admiral Leahy recalled: “It was decided that MacArthur should have full control of operations on shore in New Guinea and the adjacent islands. Admiral Halsey was to operate along a parallel line in support of MacArthur. The Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (Admiral Nimitz) was given full command

in other Pacific areas with full responsibility for defeating the Japanese fleet.”<sup>8</sup> Once again, the JCS had an opportunity to resolve this problem of command, and opted for a half-measure.

The decision, and more importantly, the command arrangement it lays out is rather vague. MacArthur and Halsey were to cooperate with the common aim of completing the conquest of the Solomons. This operation, called Cartwheel was generated by MacArthur and his staff. The plan for Cartwheel characterized the command relationship as follows:

1. Campaign to be conducted under overall command of MacArthur
2. Operations in the Solomons to be carried out under the direct command of Halsey, operating under general directives from MacArthur
3. Ships, planes, and ground forces of the Pacific Fleet to remain under control of Nimitz unless assigned by the Joint Chiefs to task forces engaged in specific operations<sup>9</sup>

The decision of the JCS is significant in that it imposed on Admiral Nimitz the “full responsibility for defeating the Japanese fleet,” and is further evidence of their inability to resolve the thorny issue of command responsibilities. This trend would continue through the planning of the eventual return to the Philippines, and would lead to difficulties in command and control at the Battle for Leyte Gulf. In his autobiography, Halsey described his relationship with his two superiors:

Whereas the over-all strategy of the whole area was in MacArthur’s hands, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had put tactical command of the Solomons subarea in mine. Although this arrangement was sensible and satisfactory, it had the curious effect of giving me two “hats” in the same echelon. My original hat was under Nimitz, who controlled my troops, ships, and supplies; now I had another hat under MacArthur, who controlled my strategy.<sup>10</sup>

Halsey was thus placed in the position where he had to serve two masters. As the commander of SOPAC, he was still directly answerable to Nimitz and had the continuing duty of

protecting the sea lines of communication with Australia. The stipulation that he would operate under MacArthur's "general directives" did nothing to relieve him of his duties and responsibilities to Nimitz. The arrangement would be successful however, because Halsey and MacArthur developed an abiding respect for each other, and Halsey did his best to always play the loyal subordinate to MacArthur and Nimitz.

At this stage of operations, Nimitz could afford to let Halsey "cooperate" with MacArthur. Nimitz's Pacific Fleet was still lacking in carrier strength, and much of the fighting that Halsey's South Pacific force engaged in was able to be supported by land based aircraft provided by the 5th Air Force. In short, Nimitz had a plan for a central Pacific offensive but for the time being, lacked the means of carrying it out. The forces Nimitz needed to carry out the leaps and bounds across the Pacific were still being built at this stage. The resultant lull in Nimitz's operational tempo meant that he did not need Halsey elsewhere. The cooperation of Halsey's South Pacific forces with MacArthur's SWPA forces worked in no small part because Halsey worked to satisfy MacArthur's strategic objectives. MacArthur respected Halsey's aggressive style and Halsey formed a positive impression of the General upon their first meeting, an impression Halsey said grew steadily during the war.<sup>11</sup>

As time wore on, newly constructed aircraft carriers, battleships, amphibious ships, transports, oilers, fighters, dive bombers, and torpedo bombers transformed Nimitz's force into a fleet of unprecedented striking power. This fleet was highly mobile and had no need to operate under an umbrella of land based air cover. It provided the means necessary to make Nimitz's strategy of a central Pacific offensive a reality. As a result, MacArthur and Nimitz had disagreements over strategy that would require mediation from above.

In broad terms, the Navy favored the central Pacific offensive because it afforded the quickest means to bring about Japan's surrender. By capturing key strategic islands like the Gilberts, Marshalls, Marianas, and Formosa, the U.S. would acquire air bases, sea bases, and anchorages from which they could sustain their drive and eventually bring combat power to bear against the Japanese mainland. This strategy also offered the greatest probability of bringing out the remnants of the Japanese fleet for a decisive battle. At some point, the Combined Fleet would have to come out in force to defend their possessions or the home islands themselves.

The strategy espoused by General MacArthur of course involved a return to the Philippines. MacArthur proposed the movement of troops through a series of amphibious operations supported by land based aircraft along the north coast of New Guinea. MacArthur envisioned using these operations as a stepping stone toward the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. This amphibious capability would allow MacArthur's forces to bypass enemy strongpoints and leave Japanese garrisons isolated and therefore combat ineffective.

MacArthur's plan saw the Philippines as critical to the eventual defeat of Japan, because it would allow the allies to interdict Japan's line of supply to its southern resource area. MacArthur was also wedded to the idea of making a triumphant return to the Philippines. Proponents of the central Pacific offensive saw that the best way to help the Philippines was to bring about the quick defeat of the Japanese. Formosa held out significant promise because it was geographically closer to the Japanese mainland than the Philippines.

#### Pearl Harbor Conference: Roosevelt Intervenes

In July of 1944, a conference was held in Pearl Harbor that allowed General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz to present their plans to President Roosevelt. In March 1944, Admirals Leahy, King, and Nimitz briefed President Roosevelt on Pacific war plans at the White House.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of this meeting, Admiral Leahy recalled: “I felt that Roosevelt recognized that perhaps disagreement in the Pacific grew out of a clash of personalities, and he made up his mind that he would make a personal inspection trip in the Pacific as soon as he could.”<sup>13</sup> It is important to remember that 1944 was an election year, and Roosevelt had recently accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination for a fourth term. The visit to Pearl Harbor presented an opportunity to cement Roosevelt’s credentials as the Commander in Chief. General Marshall, General Arnold, and Admiral King were not invited to the conference, even though Admiral King had been in Pearl Harbor days before the President’s arrival.<sup>14</sup> Admiral Leahy did attend the conference, but only in his capacity as Chief of Staff to the President. Leaving the Joint Chiefs out of the conference presented the image that the war was not being run by committee, but that the President was the one whose hand was firmly on the helm directing the war effort. Last but not least, General MacArthur’s name was enjoying some circulation as a potential candidate for the Republican nomination, and the conference meant that MacArthur could not help but be seen in a subordinate light to Roosevelt.

Political considerations aside, the purpose of the conference was to determine the way ahead for the war in the Pacific. The conference began in earnest on 27 July 1944. Admiral Nimitz presented the Navy strategy which outlined the plan to bypass the Philippines and seize Formosa. Years later, in his *Reminiscences*, MacArthur recalled: “Admiral Nimitz put forth the Navy plan, but I was sure it was King’s and not his own.”<sup>15</sup> Halsey, writing in 1947 provides some evidence to support this account: “Almost alone among senior Admirals, Chester [Nimitz] and I advocated invading the central Philippines, building a major base, and jumping from there to the home islands of Japan, via Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Ernie King, on the other hand, strongly

recommended by-passing the Philippines and occupying Formosa...”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this would account for Nimitz’s eventual acceptance of the MacArthur plan.

MacArthur of course presented his plan, which included reason and sentiment. To him it was unconscionable that the 17,000,000 Filipinos could be abandoned in favor of the attack on Formosa. It was equally unconscionable that the United States would not fulfill MacArthur’s own promise to return to the Philippines. In the end, MacArthur’s argument carried more weight, and the attendees agreed that the Philippines were the next target. Admiral Leahy, who was pleasantly surprised at how “peaceful” the conference went, recalled: “I personally was convinced that MacArthur and Nimitz were, together, the two best qualified officers in our service for this tremendous task. Nimitz promised that he would give the Army commander the needed transportation and naval support.”<sup>17</sup> Leahy’s estimation of MacArthur’s and Nimitz’s qualifications may very well have been correct, but his summation of the conference highlights the inherently problematic command division which had never been adequately addressed. Upon his return to Washington, Admiral Leahy communicated the details of the agreement reached to the Joint Chiefs. Consequently, The Joint Chiefs agreed to order General MacArthur to occupy Leyte with a target date of 20 December 1944.<sup>18</sup> MacArthur was ordered to occupy Leyte because the Philippines lay entirely within the SWPA AOR.

#### Planning for the Leyte Invasion

If anyone believed that true unity of effort had been achieved as a result of the handshakes exchanged at this conference, the planning for Leyte Gulf and conduct of the battle demonstrated that inherent organizational flaws are not so easily overcome. In making his case for the Philippines, MacArthur assured President Roosevelt that he had sufficient ground and air forces, but lacked the necessary landing craft and naval support.<sup>19</sup> Since the SWPA theater had

been established in 1942, MacArthur had subsequently been provided with his own naval force. This naval force was designated the Seventh Fleet in March of 1943, and by the time of the Leyte operation was commanded by Admiral Thomas Kinkaid. This force was inadequate to perform an amphibious operation on the scale that the seizure of Leyte required. To execute the Leyte operation, significant resources would have to be provided by Nimitz's POA forces.

Although the initial target date for the Leyte invasion was 20 December, events caused the timeline to be moved up two months. In September, Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet conducted preliminary carrier strikes against the Philippines, and encountered minimal resistance. He recommended to Admiral Nimitz that the Leyte invasion be moved up, and Nimitz passed this recommendation on to the Joint Chiefs, who were attending the QUADRANT conference in Quebec.<sup>20</sup> MacArthur was notified of the new development, and later notified the Joint Chiefs that he could support a date of 20 October. Writing in 1947, General Marshall described the Joint Chiefs' decision:

Having the utmost confidence in General MacArthur, Admiral Nimitz, and Admiral Halsey, it was not a difficult decision to make. Within 90 minutes after the signal had been received in Quebec, General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz had received their instructions to execute the Leyte operation on the target date of 20 October, abandoning the three previously approved intermediary landings.<sup>21</sup>

The three intermediary landings were the seizure of Yap, Mindanao, and Talaud. Mindanao was an ideal island for allied airfields. In choosing to accelerate the invasion timeline and cancel these operations, it meant that the Leyte landing would begin beyond the range of allied land based air. Until airfields could be captured or established on Leyte, air cover would necessarily be provided by Third Fleet's carrier aircraft.

