

Saipan would be a tougher nut to crack than anyone imagined. As the Marines hit the beaches on 15 June 1944, commanders soon realized that enemy strength was twice the 15,000 stated in intelligence reports. Japanese artillery had the beaches and the approach lanes zeroed in and murderous shelling fell on the invading marines. Marines used their rifles until they ran out of ammo, then bayonets and finally turned their empty rifles into clubs in hand-to-hand combat. By the first evening, a one mile perimeter was established at a cost of many U.S. casualties. The next day, 16 June, General Yoshitsugu Saigo, commander of the Saipan garrison, ordered a general nighttime counterattack against the American northern flank which caused heavy casualties on both sides but failed to break the Marine perimeter. In subsequent days, U.S. Marines and soldiers advanced to Magicienne Bay on the west coast of the Island. A northward attack followed, utilizing 3 divisions, the 2nd Marine Division to the west, the 4th Marine Division to the east and the Army's 27th Infantry Division in the center. Fighting on Saipan was so intense that General Holland Smith canceled the Guam invasion to keep a sufficient reserve offshore should the Saipan situation deteriorate.

A WWII infantryman had little knowledge of the war beyond his foxhole and few American troops on Saipan were aware that offshore, an historic clash of the Japanese and American navies was unfolding. The Imperial Japanese Navy's plan A-Go was designed to lure the American fleet to its destruction in a decisive carrier battle. The invasion of Biak on 27 May set the battle plan in motion. A large fleet of Japanese battleships and carriers set out to reinforce Biak on 9 June and act as bait to lure U.S. fleet into the battle. But America now had resources for a two-front war in the Pacific and even as the fighting raged on Biak, the invasion of the Marianas commenced. After the IJN learned that a large American fleet sailed for the Marianas, the threat posed by an invasion of these islands - each with airfields within range of the Japanese home islands - outweighed that of losing Biak. The venue of A-Go was thus shifted to the Philippine Sea. The Biak reinforcement mission, under the command of Admiral Matome Ugaki, was canceled and his force ordered to join the First Mobile Fleet, under Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa, in the Philippine Sea. Here Ozawa's enhanced fleet would destroy the American task force and repel the invasion of Saipan changing the course of the war.

As Ozawa sailed from Tawi Tawi, he knew that he was being shadowed by American submarines however he possessed a number of tactical advantages. He sailed eastward into the prevailing wind, allowing him to launch aircraft without course changes - the Americans, sailing westward to meet him would have to turn 180 degrees into the wind to launch. His aircraft had a 200 mile range advantage over American designs allowing his carriers to remain out of range of American carriers which could not venture beyond striking distance of Saipan and leave the landing force unprotected. Ozawa's fatal disadvantage was his lack of experienced pilots. Few Japanese pilots had combat experience - the battles of the Solomons cost Japan most of its "old school" aviators. New pilots, rushed through training, lacked the flying skills of their predecessors. They could not land on carriers and lacked navigation skills to find the enemy over water. They had to form up with experienced pilots and remain in sight of their formation leaders. After the raids, Japanese carrier-launched aircraft would have to land on the Japanese-held islands of Guam and Rota to rearm and refuel for the next attack.

On 16 June, the day after the Saipan invasion, Ozawa linked up with Ugaki's Biak task force and proceeded eastward to meet the enemy - all the while under observation of American submarines. Ozawa placed the light carriers of Carrier Division 3 in the van, followed by Carrier Division 1, with Ozawa's flagship, the new carrier Taiho on its first combat mission and the two surviving veterans of the Pearl Harbor raid, Shokaku and Zuikaku. The next day, Admiral Marc Mitscher, commander of the American carrier groups, began pressuring overall fleet commander, Adm. Raymond Spruance to detach the fast carrier groups to advance toward the Japanese fleet. Spruance denied permission because his mission was to protect the 70,000 troops on Saipan who already had suffered 1,500 killed

