

William F. Halsey and Takeo Kurita were superb naval commanders. In the epic naval battle of Leyte Gulf, each was in charge of their respective country's most powerful fleets. Kurita's mission was to foil the Leyte landing by destroying American transports (NOT warships) and Halsey's orders were to protect the beachhead from just such an enemy counterattack by sea. Both would deviate from their primary missions for the same reasons and the result would be near-disaster for the U. S. Navy and complete disaster for the Imperial Japanese Navy. (The individual battles that comprised the Battle of Leyte Gulf took place during overlapping time periods on 24-26 October 1944. I'll omit dates and times to give an overall sense of the actions which lead to the fateful command decisions.)

After the submarine attacks in the Palawan Passage on 23 October, Kurita's Center Fleet was under constant surveillance as it crossed the Philippine Archipelago supported by the land-based aircraft of Vice Admiral Takijiri Onishi, commanding Japanese Naval Air Forces in the Philippines. Halsey's 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet in the Philippine Sea far north and east of Leyte, launched devastating round-the-clock raids on Kurita's Center Force as it traversed the Sibuyan Sea. Kurita counted among his warships both Japan's super-battleships, Yamato and Musashi. After a day of constant air attacks, the Musashi, pride of the Japanese navy with 18.1 inch guns and air-conditioned staterooms for the IJN commander, succumbed to numerous bomb and torpedo hits. American planes damaged the battleships Yamato and Nagato and put the cruiser Myoko out of action. VADM Onishi's aircraft counterattacked the American fleet and were largely destroyed, however one airplane landed a 250kg bomb on the light carrier USS Princeton. As crews fought to save the ship, a secondary explosion doomed her. The cruiser Birmingham, astride the Princeton to fight her fires, was heavily damaged by the explosion and put out of action.

Kurita, badly mauled in the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea, now effected a maneuver commonly employed by Japanese fleet commanders. Kurita reversed course, appearing to retreat so as to convince the enemy he was out of the battle. This maneuver convinced Halsey that the Center Fleet was finished and he turned his attention to the northeast where intelligence indicated an enemy carrier force approaching. Halsey's strong belief that the carrier was the key to naval battles led him to assemble the bulk of his 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet carrier groups along with his large surface warships and – over the objections of a number of his subordinate commanders and in direct conflict with his mission to protect the Leyte beachhead - send them northeast to pursue what turned out to be the Ozawa decoy fleet. Historians would call this chase, "Bulls Run." Halsey left a small force composed of 6 tiny escort carriers known as "Taffy-3" to provide air cover for the landings. Taffy-3 would soon become a synonym for valor.

Meanwhile, south of Leyte, Admiral Shoji Nishimura's southern fleet (2 battleships, 1 heavy cruiser and 4 destroyers) approached from the southwest toward the Suriago Strait leading to the Leyte Gulf to join Admiral Takeo Kurita's converging Center Fleet in destroying the American beachhead. Nishimura however, was unaware that Kurita was not heading for Leyte and neither Admiral knew that Admiral Kiyohide Shima who had sailed without specific orders, now fell in behind the Nishimura force to reinforce it. The U. S. Navy's 7th Fleet support force, under Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, stood near the entrance to Leyte Gulf, its large guns lending artillery support to the landings. The support force, designed for screening the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet carrier groups, had 6 battleships, 4 heavy cruisers, 4 light cruisers and 28 destroyers. Kinkaid also had 39 PT boats which he deployed at the western approaches of the straight, with the straight itself lined by many of his destroyers. (Kinkaid's fleet also included two Australian ships, a heavy cruiser and a destroyer.) Because Halsey's carriers were now far north chasing the Ozawa fleet and the two approaching IJN Southern Fleets had no carriers among them, the Battle of the Suriago Strait was to be the last great clash of large naval surface fleets in history.