On 21 September, MacArthur issued Operations Instruction No. 70, in which "...MacArthur directed that SWPA forces covered and supported by the Third Fleet would



reoccupy the Philippines by seizing and occupying objectives in the Leyte and western Samar areas...”<sup>22</sup> In addition to providing air cover during the landing, Halsey’s Third Fleet would be expected to defend the invasion force against Japanese attempts to disrupt the landing.

However, Nimitz issued his own Operation Plan 8-44 on 27 September which echoed the cover and support mission promulgated by MacArthur’s instruction, and further directed Halsey to “destroy enemy naval and air forces in or threatening the Philippine Area”<sup>23</sup> This task is in keeping with the covering mission prescribed by MacArthur, but Nimitz went further still. An additional task was imposed on Halsey which fundamentally changed the spirit of the cover and support mission. It should be remembered that the JCS imposed upon Nimitz “the full responsibility for defeating the Japanese fleet” consequently, Nimitz added, “In case opportunity for destruction of major portion of the enemy fleet offers or can be created, such destruction becomes the primary task.”<sup>24</sup> What is most troublesome about this additional task is not that it broadens or obfuscates the cover and support mission, but that it set conditions that allowed Halsey to interpret the cover and support mission as a secondary consideration.

By keeping the Pacific theater divided, the Joint Chiefs created conditions for disunity of effort. They imposed on Nimitz a duty that MacArthur did not share, and Nimitz was not bound by any command arrangement to inform MacArthur of the additional tasks assigned to Halsey. Halsey remained answerable to Nimitz alone. As such, Halsey was delegated the responsibility of defeating the Japanese fleet. During the upcoming battle, Halsey would do his utmost to do just that, and the consequences would prove a near disaster.

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<sup>1</sup>Cray, 326.

<sup>2</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 112; King and Whitehill, 386.

- <sup>3</sup>King and Whitehill, 387.
- <sup>4</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 112; Buell, *Master of Seapower*, 215-216; Spector, 185; Cray, p.327.
- <sup>5</sup>Toland, 347.
- <sup>6</sup>King and Whitehill, 387-388.
- <sup>7</sup>King and Whitehill, 429.
- <sup>8</sup>Leahy, 153.
- <sup>9</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 210.
- <sup>10</sup>William F. Halsey and J. Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York, NY: Whittlesey House, 1947), 154.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>12</sup>Leahy, 230.
- <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 230.
- <sup>14</sup>King and Whitehill, 568.
- <sup>15</sup>Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1985), 197.
- <sup>16</sup>Halsey, 195.
- <sup>17</sup>Leahy, 251.
- <sup>18</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 321.
- <sup>19</sup>Leahy, 250.
- <sup>20</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 323.
- <sup>21</sup>The War Reports, Marshall, 227-228.
- <sup>22</sup>Vego, 106.
- <sup>23</sup>Potter. *Nimitz*, 325.
- <sup>24</sup>Vego, 126.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF

Having put off an opportunity to unify command in the Pacific, the Joint Chiefs committed the Allies to a campaign that drew forces from two Pacific theaters, and neither theater's Commander in Chief in overall command of the resources necessary to bring it to a successful conclusion. Admiral King had insisted on maintaining the division of command and the other Joint Chiefs acquiesced to his demands.

By keeping the divided command structure intact, the Joint Chiefs set conditions whereby unity of command and unity of effort for the Leyte operation were compromised from the start. This would have an adverse impact on three key areas. First, Kinkaid and Halsey would approach the campaign with disparate views on what the main effort was. Second, the ill-conceived division of command meant the two fleet commanders were not able to easily communicate with one another. Third, and perhaps most detrimental, there was no senior naval officer designated to coordinate or provide direction for the naval components. In the event of discord or disagreement between the two fleet commanders, there existed no common superior to appeal to for resolution. Thus the longstanding impasse in the Joint Chief decision on the Pacific command structure nearly led to disaster.

MacArthur and Nimitz had different missions imposed on them by the Joint Chiefs. The Joint Chiefs directed MacArthur to seize and occupy Leyte Gulf as a base for future operations within in the Philippines and beyond. The Joint Chiefs further directed Nimitz to support MacArthur in this effort, which he did by providing numerous ships and personnel to MacArthur's SWPA Theater. However, Nimitz alone shouldered the responsibility for destroying the Japanese Fleet. The result of these differing objectives meant that principal naval

subordinates entered the battle with disparate views regarding the objectives of the naval campaign. Kinkaid directed his efforts toward satisfying General MacArthur's intent of seizing and occupying Leyte. Halsey directed his efforts toward satisfying Admiral Nimitz's intent of covering and supporting the landings on Leyte *and* bringing about the destruction of the Japanese fleet. Regardless of Nimitz's intent, the addition of the destruction corollary, coupled with Halsey's obsession with fighting the Japanese carriers in a decisive engagement gave Halsey the latitude to seek and destroy the Japanese carriers.

### Preliminary Operations

The naval battle that has come to be known as the Battle of Leyte Gulf was actually three separate naval engagements that were fought in waters surrounding Leyte Gulf. These are: the Battle of Surigao Strait, the Battle of Samar, and the Battle of Cape Engaño. Although the target date for the invasion of Leyte, called A-day, was 20 October 1944, preparatory operations for the landings began days earlier. In addition to carrier airstrikes against the island, minesweeping operations were conducted to make safe the entry of Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf's battleships. These ships were required early in the battle because their task was to bombard the Leyte defenses in preparation for the landings. This preparatory bombardment began on 18 October. Underwater Demolition Teams investigated for the presence of underwater obstacles, but none were found. While some opposition was encountered from shore defenses, the preliminary operations were successful enough to allow General MacArthur to fulfill his promise to return to the Philippines on 20 October. MacArthur reported: "Operations proceeding splendidly in every respect. Strategically enemy seems caught unawares apparently in anticipation of attack to southward. His MINDANAO forces are already practically isolated and are no longer an immediate factor in the campaign."<sup>1</sup> At this early stage of the operation, things

appeared to be moving exactly according to MacArthur's plan on land. In the days to come however, MacArthur's plan and Nimitz's plan would not mesh so seamlessly in the waters surrounding Leyte Gulf.

### Differing Objectives

Halsey's orders from Nimitz included the provision: "in case opportunity for destruction of major portion of the enemy fleet offers or can be created, such destruction becomes the primary task."<sup>2</sup> The Battle for Leyte Gulf was not the first instance where Admiral Nimitz included the destruction task for a force assigned a protection and support role. He had included the same destruction task word-for-word in his Operations Order 6-44 for the occupation of Ulithi and Palau.<sup>3</sup> What drove Nimitz and his staff to explicitly include the destruction mission was likely Spruance's recent conduct of The Battle of the Philippine Sea, and more specifically the amphibious landing at Saipan which occurred in June of 1944. Spruance considered his primary mission to be the protection of the amphibious landing force from harassment by Japanese air and surface forces. His orders included no discussion of going on the offensive to destroy the Japanese Fleet.<sup>4</sup> As such, he kept his forces (including the carriers of Mitscher's TF 58) close to the landing beaches. In the naval battle that followed, Spruance caused the loss of hundreds of Japanese planes and pilots, but the Imperial Japanese Fleet lived to fight another day.

Spruance was harshly criticized by senior admirals in the Navy, many of them aviators, for his excessive caution. In their opinion Spruance, a non-aviator, had robbed his carrier forces of their mobility and striking power. Nimitz's new Deputy CINCPAC, Vice Admiral John H. Towers, was particularly harsh in his criticism and even lobbied Nimitz to fire Spruance for his mishandling of the battle and allowing the Japanese Fleet to escape.<sup>5</sup> Nimitz did not relieve

Spruance, but the Battle of the Philippine Sea undoubtedly influenced his decision to include explicit instructions for the destruction of the Japanese Fleet in subsequent operations. Halsey, an aviator, did not criticize Spruance but he was undoubtedly aware of the controversy his actions had provoked.

If there was one admiral in the Navy who did not require explicit instructions to seek and destroy the Japanese Fleet, it was Halsey. Professor Michael Palmer wrote of Halsey: “Like most senior American naval commanders, he eagerly sought a Pacific Trafalgar--a climactic and decisive battle with the main Japanese fleet. Moreover, ‘Bull’ Halsey was a frustrated flat-top admiral: despite his seniority as an aviator, he had missed the major carrier battles fought in the Coral Sea, off Midway, and most recently in the Philippine Sea.”<sup>6</sup> Shortly after Nimitz promulgated his Operation Plan 8-44, Halsey wrote Nimitz a letter wherein he stated: “Inasmuch as the destruction of the enemy fleet is the principal task, every weapon must be brought into play and the general coordination of these 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...”<sup>7</sup> This letter, dated 28 September 1944, shows that weeks before the battle was set to begin, Halsey had already placed primary emphasis on the task of destroying the Japanese Fleet. Admiral Nimitz’s inclusion of the destruction mission in addition to the cover and support mission was likely designed to permit Halsey latitude in the accomplishment of his other tasks, but the wording had the unintended consequence of allowing Admiral Halsey to interpret what his primary mission was based on the circumstances.

