

Spring 1944 saw the culmination of the miraculous expansion of American industrial production which amply provisioned our armed forces now battling the AXIS both in Europe and in the vast expanses of the Pacific. Great Britain nearly sank under the weight of American equipment being massed for D-Day, the cross-channel invasion of France scheduled for June. In Italy, Allied troops were about to break the stalemate at the Winter Line at Anzio and Monte Casino and move on Rome.

In the Central Pacific, new Essex-class carriers along with their screening vessels were now available in numbers never imagined two years earlier. Crack pilots flying superior F6F Hellcats were ready to do battle against a severely depleted Japanese naval air force. Admiral Nimitz assembled an enormous task force in the Marshall Islands for the invasion of the Marianas - 1,000 miles further from Majuro than England was from France - yet few are today aware of the Pacific D-Day of June, 1944.

In Spring 1944, Japan's biggest problem was fuel. American submarines were taking a fearsome toll of Japanese tankers and only a trickle of East Indies oil was making it to Japan to be refined into fuel for its war machine. Japanese Naval strategy still stressed luring the American fleet into a decisive Mahanian battle. To manage the fuel shortage, plan "A-Go" was devised in which the Japanese fleet would remain in waters near the East Indies where the purity of Borneo crude allowed it to be used in their ships without further refining. The American Carriers would be lured to the Japanese fleet's operational area where a continual rotation of land and sea based aircraft would wipe them out. Japan established a final line of defense stretching from the Marianas, through the Palau islands to Biak Island, 60 miles south of the equator in strategic Geelvink Bay off New Guinea. Each of these island fortresses had major airfields which, in concert with the aircraft carriers, could be used to implement the continuous shuttle-bombing operation of Plan "A-Go" which would run unabated until the American fleets were destroyed. However, the two-front war in the Pacific confused the Japanese. Reports of a large American fleet at the Marshalls and MacArthur's advances in New Guinea confounded Japanese commanders who were unable to determine where to set the "A-Go" trap.

South of the equator, the US Army under General Douglas MacArthur took over the New Guinea campaign from exhausted Australian troops. MacArthur employed a new take on classic maneuver warfare. His troops would flank the enemy from the sea, avoiding prepared Japanese strongholds. MacArthur had a powerful secret weapon. On 15 January 1944, an Australian patrol stumbled on a box half buried in the New Guinea mud. It contained the entire code library of the Japanese 20th Division which allowed Allied cryptanalysts to solve the Japanese Army's main cipher system. MacArthur now knew the location and disposition of all Japanese strongholds on New Guinea's north coast and he exploited this knowledge in his maneuver strategy. In April, US troops landed on the left and right flanks of Hollandia (today Jayapura) encircling and capturing the port and airfields. Other landings bypassed Japanese strongholds which confounded Japanese defenders who expected frontal attacks on their strongest positions. By mid May, Allied forces had taken all of New Guinea east of Geelvink Bay and stood ready to breach Japan's main line of defense south of the equator, at Biak.

Biak, with its three airfields was regarded by Japan as a crucial base for the combined sea and air battle that would destroy the American fleet. If it were lost to the Americans, the Japanese feared air raids on western New Guinea, Palau and the southern Philippines by Biak-based B-24s. Biak was defended by a garrison of 10,000 troops, including the elite, battle-tested 222nd Regiment who had served in China. The Japanese made ingenious use of the island's natural caves, hiding troops and emplacing artillery, mortars and machine guns. Biak's defenders adopted the new Japanese strategy of never conceding a single position and became the model for Japanese tactics in future operations.

The Army's 41st Division landed at Bosnek, east of Biak's airfields on 27 May 1944, initially making good progress as they approached a 200 foot high ridge paralleling the beach. Units began moving west toward the airfields and came within 200 yards of Mokmer field. A violent Japanese counterattack drove them back and the attack bogged down along the coast road. The enemy, protected in the caves on cliffs east of the airfields, along with intense equatorial heat and 12 foot high scrub growth hampered our troops. The next morning, an attack of light Japanese tanks was broken by American Shermans, another counterattack later that day was also broken. MG Horace H. Fuller, C.O. of the 41st Division, requested reinforcements to clear the east cave area to silence enemy artillery. Reinforcements arrived on 1 June and the strengthened forces were able to pressure the Japanese in the east caves from two sides. MacArthur ordered the airfields taken immediately, so one of the flanking regiments was detached to attack the airfields. With pressure off the east caves, the Japanese guns were able to continuously pound the airfields making them unusable as the battle remained bogged down.

Japan's first attempt to land reinforcements on Biak involved ferrying a large force from Zamboanga to be landed on 3 June. It was hoped that this operation would be the bait to put Plan "A-Go" into effect. However the Japanese fleet was detected and driven off by an American cruiser and destroyer force, aided by aerial attacks. Undeterred, the Japanese Navy formulated a second mission to reinforce Biak on 9 June, this time involving their super-battleships Yamato and Musashi to lure the American fleet to the waters off Palau – here it was hoped the decisive sea battle would take place. Japanese intelligence however, became aware that an immense American Fleet had sailed from the Marshalls - destination unknown. When the first fighter sweep of carrier aircraft revealed their target as Saipan, the focus of Plan A-Go shifted to the waters of the Philippine Sea. The Biak reinforcement mission was cancelled and the Japanese garrison on Biak was abandoned and ordered to fight to the last man.

On Biak, General Fuller was replaced by General Robert L. Eichelberger who had orders to get the men moving. Fighting continued through June. Japanese soldiers would come out of the caves at night and harass our troops until we devised an effective night-fighting technique causing heavy enemy losses. American infantrymen reduced the caves by neutralizing outer defenses and then lowering explosives by rope into the entrance, sealing them off. Biak was secured in mid-July 1944 although at least 500 Japanese soldiers remained active in the hills until VJ Day. About 475 American soldiers were killed and some 2400 wounded - with 3000 additional soldiers sidelined by scrub typhus. Japanese dead are estimated at 6100, it is believed that some 3000 Japanese remain entombed in Biak's caves.

Biak's airfields served bomber, fighter, transport and reconnaissance aircraft for the coming Philippines campaign. The Army Air Forces communications station on Biak became one of the largest in the Southwest Pacific. The equipment was installed, maintained and operated by Detachment 45 of the 142nd Army Airways Communications Service. In late 1944, at Campbell AAF in Kentucky, Corporal Philip Sturm, USAAF (my father of blessed memory) received an order to report to Detachment 45 as a shift supervisor of teletype operators, a "trick chief" in the vernacular of the day. Dad remained on Biak until February 1946. An aspiring professional writer, dad edited newspapers at all his duty stations, including the "45 Times" on Biak where he wrote a sports story about a fellow from Toledo, Ed Sloan, who was trying to "weld together a championship basketball team." I found Ed on line some years ago and later had the pleasure of meeting him and his bride Ruth at their beautiful home. Thank you Ed for your photos, stories and recollections which brought me closer to my father's spirit and may you and Ruth be blessed with good health and many years of happiness to enjoy your children, grand children and great grandchildren in the freedom you guaranteed us by the sacrifice of your youth.

Meanwhile, 75 years ago in June 1944, as the American fleet neared Saipan in the Marianas, US Naval Aviation was about to prepare the most awesome turkey dinner in the history of our nation.