As the Nishimura force entered the Suriago Strait, they encountered the gauntlet of PT boats and destroyers. The PT's scored no hits but torpedoes from American destroyers sank the battleship Fuso

and 3 IJN destroyers. Admiral Kinkaid positioned his cruisers and behind them his battleships, in two east to west battle lines to block Nishimura's exit to the Leyte Gulf. Since the Suriago Strait ran north to south, Kinkaid found himself in the classic position of advantage in a naval surface battle – the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet had “crossed the T.” As the Japanese Southern Fleet sailed toward the American ships bow-on, only their forward gun turrets could be employed. On the American line, each ship “crossing the T” was in a position to use all gun turrets against the advancing enemy battle line. By 1944, the Japanese Navy had a rudimentary version of radar-guided fire-control but it was no match for the advanced American system that effectively neutralized the Japanese night-fighting advantage. In the early morning of 24 October, USS West Virginia's radar painted the approaching Japanese fleet - yes, the same USS West Virginia that was sunk at Pearl Harbor. Five of the six battleships sunk on 7 Dec 1941 were raised, refitted and returned to battle and all 5 now faced the Nishimura fleet. The West Virginia opened fire, scoring a hit on the battleship Yamashiro (Nishimura's flagship) with her first salvo. West Virginia's first shots were the signal for the rest of the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet to open fire and soon hundreds of 16, 14, 8 and 6 inch shells were screaming toward the remnants of the Japanese fleet. The Yamashiro and the heavy cruiser Mogami were crippled by allied shells. The Yamashiro, limping away from the battle, was later torpedoed and sunk by an American destroyer - Southern Fleet commander Shoji Nishimura went down with his ship. The Mogami was sunk by carrier-based aircraft the next day.

The Suriago Strait action ended with the last exchange of fire between battleships in history and the last broadsides ever to be fired by a warship against another. The Shima force watched the destruction of the Southern Fleet and turned around to withdraw. Shima dispatched an ambiguous message that the battle was concluded. Only one Japanese ship retired intact from the Southern Fleet, the destroyer Shigure, known as the lucky ship because it was never badly damaged in action - until it's luck ran out the following January when it was sunk by an American submarine. Shima's message convinced the IJN combined fleet commander that a glorious victory had been achieved and Tokyo celebrated.

About the time the Suriago Strait action petered out, Admiral Kurita reversed course again and the Center Force began making for the San Bernadino Strait north of Leyte, to begin its run on Leyte Gulf from the east. Since Halsey's powerful task forces were running at high speed away from the San Bernadino Strait in pursuit of what would turn out to be the Ozawa decoy force, Kurita emerged into the Philippine sea unopposed. Soon Kurita's lookouts discovered Taffy-3, the tiny force left behind to guard the beachhead. Believing that Taffy 3 was composed of fleet carriers, Kurita - in total disregard of his mission to attack the transports in Leyte Gulf – set course to engage the American escort carrier task unit in what would be called the Battle of Samar.

Meanwhile, after many delays in communications, Halsey learned the Ozawa decoy force with it's 4 fleet carriers, was discovered off Cape Engano. The delay in discovering Ozawa was almost comical given that Ozawa was supposed to be discovered and he did everything possible to be discovered without revealing his decoy mission to Halsey. The Battle of Cape Engano loomed on the horizon.

The final engagements of the Battle of Leyte Gulf at Samar and Cape Engano were about to begin. The fate of the Leyte landings now hinged on two popular and competent commanders who abandoned their primary missions involving the Leyte beachhead, compelled by similar wartime experience to engage and destroy at all costs, the enemy carrier forces they were pursuing. Only Halsey had an “out.” A rider in his orders stated that, should a large enemy fleet appear, he was allowed to leave the beachhead to engage it, and the Ozawa fleet clearly fit that description. Still, Halsey was roundly criticized for sailing so far from Leyte that he had no chance to counter Kurita's Center Force. Had Kurita followed his orders to the letter, Japan's carefully laid defense plan might have succeeded and the Leyte landings might have ended in disaster. Kurita too would suffer lasting postwar criticism.