In Halsey’s own Operation Order 21-44 issued on 03 October 1944 to Third Fleet, he stated that the destruction task was the primary task to be accomplished by Third Fleet in the

Leyte Operation.<sup>8</sup> Halsey would act to bring about this battle of annihilation. On 21 October, Halsey sent a message to MacArthur inquiring when was the earliest time the transports would be withdrawn. In Halsey's opinion, the need to cover the transports hampered Halsey's ability to deal with enemy forces that might threaten the Philippines, and he wanted to know when the transports would be withdrawn because it would free him for further offensive action.<sup>9</sup> Halsey, ever mindful of Nimitz's "destruction" task broke radio silence to inquire of Kinkaid whether San Bernardino and Surigao Straits had been cleared of mines. As the Japanese had yet to be located in force, Halsey intended to go looking for them. Nimitz, who was privy to Halsey's communications, sent word to Halsey reminding him of the portion of the operation plan that required Halsey to cover and support the landings at Leyte. Nimitz further cautioned Halsey that no major portions of the Third Fleet would transit the San Bernardino or Surigao Strait unless ordered to do so by Nimitz.<sup>10</sup> This exchange illustrates Halsey's near obsession with destroying the Japanese fleet. The Japanese carrier forces were still unlocated, and Halsey's idea of transiting west through the straits would leave the Leyte beachhead vulnerable to attack from the east. Nimitz, who was normally reticent to interfere with the decisions of a commander at the scene of action, felt it necessary to remind Halsey of his cover and support role in the operation.

Halsey's primary target was the Japanese carrier force under Ozawa. He sought above all else to bring the Japanese carriers within the range of his powerful TF 38. Despite Nimitz's earlier admonishments, when Halsey located the Japanese carriers, he would decide to abandon his cover and support role and leave elements of the Seventh Fleet at the mercy of Vice Admiral Kurita's heavy surface forces, hereafter termed the Center Force, during the Battle off Samar.

Kinkaid had no reason to believe that Halsey would act contrary to the cover and support mission as first outlined by MacArthur's Operations Instruction No. 70. Halsey was not obliged

to notify Kinkaid or MacArthur of his intentions or plans, because he was not in their chain of command. This along with the poor communications that existed between Seventh and Third Fleets meant that Kinkaid would make assumptions as to Halsey's intentions and force dispositions that were dangerously inaccurate.

### Communications

The division of command imposed obstacles on the free flow of communications between Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet and Halsey's Third Fleet during the conduct of the operation. The lack of communication meant that neither fleet commander could derive what today would be termed a Common Operating Picture (COP) of what was actually occurring in and around the Leyte battlespace. Messages from Kinkaid to Halsey were often routed in a haphazard fashion and arrived woefully late and out of sequence. Likewise, Halsey communicated information regarding his intended fleet disposition and movement to Admiral Nimitz and his subordinates, but was under no obligation to share that information with Admiral Kinkaid. This ill conceived structure caused each fleet commander to make inaccurate assumptions about the conduct of the battle.

The dual command structure in effect at Leyte also made it time consuming for Kinkaid to communicate with Halsey. To communicate directly with Halsey, Kinkaid had to transmit his message traffic to an intermediate radio station on the island of Manus. From there it would be rebroadcast to its intended recipients. Author Evan Thomas asserts that this restriction was designed so that MacArthur could see all message traffic.<sup>11</sup> In his biography of Halsey, Potter asserts: "MacArthur, insistent on maintaining the independence of his command, forbade any uninterrupted channel of communication from the Seventh Fleet to the Third."<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the reasoning behind this regulation, it impeded the flow of message traffic from Kinkaid to



Halsey. Potter continues: “The operators at Manus stacked the urgent messages and sent them out in the order they arrived or made a wild guess about which had priority. As a result it sometimes took hours for a dispatch to get from Kinkaid to Halsey, and often the messages arrived out of sequence.”<sup>13</sup> In his recent book on the battle, H.P. Willmott states:

One hesitates to write anything in defense of MacArthur, but for naval historians to blame an army general for a lack of proper communications between naval formations seems to be at the very limit of credibility. In any event, a theater commander can hardly be blamed for lack of communications between one of his forces and a counterpart in another theater; that responsibility and task, surely, fell to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and specifically King, who bore executive responsibility for the Pacific.<sup>14</sup>

Willmott’s point is well taken. King’s earlier assertion that the Joint Chiefs would control strategy in the Pacific, coupled with the JCS’s refusal to resolve the issue of divided command in the Pacific absolved MacArthur of the ultimate responsibility. The point is not to cast blame on MacArthur; instead it is to illustrate the larger point that Third Fleet was not a “counterpart in another theater.” It was from another theater but was operating very much within MacArthur’s geographic area of responsibility. It was not his fault that Third Fleet, a unit who played a major part in determining the operation’s success or failure, was outside his operational control.

Willmott does not dispute that MacArthur wanted to keep a tight rein on communications originating within his theater. That MacArthur did so is an illustration, or a symptom, of how disunity of command adversely impacted the Leyte operation. MacArthur would have had no need to hold communications tight if Third Fleet had been placed under his operational control for the duration of the campaign.

By 23 October, disturbing reports regarding the movement of Japanese surface forces came to the attention of Kinkaid and Halsey. In the early morning hours, U.S. submarines operating on the western side of the Philippines reported the presence of a Japanese surface force transiting to the northeast in the Palawan passage. Submarines *Darter* and *Dace* had encountered

the heavy surface forces of Vice Admiral Kurita's center force, whose mission was to steam through San Bernardino Strait and destroy the transports within Leyte Gulf on 25 October.<sup>15</sup> *Darter* and *Dace* combined to sink two of Kurita's heavy cruisers, but the most crucial role played by the submarines was to alert both Kinkaid and Halsey that Japanese surface forces were on the move toward the Leyte objective area. Neither Seventh Fleet's nor Third Fleet's intelligence suggested that heavy Japanese surface forces would come out in large numbers to contest the landings at Leyte. Kinkaid's order 13-44 dated 26 September to Seventh Fleet stated:

- 1.(d) It is not believed that major elements of the Japanese fleet will be involved in the present operations.
2. It is possible that he will endeavor to strike our attack and reinforcement units with a fast task force of cruisers and destroyers. In addition he will endeavor to concentrate his PT and inshore patrol craft and use them against our landing craft and transports. Attacks by enemy submarines on targets of opportunity may be expected. Participation of Orange [Japanese] BBs [battleships] in defense of Eastern Philippines area is not considered probable.<sup>16</sup>

Kinkaid was of the opinion that this force was a reinforcement effort for the Japanese troops defending Leyte, and Halsey agreed.<sup>17</sup>

At 0820 on 24 October, search planes from Halsey's Task Group 38 reported twenty-five ships of Kurita's force south of Mindoro approximately 240 nautical miles from Leyte Gulf and continuing east.<sup>18</sup> Based on this report, Halsey ordered three of his carrier task groups to attack.<sup>19</sup> He did however keep search planes airborne to the northeast of Leyte Gulf in the hopes of finding the Japanese carrier force. At 0943, Halsey's search planes discovered the Japanese Southern Force under the command of Rear Admiral Nishimura. Nishimura's mission was to transit a southern route through the Philippine archipelago and pass through Surigao Strait from where it could engage Allied transports. Halsey chose not to strike Nishimura's force because Kurita's force represented the greater danger due to its size and composition, also because

Halsey was confident that Kinkaid had enough defensive capability within Leyte Gulf to deal with Nishimura's relatively light force.<sup>20</sup> Kinkaid's biographer, Gerald Wheeler, states: "Kinkaid let Halsey know by dispatch that the Seventh Fleet could handle the Southern Force and he expected the Third Fleet to take care of the Center Force, the term used for what was later identified as Kurita's First Striking Force."<sup>21</sup> The planes of TF 38 encountered Kurita's force in the Sibuyan Sea and were able to inflict some damage.

As happened previously in the war, the pilots who flew the missions against the Japanese force exaggerated how much damage was actually inflicted. The ships of Kurita's center force did temporarily retire to the west to stay outside of the range of Halsey's carrier strikes. But as Potter points out: "At about 1400 U.S. pilots reported that the whole enemy force had reversed course and was heading west, apparently in retirement."<sup>22</sup> While Halsey's attacks weakened Kurita's force they did not eliminate it as a threat. Halsey placed far too much faith in the damage reports of his pilots, and would use them as a justification for turning his back on San Bernardino Strait at a critical juncture of the battle.

#### Halsey's Battle Plan

At 1512 that afternoon, Halsey sent a message to his subordinate commanders in Third Fleet entitled "Battle Plan." This message was also sent to Nimitz and King to keep them apprised of developments. The message stated that 4 battleships (including Halsey's flagship USS New Jersey), 3 heavy cruisers, and 6 destroyers from TF 38 "will be formed as TF 34 under V.Adm [Willis] Lee Commander Battle Line. TF 34 engage decisively at long ranges."<sup>23</sup> As further evidence of the perils of division of command, Halsey did not address the message to Kinkaid. Had he done so it would have been out of mere courtesy. Nothing in the dual command arrangement required him to keep MacArthur or Kinkaid abreast of his intentions. Kinkaid was

aware of its contents, however. Contrary to regulations, his communications personnel listened in on Halsey's frequencies and decoded all message traffic sent by Halsey whether intended for Kinkaid or not.<sup>24</sup> No doubt, Kinkaid did this in order to keep informed of what Halsey was up to.

