

In “Strong Men Armed,” Robert Leckie described a medical briefing for Marines about to land on Saipan. “In the surf, beware of sharks, barracuda, sea snakes, anemones, razor-sharp coral, polluted waters, poison fish and giant clams that can shut on a man like a bear trap. Ashore, there is leprosy, typhus, filariasis, yaws, typhoid, dengue fever, dysentery, saber grass, hordes of flies, snakes and giant lizards. Eat nothing growing on the island, don’t drink its waters, and don’t approach its inhabitants. Any questions?” A private raised his hand, “Sir, why’n hell don’t we let the Japs keep the island?” Interestingly, this view was shared early on by both Nimitz and MacArthur, who in rare agreement, cited a number of objections to the suitability of the Marianas as a forward base. They instead favored the southern approach to Japan through the New Guinea, Palau and Philippines axis.

Admiral King and the Joint Chiefs of Staff overruled their theater commanders. In the JCS strategic view, the Marianas offered a centrally located base to interdict Japanese shipping and service American submarines. Tinian, a generally flat island, was a perfect site for a large airbase capable of handling a massive force of B-29 bombers just arriving in the Pacific theater. (In order to keep China in the war on the side of the Allies, Chiang Kai Shek was promised that our main B-29 bases for the strategic bombing of Japan would be located in China. Numerous defects kept the B-29 out of action until mid-1944 and by that time, secure Chinese bases were too remote to be useful. The B-29 had a range of 1,500 miles placing Tokyo and the Japanese industrial heartland easily within the range of the Marianas airfields which were immune from Japanese air attack.) Adm. King also expected a Japanese naval counterattack and preferred the Philippine sea as the battlefield rather than the restricted waters of the East Indies. A final and compelling reason to take these islands was that Guam was an American possession, a prize of the Spanish American war. American Citizens on the island had been imprisoned and tortured by the Japanese since Guam was captured on 10 December 1941 and we had a responsibility to liberate them. And thus the plan to take the Marianas was ordered: First strategically-located Saipan, 3 days later, Guam and after Saipan was secure, Tinian.

Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, who commanded the task forces attacking Pearl Harbor and Midway and was now Central Pacific Fleet Commander, shared the view that the next major target after Biak should be the Palau islands. He sent his engineers and building materials to build up massive fortifications on a small island named Peleliu – this at the expense of Saipan where he expected no attack until fall of 1944. On Saipan, troops there fortified the island as best they could with very little heavy construction equipment or material. LTG Yoshitsugu Saito, commanding the Army garrison on Saipan, complained that while the Palaus were being fortified, his men were “standing around with folded arms.”

Japan had difficulty reinforcing Saipan because American submarines were operating with impunity throughout the Pacific, carrying accurate intelligence of where their targets were and where they were heading. In estates near Washington, DC, young women mathematicians, many recruited from women’s universities comprising the famed “Seven Sisters,” were searching out patterns in intercepted Japanese radio transmissions appearing to be random characters. Eventually, they were able to find repetitions that yielded a pattern. Now they could deduce a mathematical key which would decode the messages. Eventually, this secret society of unsung heroic women broke the major codes of the AXIS forces. One of their successes was cracking the “Maru” code, used by Japanese merchant ships to send daily position reports. The Navy had to be discrete in the use of this information and many tempting targets were allowed to pass unharmed so as not to hint that the code was broken. Convoys ferrying troops to the Marianas however, were too important to ignore. Just before the American task force arrived, 5 of 7 Japanese troopships in a convoy heading for Saipan were sunk by American submarines. Although most of the 3700 troops reached their destination, they lost all their equipment. Gen. Saito however, had 30,000 troops on Saipan – twice the number estimated by American intelligence.

On 6 June, 1944, the worlds largest amphibious fleet, comprised of ships of many nations, sailed approximately 120 miles to the beaches of France. In the Pacific another massive task force which, were it not for the Normandy landings, would have been the largest amphibious operation in history, was sailing toward the Marianas – 1000 miles from their assembly points at Majuro, Kwajalein and Eniwetok. Many of the Marines about to hit the beach at Saipan traveled a total of 3,700 miles from camps in Hawaii. 600 ships - all but 3 American - put to sea carrying 300,000 men including 127,000 assault troops from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Marine Divisions and the Army's 27th Infantry division. 15 Aircraft carriers carrying 950 aircraft with 8 million gallons of aviation gas and a host of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, oilers and crucial supply ships would form a combined, self-supporting air, sea and land force to attack all three island targets in the Marianas. War records showed some 40,000 individual supply classifications were combat loaded onto supply vessels which could be unloaded as the items were needed. One cargo ship carried enough rations for 90,000 troops for a month.

Two weeks before the task force sailed, a terrible accident occurred while loading ammunition onto Saipan-bound LST's moored in the West Loch of Pearl Harbor. A massive explosion threw debris and bodies all over Ford Island, killing 163, wounding 396 and destroying 6 LSTs whose wrecks can still be seen today in Google satellite view. The Navy suppressed coverage of the disaster for security reasons but amazingly though 6 months earlier this disaster would have postponed the invasion, at this point in the war, the loss did not affect the timetable. It is today difficult to appreciate the fact that America was able to produce equipment for, and muster sufficient manpower for simultaneous, large-scale amphibious invasions on both sides of the Eurasian land mass.

Although Task Force 58, as the Marianas force was designated, was ready to land a large amphibious force and its supplies under the umbrella of carrier-based air support, one possible complication to the plan was never fully considered. What if the Japanese carrier fleet, currently based at Tawi Tawi near Borneo were to show up off Saipan? We knew that TF 58 was detected by Japanese naval intelligence. A plan to meet the Japanese seaborne threat would be devised ad hoc if the Japanese came out to fight.

Forward elements of TF 58 arrived in range of the Marianas on 13 June 1944 to begin air sweeps of Saipan's Aslito airfield and the fields on Guam, Rota and Tinian, eliminating any local airborne threat from Japan. Saipan was some 12 miles long with a mountain range running the length of the island. Unlike previous assaults, Saipan had varied terrain - cane fields, terraced rises and mountain passes – and worse, it had towns and an indigenous population of 30,000. The landing beaches were located on the west shore of the island, south of the town of Garapan and were split into two division sectors.

As soon Japan received information that TF 58's target was Saipan, the Japanese fleet at Tawi Tawi began to raise steam for the epic "A-Go" battle which would take place west of the Marianas in the Philippine Sea. American commanders believed that Japan had saved a cadre of their best pilots for this battle but they were mistaken. Japan had few surviving experienced combat pilots and even fewer capable of operating from carriers. Japan's pilots were so inexperienced that they incurred huge training losses from accidents - eventually forcing them to cease carrier training to conserve the remainder of their pilots. Because their pilots were unable to effect carrier landings, they shifted their strategy to launching at sea and then using airfields on Guam to continuously attack the American fleet.

As the first Marines set their boots on Saipan on 15 June 1944, Japan's carrier fleet sailed through Philippine Island passages toward the Philippine sea. Two great navies were on a collision course. Japan, remembering their decisive naval victory at Tsushima in 1905, prepared for the decisive battle according to the theories of the Japanese Navy's American mentor, Alfred Thayer Mahan. They planned to surprise and destroy an American fleet preoccupied with supporting the Saipan landing.