

In the evening of 19 June 1944, Admiral Ozawa was still unaware – or perhaps unbelieving – of the disaster that befell his fleet that day. Ozawa counted 102 operational aircraft remaining aboard his carriers but assumed many had landed on Guam after inflicting heavy damage to the American fleet. As reports filtered in, it became clear that Ozawa's forces suffered grievous losses and Admiral Toyoda, Commander of the Combined Fleet, ordered Ozawa to withdraw to preserve the remainder of his force. In the morning of 20 June, American search aircraft failed to detect any enemy ships. At 1500, a garbled contact report was received placing the Japanese fleet 270 miles northeast of the American Task Force, heading away. Admiral Mitscher ordered every available aircraft to launch. Three words were written on chalk boards in ready rooms throughout the fleet: "Get the carriers."

Mitscher also warned his pilots that this mission would likely result in a night recovery. Night carrier landings were rare during WWII and most navy pilots were not trained to make this dangerous recovery. At 1621 hours, a giant air armada of 216 fighters and dive bombers launched to "get the carriers." These included 26 SBD's on their last combat mission of the war – they were being replaced by the more capable SB2C. Each pilot knew that the enemy force was at the edge of their combat range and they would be returning to their carriers in the dark, "running on fumes." Although many tactical disagreements resulted in enmity between the "Black Shoe" and "Brown Shoe" navies, blue-water sailors were committed to never allowing a single aviator to be lost at sea. A trust had built up between pilots and sailors, now that trust had to be relied on to land a heavy blow on the retreating IJN. Many pilots knew they would get wet that night, but they trusted the Navy would be there for them.

At 1825, the leading American formation contacted the Japanese fleet. Ozawa launched 80 aircraft to meet the attackers. Although 20 were shot down in minutes, the enemy defense was spirited and caused American losses. Dive bombers flew through heavy anti-aircraft fire to deliver bombs on the Zuikaku, the last carrier of the Pearl Harbor attackers still afloat. The carrier began burning furiously but in this case, effective damage-control actions allowed her to return to port. (The Zuikaku would later be sunk in the Leyte Gulf battle.) A dive bomber attack on the carrier Hiyo failed to get hits but a subsequent torpedo attack set the carrier ablaze. Abandoned by her crew, the Hiyo sank at 2200. Also hit and damaged were the light carriers Junyo and Chiyoda and the battleship Haruna. Two precious Japanese Fleet Oilers were hit and later scuttled, payback for the heroic crew of the American Oiler Neosho, which suffered the same fate 2 years earlier during the battle of the Coral Sea.

American pilots, exhausted from a week of heavy fighting now began a long and dangerous return to their carriers in the gathering darkness. The radio was alive with desperate calls from wounded pilots, flying shot-up aircraft, all low on fuel. Admiral Mitscher gave the order for all of his ships to turn on their running lights and point their searchlights up to the sky to guide returning pilots. Although breaking blackout could expose his fleet to submarine and air attack, it was not unprecedented and not controversial because the pilots, not the ships, were the power of the carrier group. Admiral Mitscher ordered his aircraft to land on any carrier - the recovery was bedlam. Damaged aircraft fought each other to land first, the Lexington recovered two aircraft simultaneously, each catching different wires. On the Belleau Wood, the landing officer, Lt. Harper, guided a lone aircraft in but the pilot kept misreading his signals and was waved off. Harper then noticed the "meatballs" of an Aichi bomber and regretted he could not coax the Japanese pilot down to what would have been the most amazing capture in the history of naval aviation. Of the 216 American aircraft launched, 80 either ditched in the sea or crashed on landing and 20 went missing - presumed destroyed in combat. Of the 209 downed aviators, all were rescued except for 16 pilots and 33 crew. All American aircraft were replaced from spares carried by the fleet. Ozawa had lost 400 aircraft and 3 carriers. His fleet retired at high speed for the Inland Sea with 35 operational aircraft. The Battle of the Philippine Sea was a solid American victory.