Kinkaid felt no need to respond directly to Halsey as a result of this message, because it allowed Kinkaid to draw the false conclusion that San Bernardino would be covered by TF 34.<sup>25</sup> In short, it raised no alarm within Seventh Fleet because it said exactly what Kinkaid wanted to hear. In his autobiography, Admiral Halsey explained the message this way: "This dispatch which played a critical part in the next day's battle, I intended merely as warning to the ships concerned that *if a surface engagement offered*, I would detach them from TF 38, form them into TF 34, and send them ahead as a battle line. It was definitely not an executive dispatch, but a battle plan, and was so marked."<sup>26</sup> The wording of the message must have raised some questions within Halsey's staff or from his subordinate commanders, because Halsey felt the need to clarify it. Unfortunately for Kinkaid, Halsey did this on a circuit that Kinkaid could not eavesdrop on. Via Third Fleet's Talk Between Ships (TBS) circuit, Halsey stated: "If the enemy sorties [through San Bernardino], TF 34 will be formed *when directed by me*."<sup>27</sup> Regardless of Halsey's later explanation, it was understood by Admiral Kinkaid, Admiral Nimitz, and Admiral King to mean that TF 34 had been created with the responsibility of guarding the San Bernardino Strait. CINCPAC's Operations Daily Summary of 24 October 1944 reads: "Task Force 34 organized, under Vice Admiral Lee."<sup>28</sup> Kinkaid persisted in this belief until the opening salvos of the Battle off Samar, when Kurita's center force sailed through San Bernardino Strait with no American covering force to stop him.

After Halsey sent his battle plan message to Third Fleet and Admiral Nimitz, Ozawa's Japanese carrier force, or Northern Force, was discovered at 1640 by search planes from TG 38.3

under Rear Admiral Forrest Sherman. The position of this contact report placed the carriers some 450 miles from the center of Leyte Gulf.<sup>29</sup> At long last, Halsey knew where the Japanese carriers were and weighed three alternative courses of action: The first was to Guard San Bernardino Strait with the whole of his Third Fleet. Halsey rejected this because he viewed Ozawa's carrier force as the biggest threat to Allied plans and did not want to yield the initiative to the enemy. His second option was to leave TF 34 behind as suggested in his battle plan, and take fast carrier TG 38.2, TG 38.3, and TG 38.4 north to meet the enemy. Rear Admiral McCain's TG 38.1 had been given permission to rearm and refit at Ulithi on the evening of 22 October. Halsey rejected this option because he did not want to divide his forces in the presence of Japanese land based and carrier based air threats. The third option Halsey weighed was to leave San Bernardino Strait uncovered and strike Ozawa's force with his whole fleet. Halsey accepted this option. In his autobiography, Halsey rationalized his acceptance of this course of action:

It preserved my fleet's integrity, it left the initiative with me, and it promised the greatest possibility of surprise. Even if the 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.<sup>30</sup>

With that, Halsey had made his decision to abandon the San Bernardino Strait and seek out the decisive battle he had been waiting for. Accordingly, at about 1950 on the 24<sup>th</sup>, Halsey sent this notification to Kinkaid: "CENTRAL FORCE HEAVILY DAMAGED ACCORDING TO STRIKE REPORTS X AM PROCEEDING NORTH WITH THREE GROUPS TO ATTACK CARRIER FORCE AT DAWN"<sup>31</sup> What Halsey did not know of course, was that he was doing exactly as the Japanese hoped he would. Kurita's Central Force posed the greatest danger to the landings at Leyte. Ozawa's Northern Force was merely a decoy designed to lure Halsey's carriers away from San Bernardino Strait and leave the way open for Kurita to pounce on the

vulnerable transports and escort carriers of Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet. In his post-war interrogation, Ozawa highlighted the importance of Kurita's mission, stating: "I thought if Kurita's fleet ever succeeded in attacking your landing forces I would be satisfied, even though totally destroyed; if they destroyed the transports there in Leyte Gulf I would have been satisfied."<sup>32</sup> Halsey notified Kinkaid that he was going north with the three carrier groups at his disposal to attack the enemy carriers. Kinkaid was not concerned about Halsey's notification because he assumed that TF 34 had been formed to stand guard over the San Bernardino.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Kinkaid prepared to engage Nishimura's Southern Force, and made no preparations for a surface encounter with Kurita's Central Force.

#### The Battle of Surigao Strait

The Battle of Surigao Strait, which began on the evening of 24 October and lasted into the morning of 25 October, was not adversely impacted by divided command or Halsey's decision to leave the San Bernardino Strait unguarded. Kinkaid was aware that Nishimura was approaching, and determined he had enough firepower at his disposal to handle the Southern Force. Based on the sighting reports by Halsey's aircraft and Nishimura's leisurely speed of 15 knots, Kinkaid ordered his Seventh Fleet to prepare for a night engagement.<sup>34</sup> Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf's Fire Support Group TF 77.2, which consisted of several battleships that had been repaired since they were damaged at Pearl Harbor, would guard the Surigao Strait along with PT boats and destroyers. Oldendorf's original mission was to provide the initial shore bombardment in preparation for Allied landings; as a result, his ships carried an abundance of explosive and incendiary shells, but were light on the armor-piercing projectiles necessary to fight a surface engagement. In the end, Oldendorf defeated Nishimura's Southern Force, but expended their already limited quantities of armor piercing projectiles to do so.

### The Center Force Breaks Through

While Oldendorf was doing battle with Nishimura's force, Kurita had since resumed his eastbound approach to San Bernardino Strait. This fact was known to Halsey, because at 2145 on 24 October, a plane from Halsey's carrier groups reported Kurita's force farther east than they had ever been reported before, and therefore clearly headed for the San Bernardino Strait. This report reached Halsey by 2320, but it is unknown whether this information was forwarded to VADM Kinkaid.<sup>35</sup> What is known is that at 0412 on the morning of 25 October, Kinkaid sent a message to Halsey specifically inquiring whether TF 34 had been left behind to guard San Bernardino Strait.<sup>36</sup> The message read: "AM NOW ENGAGING ENEMY FORCES SURIGAO STRAIT X QUESTION IS TF 34 GUARDING SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT"<sup>37</sup> This inquiry on Kinkaid's part seems to imply that there was some doubt on the part of Kinkaid or his staff as to Halsey's whereabouts.

What may have introduced doubt in Kinkaid's mind was the wording of Halsey's message wherein he stated "Am proceeding north..." In Halsey's original battle plan, it was understood by Kinkaid that Halsey's flagship *New Jersey* would be part of TF 34. Halsey's message stating "Am proceeding north" would seem to imply that Halsey and the *New Jersey* were in fact not guarding San Bernardino Strait as part of TF 34, but that Halsey was proceeding north with his entire force. Kinkaid sent his message at 0412, but due to the communications difficulties previously described, it would be hours before Halsey actually received it.

Kinkaid was aware that Halsey's available carrier strength was steaming to the North to engage Ozawa's Northern Force, so Kinkaid had ordered air searches of the San Bernardino Strait as a precaution to provide advance notice of Kurita's movements. These searches were to be conducted by Catalina PBY's from VPB-33. Kinkaid further directed that planes from TG

77.4 conduct air searches of the entrance to San Bernardino beginning at dawn on 25 October. Of the ten available PBY planes that had been flown into Leyte Gulf the previous afternoon, only three were available.<sup>38</sup> One of the PBY's overflowed San Bernardino Strait but did not detect Kurita's force. In a study of the battle conducted on behalf of the Naval War College, Richard Bates states:

Why this plane failed to contact the Main Body First Striking Force [Kurita's Center Force] is not explained, but it seems to have been due to the fact that having departed Leyte Gulf about 2115, the plane passed through San Bernardino Strait shortly before the arrival of the Main Body, First Striking Force and later, retracing its track, flew by the force--though apparently not sufficiently close for detection--which was cruising within twenty miles of the coast of Samar until sunrise the morning of the 25th.<sup>39</sup>

#### The Battle That Should Never Have Been Fought: The Battle Off Samar

By 0648, some two and a half hours after Kinkaid transmitted his message inquiring whether TF 34 was guarding San Bernardino Strait, Halsey finally received it. Halsey's response to Kinkaid was disquieting to say the least: "NEGATIVE X IT IS WITH OUR CARRIERS ENGAGING ENEMY CARRIERS."<sup>40</sup> The stage was now set for a battle that should never have been fought. Although Kurita's force had been bombed, torpedoed, and strafed during the preceding 48 hours, he still had an impressive array of forces at his disposal. This force should have been rendered combat ineffective in the Sibuyan Sea, but due to inadequate air search plans covering the San Bernardino Strait, and Halsey's overconfidence in the damage reports of his pilots, Kurita was allowed to pass through unmolested. His heavy surface forces were now in the open sea, in circular formation to provide the best defense against allied air forces. He was steaming toward the escort carriers of TG 77.4, stationed outside Leyte Gulf to the east. TG 77.4's primary mission was to provide close air support to the landing troops on Leyte, and the secondary roles of these carriers was to provide combat air patrol, and anti-submarine patrols.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that nowhere is fighting a surface engagement mentioned. Escort carriers are



not designed for such a purpose. Escort carriers are lightly armored and lightly armed. Their heaviest armament was a single five inch gun. Kurita's force had 18, 16, 14, 8, and 5 inch armament that could easily pierce the skin of the escort carriers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts of Taffy 3. In addition to superior armament, the Japanese force could easily outrun Sprague's escort carriers. With their expected roles being close air support and anti-submarine warfare patrol, most of the planes of Taffy 3 were not loaded with the type of ordnance that could hope to pierce the decks of Kurita's heavily armored battleships.<sup>42</sup>

At 0647 (one minute before Halsey received Kinkaid's inquiry) on the morning of 25 October, a search plane from TU 77.4.2 (Taffy 2) reported the presence of Kurita's force twenty miles from and bearing down on TU 77.4.3 (Taffy 3), under the command of RADM Clifton Sprague.<sup>43</sup> By 0658 Kurita opened fire on the vulnerable escort carriers of Taffy 3. In Kinkaid's preliminary action report of the battle, sent to King on 18 November, he stated: "This was the first indication that the enemy's Central Force had succeeded in passing through San Bernardino Straits. Up to this time, from information available to Commander Seventh Fleet, it was assumed that Third Fleet forces were guarding the San Bernardino Strait in position to intercept and destroy any enemy forces attempting to come through."<sup>44</sup> Sprague's force was completely taken by surprise, and faced almost certain annihilation in the Battle off Samar, a battle that the vulnerable escort carriers of TG 77.4 were ill equipped to win and should never have had to fight.

