

At the outset of the Pacific War, the U. S. Army and Navy were in agreement with respect to the route to conquer Japan. The axis of attack would oust Japanese forces from the Solomons, New Guinea and the Philippines before invading the mainland. In fall of 1943, as new fast carriers joined the U. S. fleet, the advantages of the tactical employment of the fast carrier group in offensive operations became more apparent to the Navy. Admiral Nimitz, Pacific Theater commander, noticed a weakness in the Japanese defense in depth of the central Pacific and exploited it. In the 8 months between November, 1943 and June, 1944 the U. S. Army, Navy and Marine corps fought their way through the Central Pacific from Tarawa to the Marianas, placing the Japanese mainland in range of the B-29 bombers. In the South Pacific, the Army advanced to the western tip of New Guinea. Opinions within the Navy and Army began to diverge at this point as to the best strategy to isolate and conquer Japan.

Reasoned arguments were offered by the Navy to bypass the Philippine Islands and to continue the central Pacific advance to Okinawa and Formosa (Taiwan.) This strategy would effect an impenetrable blockade of shipping to Japan, starving it of food, fuel and the raw materials needed to produce weapons and equipment. The radius of operational range of long and short range bombers from Kaohsiung airfield in Formosa would cover a large portion of eastern China, southern Japan and all the sea lanes to it, including the Straight of Formosa, Japan's primary shipping route. On the other hand, aircraft based on Clark Field in the Philippines could not reach Southern Japan and most of China, with the Straight of Formosa reachable only by long range bombers. Post-war studies reveal that many Japanese officers also felt bypassing the Philippines for Formosa would have been the more effective strategy. Saburo Sakai, one of Japan's greatest aviators, wrote that the war would have been shortened by a year if the U. S. Army's Pacific forces had been used in the Central Pacific strategy, rather than Philippines. (I believe however, his opinion was colored by the extreme suffering endured by himself and his family during the final months of the Pacific War and the immediate post-war period.)

The Army's plan to advance on Japan via the Philippines may not have yielded an air-tight naval and air blockade but was based on sound military doctrine and less risky. Formosa had been a Japanese territory since 1895 and the population had grown sympathetic to being part of Japan. Formosa's proximity to China left it open to easy reinforcement from the numerous Japanese troops still effectively fighting in China. Worse, American lines of communication (i.e. resupply routes) would be sandwiched between large forces from the Japanese mainland and the occupied Philippines.

Unlike Formosa, the Filipino people by 1944 had a warm relationship with the United States and had a large guerrilla force actively opposing the Japanese and ready to aid U. S. invasion forces. America controlled all lines of communications from the Philippines to the west coast of the U. S. and there was a moral obligation to liberate the Philippine people and Allied prisoners. One more factor was available to tip the balance toward the Philippine axis of advance – General Douglas MacArthur who held his promise to return sacrosanct. Despite all MacArthur's faults, his desire to take the Philippines was based on reasoned military logic and he used his influence to advance a sensible military plan - not a personal crusade. FDR met with MacArthur and Nimitz at Pearl Harbor and made the decision – the Philippines would be America's next major operation. With a smaller Japanese garrison than Luzon and a good port, Leyte was chosen as the initial landing site for the Philippines campaign.

On 17 October 1944, the 6th Ranger Bn., led by LTC Henry Mucci (who would later lead the "Great Raid" that liberated the POW camp at Cabanatuan) took the islands of Homonhon, Suluan and Dinagat to secure the entrance to the Gulf of Leyte and to set up navigation lights for the invasion fleet. On 20 October, the 6th United States Army landed a corps at Tacloban and another at Dulag with the objective of taking the northern half of the Island of Leyte. In the evening, General MacArthur, unable to secure an amphibious vehicle to drive him onto the beach, made his famous walk from a landing craft through

the surf at Tacloban, accompanied by Sergio Osmena, president of the Philippines. MacArthur proclaimed, "People of the Philippines, I have returned! By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil." Offshore, the greatest naval battle in history was about to begin.