On Saipan, the fighting raged on – both between America and Japan and between the services. Having captured all the Island south of Magicienne Bay, the U.S. V Amphibious Corps began a northward advance on a 3 Division Front with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Div. along the west coast and the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Div. along the east coast. The Army's 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Div. had the center of the front, which had the worst terrain. Called "Death Valley," it was a deep valley with Japanese controlling the high ground on either side. Immediately, the 27<sup>th</sup> got off to a slow start, hampered by difficult terrain and fierce enemy resistance. Army infantry doctrine was designed for continental warfare, emphasizing cautious advance behind concentrated artillery preparation. The Marines' doctrine reflected their more localized mission requirements of quick seizure without regard for casualties. The difficult terrain, heavy resistance and doctrinal differences caused the center Army advance to fall behind the Marine advances on the flanks, in effect causing a dangerous salient (bulge in the lines.) Robert Leckie, USMC veteran of Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester and Peleliu and one of the Marine Corps' greatest boosters, refused to fault the Army in his history, given the obstacles they faced - but USMC brass were furious. The Army's slow advance exposed their flanks and slowed the general advance northward. On 24 June, MG Ralph Smith, CO of the 27<sup>th</sup> division was relieved. A week later - utilizing Gen. Smith's own battle plan - the Army broke through, allowing the combined advance to continue.

The Japanese position was deteriorating. They were running out of room to retreat and under constant bombardment by both shore based artillery and the heavy guns of the fleet offshore. Ben Bradley, later the editor of the Washington Post, served aboard the destroyer Philip just off Saipan and relayed fire-control directives from a Marine artillery spotter located yards from the enemy. Bradley said he could hear the Japanese screaming. On 7 July, a desperate Banzai charge thundered down the Garupan plain, slicing through American lines. Maj. Ben L. Salomon, a dentist in the 27<sup>th</sup> Division, defended patients being evacuated from his field hospital during the charge and then took over a machine-gun, destroying 98 of the enemy before being killed. Maj. Salomon became the third Jewish medal of honor winner of WWII. The charge, one of the worst of the war, claimed 400 soldiers and Marines and cost the Japanese over 4,000 dead. As the American forces chased remaining Japanese troops northward, civilians began retreating with them. As they reached the tip of the island, Marpi Point, they were ordered to commit suicide by jumping off the high cliff into the sea. Desperate pleas by the U.S. to save themselves were ignored. This mass suicide of some 1,000 Japanese civilians became a huge propaganda boost by the Japanese government. For weeks, bodies floated offshore – divers had to be put over the side of warships to clear propellers fouled by human remains. American planners were now beginning to understand what would lie ahead of us as we neared Japanese home territory.

The end of resistance on Saipan was declared on 9 July 1944, however sporadic guerrilla fighting continued for months. Some 29,000 Japanese were killed – nearly the entire garrison. General Yoshitsugo Saito and Admiral Chiuchi Nagumo, hero of Pearl Harbor, both committed suicide in the last days of battle. American casualties among the 71,000 who landed were about 2950 killed and 10,500 wounded – among the wounded was future actor Lee Marvin, hit by shell fragments. At home, the Japanese people were told not to worry, this was all according to plan – the enemy were being drawn in closer to their final destruction. Many Japanese looked at their maps and found this harder and harder to believe as the Americans drew ever closer to the home islands. Daily, wives and mothers were solemnly presented with white boxes containing the ashes of their loved ones, few soldiers returned from overseas service. Japanese politicians began talking about the Kamikaze (Divine Wind) a typhoon that saved the Japan from Mongol Invasion in 1281. For the American side, Saipan was now a forward base for remaining operations in the Marianas campaign. Bitter fighting on Guam and Tinian remained for the assault troops of TF-58. Although the Japanese Air Force and Navy were unable to interfere in the Marianas, they would still exact a toll on the U.S. Navy before the Pacific War ended.