Sprague received permission from Kinkaid to use all of his available airpower to attack the Japanese, and quickly ordered the captains of his ships to "Get the damn things up."<sup>45</sup> Sprague was determined to make a show of force against the Japanese with every means at his disposal. Kurita was surprised to find American carriers operating so close to Leyte Gulf, and

mistakenly believed that the escort carriers in sight were heavy carriers like the ones under Halsey's command.<sup>46</sup> He radioed Combined Fleet headquarters: "BY HEAVEN SENT OPPORTUNITY, WE ARE DASHING TO ATTACK ENEMY CARRIERS. OUR FIRST OBJECTIVE IS TO DESTROY THE FLIGHT DECKS, THEN THE TASK FORCE."<sup>47</sup>

Kurita's exuberance was understandable; the previous 48 hours had been a significant trial for Kurita. His flagship Atago was sunk by the American submarine Darter on 23 October. Following that, his force had been subjected to wave after wave of Halsey's attack aircraft. Finding a force of carriers without air protection must have indeed seemed like a gift from heaven at the time. However, his exuberance would be short lived.

Sprague was anything but exuberant, he knew his escort carriers were no match for Kurita's force, but he was determined to slow the Japanese advance to Leyte even if it meant sacrificing his own force.<sup>48</sup> Kurita could have detached part of his force to destroy Sprague while continuing to Leyte Gulf with the rest of his force to fulfill his mission of destroying the transports. Kurita did not do this, opting instead to attack Sprague with his entire force.

Sprague turned his escort carriers away from Kurita's approach and ordered his destroyers and destroyer escorts to make torpedo runs at the incoming enemy. Destroyers Johnston and Hoel, and the destroyer escort Samuel B. Roberts made their runs and interposed themselves between the Japanese and the fleeing escort carriers. All three wound up being sunk by the murderous fire inflicted on them. The escort carrier Gambier Bay would also fall victim to the incessant barrage. No less brave were the American pilots who attacked Kurita's ships with everything at their disposal, to include depth charges, anti-personnel bombs, flares, and machine gun fire. These attacks did not cause significant damage on Kurita's force, but the ferocity of resistance surprised the Japanese. Kurita thought the air attacks would increase in ferocity, and

assumed another American carrier group had to be nearby. Interestingly, the Japanese had intercepted one of Kinkaid's requests for assistance from Halsey, and wrongfully assumed that he was closer to the battle than he actually was.<sup>49</sup> Kurita made this supposition because he had no word from Ozawa telling him where the American carriers actually were.

### The Battle off Cape Engaño

Concurrently with the Battle off Samar, Halsey waged his fight against Ozawa's Northern Force of carriers. The Japanese plan to lure American carrier strength away from Leyte had worked as designed. Halsey was hundreds of miles from Leyte Gulf, and San Bernardino Strait was wide open to Kurita's advance. Halsey had barely joined battle against the Japanese decoy force when urgent pleas for assistance began pouring in from Seventh Fleet. At 0822, Halsey received notification from Kinkaid that TU 77.4.3 was under fire from Japanese warships off Samar, but Halsey assumed that the escort carriers (when augmented by Oldendorf's old battleships) would have enough capability to fend off any attack. At 0830, Halsey received another urgent request for assistance. Kinkaid's dispatch read: "URGENTLY NEED FAST BBS [battleships] LEYTE GULF AT ONCE." Writing after the war, Halsey had an interesting interpretation of this message, stating: "That surprised me. It was not my job to protect the Seventh Fleet. My job was offensive, to strike with the Third Fleet, and we were even then rushing to intercept a force that threatened not only Kinkaid and myself, but the whole Pacific strategy."<sup>50</sup> Halsey's comments highlight the fundamental differences that Kinkaid and Halsey had regarding the mission of Halsey's Third Fleet. In Halsey's mind, he was acting to bring about the destruction of the Japanese Fleet in accordance with Nimitz's Operation Plan 8-44. With no common superior on hand to mediate the dispute, Halsey made a minimal effort to lend assistance to Kinkaid's outmatched escort carriers.

On the evening of 22 October, Halsey had directed one of his carrier groups, TG 38.1 under McCain to reprovision and resupply at Ulithi, nearly 800 miles to the east of Leyte.<sup>51</sup> To assist Kinkaid, Halsey recalled McCain in order to assist Seventh Fleet forces engaged off Samar. It would be hours before McCain closed Leyte sufficiently to lend assistance with his carrier planes. The fast battleships of TF 34 continued north with Halsey. For the time being, Halsey had decided to let Sprague's escort carriers fight it out on their own.

In adopting this concept of support, Halsey relegated Sprague's Task Unit 77.4.3 to a vicious pounding. Sprague ordered his escort carriers to steam away from the Japanese center force and to seek shelter in a rain squall. He ordered his destroyer escorts to lay a smoke screen that obscured the carriers from Japanese vision, and made it difficult for the Japanese gunners to land their rounds. Sprague requested assistance from all available U.S. forces, including Halsey, but communications delays exacerbated by divided command meant that Halsey didn't receive Sprague's request for over an hour.<sup>52</sup> The delay in communication was harmful enough, but even when messages were received by Halsey, he remained single-mindedly focused on Nimitz's destruction task and underestimated the danger posed by Kurita's breakthrough of San Bernardino Strait.

At 0900, Halsey received an additional urgent plea from Kinkaid. Kinkaid wired: "REQUEST LEE PROCEED TOP SPEED TO COVER LEYTE. REQUEST IMMEDIATE AIRSTRIKE BY FAST CARRIERS."<sup>53</sup> At 0922, Halsey received yet another, which stated in part: "REQUEST IMMEDIATE AIRSTRIKE X ALSO REQUEST SUPPORT BY HEAVY SHIPS X MY OBBS [old battleships] LOW IN AMMUNITION."<sup>54</sup> In *Admiral Halsey's Story*, Halsey registered his shock and amazement that this message, sent by Kinkaid nearly two hours before, did not reach him in sequence with the other requests for help. Halsey was unaware how

significantly MacArthur's edict that all Seventh Fleet message traffic pass through Manus degraded Kinkaid's ability to communicate with him.

That Oldendorf's battleships were low in ammunition negated Halsey's assumption that Oldendorf could lend sustained assistance to the beleaguered TG 77.4. Remarkably, Halsey took no action except to reiterate that McCain was on his way from Ulithi with five carriers and four heavy cruisers. Interestingly Halsey states in his biography: "...and I gave my position, to show him [Kinkaid] the impossibility of the fast battleships reaching him."<sup>55</sup> Despite all of these calls for help, and the recent realization that Kinkaid's battleships could offer little help to TG 77.4, Halsey did the worst thing possible; he did nothing. He continued to engage Ozawa's decoy force with his entire force, leaving Taffy 3 at the mercy of the Japanese.

Even in the earliest hours of this engagement, Seventh Fleet personnel were aware of the peril that the divided command subjected them to. Captain Raymond Tarbuck was the senior naval officer on General MacArthur's staff. During the Battle of Leyte Gulf he was embarked onboard the *Blue Ridge*, flagship of Rear Admiral David Barbey's TF 78. On 03 November 1944 Tarbuck filed a report to General MacArthur describing his view of the Battle off Samar. In his entry for 0739 on 25 October, Tarbuck states: "Admiral Kinkaid ordered our slow battleships to assist the escort carriers about 80 miles to the east. We are now suffering the effects of divided command and dual responsibility. The Third Fleet has been kept intact and taken north as a unit regardless of the existence of modern [Japanese] battleship targets to the south."<sup>56</sup> Tarbuck's account paints a picture of despair. Halsey was too far away to lend any assistance in the Battle off Samar. The only thing that stood in Kurita's path was Sprague's force, and there was simply no reason to think that Sprague could fend off Kurita for long. If Kurita defeated Taffy 3,

nothing would bar Kurita from entering Leyte Gulf and destroying Kinkaid's amphibious ships and transports.

### No Common Superior

With no common superior on hand to provide coordinated direction to both fleet commanders, Admiral Nimitz, against his usual inclination to allow his commanders wide latitude, decided to intervene once it became apparent that Halsey was no longer covering and supporting Seventh Fleet. Unfortunately, Nimitz had some indications that San Bernardino was unguarded some time before he acted.