Japan developed a series of comprehensive defensive plans to defend the mainland against various Allied attack scenarios. No longer bent on conserving their fleet, Japan would commit their navy to the final victorious clash of warships envisioned by 19th Century American naval theorist, Alfred Thayer Mahan who shaped both U. S. and Japanese prewar naval doctrines. A week before the Leyte landings, on 12 October the U. S. Navy launched carrier raids against Okinawa and Formosa as a diversion. The Task force was led by Adm. John S. "Slew" McCain Sr., father of Senator and presidential candidate, John S. McCain Jr. The task force was the most powerful in the 3rd Fleet and "Slew" McCain, expert in carrier tactics, took it deep into Japanese waters to launch his raids. The Japanese took the bait but harbored considerable doubt about actual U. S. intentions and held their navy in reserve, using aircraft only to oppose the Formosa raids. Large numbers of Japanese aircraft flying from the mainland attacked the American fleet but due to the scarcity of experienced Japanese pilots and poor maintenance of their aircraft, McCain gained a major victory, suffering minimal losses while destroying his target airfields and large numbers of Japanese aircraft. Ironically after the battle, the triumphant McCain was ordered to return to Ulithi to resupply and never got to participate in the "main event." The raids also trapped the IJN Combined Fleet Commander Soemu Toyoda in Manila where he had gone to tour the front and overall command passed to Adm. Ryunosuke Kusaka, his chief of staff. (This should not be construed as a serious deficiency. In the Japanese Navy, Chiefs of Staff were qualified commanders imbued with full command authority in the absence of the Fleet Commander.)

As word came of the Leyte landings, Japan activated an intelligent, reasoned defense plan, utilizing 4 fleets to counterattack and destroy the American transports in Leyte Gulf. From bases in Sumatra and Borneo, Admiral Shoji Nishimura's southern force would attack eastward through the Suriago Strait and Admiral Takeo Kurita's center fleet would sail through the Philippine Archipelago, pass through the San Bernadino Strait and attack from the Philippine Sea in a classic pincer action. A third fleet, under the command of Admiral Kiyohide Shima set sail from the Japanese mainland without specific orders. Finally, and perhaps the key to the operation, a fourth fleet, built around 4 aircraft carriers (including Zuikaku, last surviving carrier of the Pearl Harbor fleet) set sail from the mainland. These carriers had only 100 aircraft between them, their mission was to act as a decoy to draw the American Fleet away from the transports. This diversion fleet was under the command of Adm. Jisaburo Ozawa and came close to avenging the shellacking he took in the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June.

Supporting the Leyte landings was the American 3rd Fleet, under William "Bull" Halsey and the 7th Fleet, commanded by Thomas C. Kinkaid. These were joined by Task Force 74 of the Royal Australian Navy, commanded by Sir John A. Collins, KBE, CB. The Allied naval force comprised some 300 ships, including 8 fleet carriers, 26 smaller carriers and 12 battleships. Japan's attacking force had some 67 ships, 1 fleet carrier, 5 smaller carriers and 7 battleships – including both super-battleships, Yamato and Musashi. Both sides employed multiple independent fleets but operating without unified command. The lack of overall leadership would hamper coordination of both side's fleets in battle.

On 23 October 1944, Kurita's Center Force was attacked by two American subs, Darter and Dace. Two heavy cruisers, Atago (Kurita's flagship) and Maya were sunk and a third, Takao, was severely damaged. Kurita, uninjured, had to swim to a destroyer and eventually transferred to Yamato - which was not equipped with the extra radio gear required for a fleet commander's flagship. The historic Battle of Leyte Gulf began with the IJN commander Soemu Toyoda stuck in Manila and Center Force commander, Takeo Kurita, lacking sufficient command and control channels to operate effectively.