and 4,000 wounded. Spruance also chose to defend against an enemy flanking attack, a known Japanese tactic. A bitter battle erupted between the “Brown Shoe Navy” (aviators) and the “Black Shoe Navy” (surface sailors.) Mitscher’s subordinates fumed at Spruance’s tactics which they felt underestimated the capabilities of the fast carriers. Mitscher however, accepted the fleet commander’s logic and silenced objections. In Pearl Harbor, ambitious naval officers seeking Spruance’s job also questioned his decision to hold the carriers on a tight leash, but Admiral Chester Nimitz flatly refused to interfere with his fleet commander’s tactical decisions. Spruance kept the carriers within striking distance of Saipan and deployed his battleships and other heavy surface ships 35 miles ahead of them to use their massive anti-aircraft firepower to defend the fleet against Japanese aircraft that survived the gauntlet of American fighter interceptors. Unlike Midway in 1942, American commanders could rely on advanced radar to plot incoming enemy aircraft in plenty of time to launch interceptors. Spruance’s successful tactics as it turned out, garnered both criticism and praise after the war.

At 0730 on 19 June 1944, radar screens lit up around the Orote airfield on Guam. Interceptors were launched and destroyed 35 shore-based aircraft at the cost of one Hellcat in the opening battle. Ozawa launched his first aircraft from the van force which were detected by radar at 1005. All available fighters were launched from U.S. carriers. Few of the 69 Japanese aircraft survived the swarm of F6F Hellcats, flown by crack pilots. Those that did survive were mauled by AA gunners on the battleship picket line. Several American ships suffered minor bomb hits. Veteran Japanese pilot, Lt. Zenji Abe was able to dive bomb the carrier Wasp. His bomb narrowly missed but caused some damage. Somehow, Abe was able to return to his carrier – the only Japanese pilot to bomb an American vessel and survive. Ozawa launched his second wave which resulted in the worst aviation slaughter in history. 60 Japanese aircraft were destroyed by American Hellcats in 15 minutes. In a famous photo, U.S. Navy aviator Alex Vraciu returned to the carrier Lexington holding up 6 fingers – 6 confirmed kills.

As Ozawa’s flagship Taiho launched the second wave, the U.S. submarine Albacore tracked her to perfect firing position. Two of a spread of 6 torpedoes were on course to hit. Warrant Officer Sakio Komatsu spotted the torpedo wake just as he lifted off the Taiho and crashed his plane into one of the torpedoes, destroying it. His valor was for naught, the second hit. Taiho was built with armor to withstand both torpedoes and bombs and the ship did not appear badly damaged, it’s propulsion and steering still fully functional. The torpedo ruptured aviation fuel tanks and the lower decks began to fill with explosive fumes. An inexperienced damage-control officer turned on the ship’s blowers, spreading the fumes throughout the carrier. A spark caused a disastrous explosion rending the carrier from stem to stern. Ozawa escaped but Taiho, Japan’s newest carrier, sank on it’s first combat patrol. The American sub Cavalla, also on it’s first combat patrol, set up for a shot at the carrier Shokaku. Three of Cavalla’s 6 torpedo spread hit Shokaku, eventually sinking this veteran of Pearl Harbor.

Ozawa’s final two attacks were badly formed, many pilots “beat it” for Guam or Rota and were destroyed as they attempted to land. Ens. W. B. “Spider” Webb, shot down an amazing 8 Japanese aircraft in one mission over Guam. Many others were destroyed by fighter interceptors and AA fire from surface vessels or put out of action landing on the cratered runways of Orote field.

At days end, only 130 of the 373 carrier aircraft launched by Ozawa’s fleet were operational, 50 more land-based aircraft were destroyed over Guam - at the cost of 25 American Hellcats. This represented an 11 to 1 kill ratio, unparalleled in modern warfare. In ready-rooms across the fleet, pilots enjoyed “medicinal” brandy and talked incessantly about the action. One said, “It reminded me of an old-fashioned Turkey Shoot!” Historians have officially named this carrier battle the “Battle of the Philippine Sea” but it will forever be known as the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot” – and this was only the first day of battle. The Imperial Japanese Navy would yet suffer more losses in the Philippine Sea.