Before Kinkaid's requests for assistance, Admiral Nimitz harbored doubts as to whether TF 34 had been formed and left behind to guard San Bernardino Strait. Before proceeding north with his available carrier strength, Halsey informed Kinkaid and Nimitz that Kurita's center force had sustained heavy damage. Halsey included the course and speed of the remaining vessels, which would put them in a position to pass through San Bernardino Strait near midnight, or in the early morning hours of 25 October. Based on this report, Nimitz expected a night engagement when Kurita's force met TF 34. The absence of any radio traffic indicating such a night engagement in the vicinity of San Bernardino Strait alarmed Nimitz, but he took no action.<sup>57</sup>

Nimitz's Assistant Chief of Staff, Captain Bernard Austin suggested that Nimitz query Halsey directly whether TF 34 had been formed, but Nimitz demurred. According to E.B. Potter: "Nimitz thought a moment and then gave Austin the expected answer--he did not want to send any dispatch that would directly or indirectly influence the responsible tactical commander in the tactical use of his forces."<sup>58</sup> This reluctance to interfere with the tactical commander on the scene

is generally regarded as a positive character trait for Nimitz, but in this instance it did not serve him or Seventh Fleet well.

Nimitz chose to “influence” Halsey only when he himself was convinced that TF 34 was with Halsey engaging Ozawa’s carriers, and not when the expected night battle off San Bernardino Strait failed to materialize. Had he inquired earlier, Halsey might have been quicker in sending assistance to Kinkaid. Around 1000 on 25 October, CINCPAC sent a message that has since become famous in naval lore.

In an effort to confuse Japanese code breakers, messages often included nonsense phrases or padding. When received, the padding was supposed to be obvious enough that the recipients could easily strip the padding off of the message before it was forwarded to the intended recipient. The message that Halsey received from Nimitz at 1000 read: “WHERE IS RPT WHERE IS TASK FORCE 34 RR THE WORLD WONDERS.”<sup>59</sup> The latter part of the message, “the world wonders,” was nonsense padding meant to be stricken from the message. Halsey’s communications personnel mistakenly left the padding intact, turning Nimitz’s inquiry into a sarcastic rebuke.

The corrupted message did however have an effect on Halsey. Given Halsey’s earlier disregard of Kinkaid and Sprague’s desperate cries for help, the unintended rebuke may have been just the thing to snap Halsey into action. Halsey claimed in his memoirs that the message from Nimitz angered him into speechlessness, and stated: “I was as stunned as if I had been struck in the face.”<sup>60</sup> Other historians have claimed that Halsey sobbed when he received the message.<sup>61</sup> Regardless, it was this message from Nimitz that broke Halsey of his single-minded determination to destroy the Japanese carriers at the expense of all else. Even with this perceived slight by Admiral Nimitz, Halsey deliberated over an hour before dispatching any of his forces

south to meet Kurita's Center Force in order to assist Kinkaid. Halsey left carrier groups 38.3 and 38.4 under Mitscher's command to finish off Ozawa's decoy force. At 1115, Halsey turned south with TF 34 and TG 38.2 As he did so, it was with a heavy heart; not so much for the haggard forces of Sprague's Taffy 3, who faced annihilation, but for his own missed chance at personal glory. Halsey recalled after changing course due south: "I turned my back on the opportunity I had dreamed of since my days as a cadet. For me, one of the biggest battles of the war was off, and what has been called 'the Battle of Bull's Run' was on."<sup>62</sup> Nimitz's intervention and Halsey's reluctant decision to turn south came too late for Sprague's Taffy 3. *Johnston, Hoel, Samuel B. Roberts, and Gambier Bay* had already been sunk by Kurita.

Amazingly, Kurita broke off his pursuit of Sprague before any elements of Third Fleet arrived. The previous 48 hours, Sprague's spirited defense, the absence of word from Ozawa, and Kurita's lingering fear that other American carrier forces lay in wait for him caused Kurita to break off the engagement. He did not know at the time how close he was to achieving his goal. Just when he had Taffy 3 in his grasp, he ordered his forces north. He vacillated for a time as to whether to return and press the attack, but eventually set a course for San Bernardino Strait. He would exit the battlefield through the same route he came in. Another escort carrier, *The St. Lo* succumbed to kamikaze attack after Kurita's decision to withdraw.

While kamikazes continued to harass American ships at Leyte, the naval battle effectively ended when Kurita took the unforeseen action to withdraw. By the time Halsey arrived off San Bernardino around midnight on 25 October, the only target of interest was a Japanese destroyer that had stayed behind to rescue Japanese survivors of the Battle off Samar. This destroyer was sunk, and by the morning of 26 October, Halsey's planes were able to destroy a heavy cruiser and light cruiser from Kurita's force that were limping westward in the Sibuyan



Sea. With that, the naval battle for Leyte Gulf was effectively over, and Halsey's actions immediately became the subject of controversy.

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<sup>1</sup>CINCPAC War Diary for the month of October, 1944

<sup>2</sup>Vego, 126.

<sup>3</sup>Bates, Vol 1, 17.

<sup>4</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 302.

<sup>5</sup>Buell, *The Quiet Warrior*, 300.

<sup>6</sup>Michael A. Palmer, *Command at Sea: Naval Command and Control Since the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 267.

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Halsey to Nimitz 28 September 1944, as quoted in Potter, *Halsey*, 279.

<sup>8</sup>Richard W. Bates, *The Battle for Leyte Gulf, October 1944. Strategical and Tactical Analysis. Volume I. Preliminary Operations Until 0719 October 17, 1944 Including Battle off Formosa* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1953), 16.

<sup>9</sup>Richard W. Bates, *The Battle for Leyte Gulf, October 1944. Strategical and Tactical Analysis. Volume III* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1957), 252.

<sup>10</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 287.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas, 212.

<sup>12</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 290.

<sup>13</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 290; Vego, 294-295.

<sup>14</sup>Willmott, 124.

<sup>15</sup>Field, 31.

<sup>16</sup>Operation Plan 13-44 dated 26 September 1944 as quoted in Barbey, 236.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas, 196.

<sup>18</sup>CINCPAC, *War Diary for the month of October, 1944*, 112.

<sup>19</sup>Halsey, 214.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 214-215.

<sup>21</sup>Gerald E. Wheeler, *Kinkaid of the Seventh Fleet: A biography of Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1995), 397.

<sup>22</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 293.

<sup>23</sup>Vego, 260.

<sup>24</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 290.

<sup>25</sup>Wheeler, 399.

<sup>26</sup>Halsey, 214.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 214.

<sup>28</sup>CINCPAC, *War Diary (CINCPAC) for October 1944* (La Crosse, WI: Brookhaven Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>29</sup>CINCPAC, *War Diary*, 112.

<sup>30</sup>Halsey, 217.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 217.

<sup>32</sup>Ozawa interrogation, p 223 11May09

<sup>33</sup>Wheeler, 399.

<sup>34</sup>CINCPAC, *War Diary*, 113.

<sup>35</sup>Willmott, 245.

<sup>36</sup>Wheeler, 400; Willmott, 245.

<sup>37</sup>Halsey, 218.

<sup>38</sup>Richard W. Bates, *The Battle for Leyte Gulf, October 1944: Strategical and Tactical Analysis, Vol V* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 1958), 154-155.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>40</sup>Halsey, 218.

<sup>41</sup>Willmott, 244.

<sup>42</sup>Wukovitz, 146.

<sup>43</sup>Wheeler, 401.

<sup>44</sup>CTF 77, *Preliminary Action Report of Engagements in Leyte Gulf and off Samar Island on 25 October, 1944* <http://ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/rep/Leyte/TF-77-Leyte.html>. accessed 04 June 2009.

<sup>45</sup>Thomas, 268; Wukovitz, 146.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas, 259.

<sup>47</sup>Toland, 564.

<sup>48</sup>Wukovitz, 146.

<sup>49</sup>Thomas, 288.

<sup>50</sup>Halsey, 219.

<sup>51</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 331.

<sup>52</sup>Wukovitz, 148-149.

<sup>53</sup>Commander Seventh Fleet to Commander Third Fleet, as quoted in Wukovitz, 176.

<sup>54</sup>Halsey, 220.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>56</sup>Captain Raymond Tarbuck, as quoted in Barbey, 254-255.

<sup>57</sup> Potter, *Nimitz*, 336-337.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>59</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 303.

<sup>60</sup>Halsey, 220.

<sup>61</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 303; Thomas, 300.

<sup>62</sup>Halsey, 221.

## CHAPTER 5

### AFTERMATH AND CONSEQUENCES

Although the Leyte campaign would continue until December 1944, surface engagements between the American and Japanese Fleets ended on 26 October. Halsey was quick to declare a resounding victory; nevertheless his actions during the battle immediately became a subject of controversy within the Navy. Admirals King and Nimitz were quick to stifle all internal criticism of Halsey's conduct during the battle. This decision to stem criticism of Halsey was done for several reasons. First, Halsey enjoyed a level of popularity on the home front that no other U.S. Navy Officer could match. To openly censure Halsey for his conduct would prove injurious to the Navy's public image. Second, after the Battle for Leyte concluded, there was much fighting left to be done. Plans were already in effect for subsequent operations against Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and fruitless second-guessing of Halsey's actions would not help the Navy prosecute the war against Japan. Thirdly, by insulating Halsey from criticism, King and Nimitz thereby kept the spotlight away from themselves and their own culpability for what befell Seventh Fleet in the Battle off Samar. King wanted to deflect criticism from the divided command arrangement that he fought so hard to perpetuate. Nimitz, in protecting Halsey, served to insulate himself from criticism for allowing Halsey to see the destruction of Japanese carriers as his primary task.

As early as the evening of 25 October, Halsey wired Nimitz a message that read in part: "THE JAPANESE NAVY HAS BEEN BEATEN AND ROUTED AND BROKEN BY THE THIRD AND SEVENTH FLEETS."<sup>1</sup> Admiral King also received this message, but greeted this optimistic summary of the battle with skepticism. It did not seem to corroborate the picture of the battle that he had been following. Much of the radio traffic that day consisted of Seventh Fleet's urgent calls for assistance to Halsey. Halsey's biographer E.B. Potter describes Halsey's

rationale for sending this communiqué, and how Halsey's name got to be associated with the one-sided victory:

The navy's hand was forced by MacArthur, who on his own released a victory communiqué to the Reuters news agency. Harry Hopkins, special assistant to the president, called [Secretary of the Navy] Forrestal and suggested that Halsey's message be given to the press. Forrestal was hesitant to release good news without being absolutely certain of the facts, but Hopkins thought it was worth taking a chance. Consequently, at 1800 (Washington time) on 25 October the president called in White House reporters and read them a paraphrase of Halsey's victory message to Nimitz.<sup>2</sup>

Halsey, already popular on the home-front, enjoyed a surge of publicity based on this message.

Earlier in the war, Halsey had inspired the Pacific Fleet after the devastating losses incurred at Pearl Harbor, and instilled an aggressive zeal into the Pacific Theater. His command of daring raids like the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, and the raiding of the Gilberts and the Marshalls in the early months of the war captivated the public and helped restore American morale. News of the Japanese defeat at Leyte further cemented Halsey's reputation as the most aggressive and able naval commander in the Pacific Fleet.

Halsey's popularity presented challenges to King and Nimitz. They both agreed that Halsey blundered by leaving the San Bernardino Strait unguarded.<sup>3</sup> The only question was what to do about it. It would have been incomprehensible to relieve Halsey of his command after President Roosevelt endorsed Halsey's victory announcement. The publicity that the Navy earned as a result of this victory message made it difficult to censure Halsey once all the facts became known. King had considered relieving Halsey on several occasions during the war.<sup>4</sup> When MacArthur learned of Halsey's abandonment of San Bernardino Strait, he likewise called for Halsey's relief.<sup>5</sup> Halsey's reputation coupled with the very public victory announcement made Halsey virtually untouchable. King's biographer Thomas Buell states: "Halsey was far too outspoken and far too popular with the press for King to have risked provoking Halsey to defend

himself. In a moment of indiscretion the voluble Halsey might have said something to the press that the Navy would regret.”<sup>6</sup> Whatever skill Halsey lacked as a tactician was compensated for by his ability to attract good publicity for the Navy.

What further saved Halsey from official censure were the exigencies of war. King was of the opinion that Halsey erred in leaving San Bernardino Strait unguarded, but aside from suggesting that Halsey needed a rest, did not pursue formal disciplinary action. As had been the custom, Halsey turned over command of the fleet to Spruance for subsequent operations. As author H.P. Willmott states: “King’s behavior lends itself to one obvious interpretation, and that was simply that a war remained to be fought and won and he was not prepared to allow what was, in the final analysis, a matter of small account to intrude upon more important proceedings.”<sup>7</sup> Willmott may have understated the significance of Halsey’s absence from the Battle off Samar, but the Navy had a central role to play in subsequent operations against the Japanese. An invasive inquiry into the performance of Halsey, Kinkaid, and their respective staffs would be a distraction that the Navy could not afford. The invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa were already scheduled, and the war was not going to stop to allow a lengthy inquiry into Halsey’s conduct. The U.S needed to maintain pressure on the Japanese. In addition, if it were to become public knowledge that the Navy was incapable of handling its affairs, it would provide new impetus for calls that the Pacific Command be unified under MacArthur.<sup>8</sup> King, ever jealous of his control of the fleet, would never let that happen.

King and Nimitz were the keepers of the Navy’s image. As such, they did not wish to bring discredit on the Navy or themselves by exposing the unfortunate sequence of events that led to the Battle off Samar. Although King was furious at Halsey for leaving San Bernardino

unguarded during the battle, his rage did not last long.<sup>9</sup> Halsey recalls his first meeting with King after the battle in January 1945:

When I reported to him in Washington the following January, my very first words were, 'I made a mistake in that battle.'

He held up his hand. 'You don't have to tell me anymore. You've got a green light on everything you did.'

But I wanted to get it off my chest. I said, 'I still think it was a mistake to turn south when the Japs were right under my guns.'

Ernie [Admiral King] said, 'No, it wasn't a mistake. You couldn't have done otherwise.'<sup>10</sup>

King's calm demeanor in this exchange points to a recognition on his part that Halsey was not entirely to blame. It could never be said that Halsey violated orders--Nimitz's inclusion of the destruction task removed that possibility. King's biographer Thomas Buell goes so far as to assert that King likely ordered Nimitz to include the destruction task in his orders to Halsey.<sup>11</sup> This idea, although based on likelihood, seems plausible. The Battle of the Philippine Sea had happened only months before Leyte Gulf, and many senior naval aviators believed Spruance allowed the Japanese carriers to escape. King was also a naval aviator and may have urged Nimitz to instill more zeal in his fleet commanders if the enemy appeared in force. Regardless, King did not castigate Halsey for his conduct during the battle. Wukovitz asserts that King reacted mildly to preserve Halsey's dignity and protect himself: "Deeper analysis of Leyte Gulf would assuredly focus criticism on the divided command and on Nimitz's decision that Halsey could make the enemy carriers his prime target, two aspects in which King had a hand."<sup>12</sup> If King were to relieve the hero of Leyte Gulf, it would sully the Navy's reputation, and invite unwanted attention. It was far better from King's perspective as both CNO and COMINCH to preserve Halsey as a hero.

As has already been described, Nimitz bears his share of responsibility for Halsey's actions at the Battle of Leyte Gulf. On 28 October, Nimitz sent a letter to Admiral King marked "Personal and Top Secret" wherein he stated some regrets about the conduct of the battle. It reads:

My second exception and regret is that the fast battleships were not left in the vicinity of Samar when TF 38 started after the striking force reported to be in the north end of the Philippines Sea [Ozawa's Northern Force], and composed of carriers, two battleships, cruisers, and destroyers in support. It never occurred to me that Halsey, knowing the composition of the ships in the Sibuyan Sea [Kurita's Center Force], would leave San Bernardino unguarded, even though the Jap detachments in the Sibuyan Sea had been reported seriously damaged.<sup>13</sup>

Clifton Sprague's biographer John Wukovitz paints a bleak picture regarding Nimitz's involvement in what befell Sprague's Taffy 3:

Nimitz clearly condemns Halsey in this letter and agrees with Sprague that the Third Fleet commander left Taffy 3 high and dry, though he refuses to acknowledge any responsibility in the matter. Nimitz wrote that he never imagined Halsey would allow Kurita to freely exit San Bernardino Strait, but he should have. Nimitz issued the order giving Halsey permission to concentrate on enemy carriers, and everyone, including Nimitz, knew that when handed a choice between watching a strait and attacking carriers, Halsey would opt for the latter. Nimitz stumbled in giving Halsey a free hand at Leyte Gulf.<sup>14</sup>

It cannot be denied that Nimitz gave Halsey a wide degree of latitude and that the unfortunate destruction task was included in orders that bore Nimitz's name. However, for Wukovitz to say that Nimitz *should have* known Halsey would leave San Bernardino Strait entirely unguarded based on the universally accepted knowledge that Halsey would always go after carriers is an overstatement. It would not be derelict on Nimitz's part to assume that Halsey would leave some of his force, the fast battleships of TF 34, behind to guard San Bernardino after Halsey hinted that he would do so. Where Nimitz stumbled was in refusing to act decisively the moment the expected night action off San Bernardino failed to materialize during the early morning hours of 25 October.



Nimitz did take steps to silence criticism of Halsey from within the Navy, and used his position to tone down reports he deemed overly critical of Halsey's actions. One notable instance of this was when the head of CINCPAC's Analytical Section, Captain Ralph Parker, submitted the official CINCPAC report of the battle to Admiral Nimitz for signature. The report was highly critical of Halsey and condemned his conduct of the battle. Nimitz refused to sign the document, instead he returned it with a note stating: "What are you trying to do, Parker, start another Sampson-Schley controversy? Tone this down. I'll leave it to you."<sup>15</sup> Nimitz's invocation of the Sampson-Schley controversy implies that his motivation for silencing criticism was to protect the Navy as an organization, and not for personal protection or gain.

Nimitz, who left no memoirs or autobiography, may have been motivated by something else; showing loyalty to one's subordinates. Author James Hornfischer writes: "for all the honors handed out, the Battle off Samar was for a time the victory whose name the Navy dared not speak. To celebrate it too vigorously, Admiral Nimitz felt, would unavoidably be to criticize the Navy's most spectacular old lion [Halsey]."<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to say with certainty what guided men's actions this many years after the fact, but Nimitz had reason to feel indebted to Halsey. In the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack, Nimitz was left with a fleet largely in ruins. An air of defeatism lingered in Pearl Harbor, but Admiral Halsey, perhaps even more than Nimitz himself, infused a sense of optimism and fearlessness into the organization. Halsey volunteered to command a risky raid against the Gilberts and Marshalls in the early months of the war that would take the fight to the Japanese. E.B. Potter states: "Long afterward, when Halsey came under criticism, Nimitz recalled this interlude. 'Bill Halsey came to my support and offered to lead the attack,' he said. 'I'll not be a party to any enterprise that can hurt the reputation of a man like that'."<sup>17</sup> Nimitz remained true to his word to the end of his life.

Given the benefit of hindsight, Halsey's actions seem controversial, and they were considered no less so at the time. In fact, they had the potential to divide the Navy into camps. Consider how detrimental it would be to a war fighting organization if one had to declare affiliation as a "Halsey man, a Kinkaid man, or a Sprague man." Nimitz and King still had a war to fight, as did the rest of the Navy. As a result, they adopted the expedient and pragmatic solution of safeguarding Halsey's reputation as a fighting admiral. Doing so preserved the public trust in the Navy as an institution. After all, it was not their faces on the front pages. Halsey was much more valuable to the Navy while his career was alive rather than dead. The unfortunate byproduct of this was that Taffy 3's valiant battle against the superior Japanese force of Admiral Kurita would remain largely unsung for some years. King and Nimitz knew that Iwo Jima and Okinawa (both within Nimitz's POA AOR) were to be POA fights. Coordination between fleets would not be an issue. All naval forces present would be commanded by Spruance under the direct command of Admiral Nimitz. As the senior leadership of the Navy, they took action to silence criticism of Halsey. For a time at least, they succeeded in silencing criticism of themselves.

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<sup>1</sup>Halsey, *Story*, 226.

<sup>2</sup>Potter, *Bull Halsey* 306.

<sup>3</sup>James D. Hornfischer, *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 417.

<sup>4</sup>Buell, *Master of Seapower*, 478-479.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, 325.

<sup>6</sup>Buell, *Master of Seapower*, 478.

<sup>7</sup>Willmott, 248.

<sup>8</sup>Buell, *Master of Seapower*, 478.

<sup>9</sup>Wukovitz, 190-191.

<sup>10</sup>Halsey, 226.

<sup>11</sup>Buell, *Master of Seapower* 476-478.

<sup>12</sup>Wukovitz,, 191.

<sup>13</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 344.

<sup>14</sup>Wukovitz, 190.

<sup>15</sup>Potter, *Nimitz*, 344

<sup>16</sup>Hornfischer, 416-417.

<sup>17</sup>Potter, *Halsey*, 38.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The Battle for Leyte Gulf was a decisive victory for the Allies and a devastating defeat for the Imperial Japanese Navy. The battle deserves continued study, because of the unfortunate, and in retrospect, avoidable losses in ships and personnel. Virtually all of the problems encountered in the conduct of the Leyte campaign can be attributed to the divided command arrangement put into place by the Joint Chiefs at the beginning of the war. The decision to divide command between General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz was a pragmatic one made in the early months of the war. The United States defense establishment had never been organized to fight a global war and the newly created Joint Chiefs had to respond rapidly to a changing strategic environment. The divided command represented a workable, if not ideal compromise born from interservice parochialism and personality clashes among senior military officers.

The Joint Chiefs would have been derelict to allow the question of command to remain unresolved, so when all parties agreed to the divided structure, it was put into effect. This decision had far reaching consequences during the war in the Pacific, few of which could have been foreseen when the decision was made. As the war progressed, the question of unity of command occupied the Joint Chiefs again and again, but they delayed unifying command in the Pacific due to the same interservice rivalry that created it. Operations like the Solomons campaign, where SWPA and POA forces operated in close cooperation, were successful not because the divided command was effective, but because Halsey and MacArthur were united by common objectives. Although Halsey was in Nimitz's chain of command, Nimitz did not have competing priorities that Halsey was required to fulfill.

This changed of course in March 1943 when the Joint Chiefs determined that Nimitz would have full responsibility for destroying the Japanese fleet. MacArthur, whose forces were land and air based, could not share in this task. Here, the Joint Chiefs exacerbated the division that already existed. The two commanders in the Pacific were further divided by mission sets imposed by the Joint Chiefs. This mismatch of objectives made it ever more difficult for the two theaters to cooperate toward a common aim. This problem remained dormant once MacArthur got a fleet of his own. When the Seventh Fleet was established, MacArthur was no longer dependant on assistance from Nimitz to accomplish his objectives in the Southwest Pacific. Likewise, Nimitz was free from having to loan forces to MacArthur and continued his advance across the central Pacific.

Fallout from Spruance's performance at the Battle of the Philippine Sea further complicated matters. Spruance was criticized for adhering too strictly to his cover and support role during the invasion of Saipan. Senior aviators in the Navy criticized Spruance for his caution and for allowing the Japanese fleet to slip away. In subsequent operations, Nimitz specifically instructed his fleet commanders that destruction of the enemy fleet was the primary task if opportunity offered or could be created

When President Roosevelt helped decide the issue of Pacific strategy, the JCS issued orders to take back the Philippines. As an objective, the Philippines carried significant military merit. It offered land based airfields, and threatened Japan's lines of communication with its Southern Resource Area. In addition, the islands could be used as a jumping off point for further operations against the home islands of Japan. On the other hand, the Philippines offered an environment that placed the divided command under its greatest strain of the entire war.

To liberate the Philippines, SWPA and POA forces were once again required to act in close cooperation. The Philippine archipelago rested entirely within MacArthur's SWPA AOR. Consequently, the Joint Chiefs ordered MacArthur to seize and occupy Leyte, and ordered Nimitz to support MacArthur in that effort. Once again, the JCS had an opportunity to unify command of the Pacific Theater under one Commander in Chief, or at a minimum to unify command of the operation. Once more the Joint Chiefs demurred, and the result was a catastrophe in the waters off Samar.

Kinkaid and Halsey were not united by a common purpose. Although MacArthur's Operations Instruction No 70 required Halsey's Third Fleet to cover and support Seventh Fleet during the invasion of Leyte, Nimitz confused the picture by including the destruction task in his orders to Halsey. Kinkaid believed Halsey would act in accordance with MacArthur's directive. Halsey, on the other hand, seized Nimitz's destruction task to fulfill his overriding ambition to destroy the Japanese carrier force in the event it offered battle. This incongruence of objectives may not have proved so detrimental if clear and timely communications were exchanged between the fleet commanders, but the division of command precluded that possibility as well.

This confusion allowed the Japanese to decoy Halsey away from Leyte using a force of impotent Japanese carriers. In his absence, a second, more powerful Japanese striking force steamed unnoticed through San Bernardino Strait. Kinkaid was taken completely by surprise, and had to rely on Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague's lightly armed and armored Task Unit 77.4.3 (Taffy 3) to repel the Japanese advance into Leyte Gulf. Against all expectations Taffy 3 succeeded, but the cost was great. Five of the six U.S. Navy vessels sunk during the battle belonged to Sprague's Taffy 3. Their loss was the result of poor communications, competing

mission priorities, and the absence of any superior Navy officer to coordinate the efforts of both fleets.

Uniting the Pacific theater under one Commander in Chief would have fixed all of these problems described. However, the only body with the ability to make the decision was the Joint Chiefs, and they proved incapable of doing so. At the very least, the Joint Chiefs could have decided to unify command of the Leyte Campaign under MacArthur or Nimitz. This option, which apparently was never given serious thought, would have mitigated many of the communication problems encountered between Seventh Fleet and Third Fleet in the conduct of the operation. The Joint Chiefs did not do this either. The divided command had worked up to the Leyte campaign, and there would have been no reason to think that it would break down during it. Last but not least, the JCS could have appointed a senior Navy officer to coordinate the efforts of both fleets. Admiral King, as a member of the JCS and Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet had the authority to do this. But as the Joint Chiefs governed by consensus, and were influenced by service parochialism; Generals Marshall and MacArthur would no doubt have seen such a move as a power grab by the Navy.

By almost any measure, the Battle for Leyte Gulf was a one sided victory in favor of the Allies. The Japanese failed to accomplish their objective of destroying Seventh Fleet's amphibious shipping, and the decisive battle they coveted went against them. Admiral Ozawa described the effect of the Battle for Leyte Gulf on the Japanese Fleet: "After this battle the surface force became strictly auxiliary, so that we relied on land forces, special attack, and air power."<sup>1</sup> Admiral Ozawa employed the Japanese euphemism "special attack" for kamikaze attacks, which first appeared as an organized offensive measure at Leyte Gulf. The U.S. decisively defeated Japanese forces at the Battle of Surigao Strait and the Battle off Cape

Engaño. The Battle off Samar is of a different character, however. The Battle off Samar is a victory only in the sense that the survivors faced almost certain death, and due to hesitation on the enemy's part, managed to escape with their lives. The Battle off Samar, and the resultant loss of American lives, was the consequence of divided command.

To call it a victory and leave it unexamined would be a disservice not only to the brave sailors who fought and died there, but also to the professional military officers of today, and the leaders of tomorrow. If we did not pause to reflect how these deaths could have been avoided, we open ourselves to repeating the same mistake. Unity of command has long been a fundamental principle of war, but it is one that often gets violated in the interests of interservice competition, mission secrecy, and in the case of coalition warfare, national sovereignty. Great strategists like George C. Marshall and Ernest J. King fell to the temptation of dividing command for expediency's sake. The cost of this decision was paid for in men and material in the Battle off Samar. It is incumbent on the planners and strategists of tomorrow's fight to learn the lessons of divided command and ensure that the fundamental principle of unity of command remains. The renowned naval historian Samuel Eliot Morrison said of the Battle for Leyte Gulf: "The Battle for Leyte Gulf did not end the war, but it was decisive. And it should be an imperishable part of our national memory."<sup>2</sup> Indeed it was a decisive victory, but a tarnished one. For this reason alone it must remain an imperishable part of our national memory.

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<sup>1</sup>Ozawa interrogation, 225.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel E. Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short history of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1963), 470.



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