

In the early morning of 25 October 1944, Admiral Takeo Kurita's Center Force traversed the San Bernadino Strait without opposition. Kurita feared that as he exited the strait to the Philippine sea, a battle line of American ships would be laid out across his path, "crossing the T." However, no American ships were anywhere near him – Halsey's large fleet of carriers and battleships were 450 miles north, near Cape Engano already engaging the Ozawa force. Kinkaid's 7th Fleet was 250 miles to the south, fresh from destroying Nishimura's Southern Force. The Japanese defensive plan for the Philippines, despite the loss of the Southern Force was working better than they could have been imagined – nothing stood between Kurita and destroying the American beachhead in Leyte – nothing except Kurita's lifetime of following Japanese naval tradition and his every instinct as an Imperial Japanese Navy officer.

Soon after emerging unopposed into the Philippine sea, Kurita set a course parallel to the coast of Samar Island, heading for the entrance to Leyte Gulf. Kurita's fleet was weakened by the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea but still included 4 battleships, 6 heavy and 2 light cruisers (most though, sustained damage in the previous day's air attacks.) Even the weather was cooperative, with scattered squalls to hide him from enemy aircraft. Japanese radar then picked up the small American carrier group, "Taffy-3" (6 small escort carriers and 7 destroyers) left by Halsey protect the landing fleet. Kurita, torn between his mission of destroying the beachhead and the long naval tradition of destroying the enemy fleet, embraced tradition and training. Convinced that Taffy-3 was Halsey's task force of fleet carriers, Kurita engaged the American fleet in what would become the Battle of Samar.

The United States Navy, in certainly their most heroic stand in history, fought Kurita's ships with carriers armed with a single five inch gun mounted on their stern, and with thin-skinned destroyers firing torpedoes and 5 inch guns against Japanese battleships armed with 14 and 16 inch guns. No outside help was possible given the heavy ships of the 7th fleet were 11 hours away to the south and Halsey's fastest ships 18 hours away to the north. Taffy-3's carriers, taken by surprise as they prepared their morning raids, were shelled by the Japanese fleet running a parallel course. The carriers turned to run, exposing the Kurita force to their aft-mounted 5 in. armament – and registered hits. Their aircraft, armed for combat-support, were launched to do what damage they could before landing on Leyte airfields. Kurita, fearing fuel shortages, eventually abandoned the pursuit and turned south back toward Leyte, placing him in the path of the American destroyers tasked to screen the fleet against submarine attack. The "Tin Cans" had no armor and heroically engaged the thickly armored Japanese battleships and cruisers with torpedoes, and rapid-fire of their 5 inch guns. The carriers and destroyers, including the famed USS Samuel B Roberts, the tiny destroyer escort that "fought like a battleship," broke up the Japanese formation, heavily damaging 6 cruisers.

Kurita in the Yamato, lost control of his fleet for a period of time due to evasive maneuvers against a torpedo attack. Still, the Center Force was able to sink the escort carrier Gambier Bay (the only American carrier lost to surface action) and 3 destroyers. Four other U. S. carriers and 3 destroyers were damaged. Technically, Kurita had won the battle but other issues weighed on his mind. Lack of communication between the Japanese fleets left Kurita unaware that Halsey had taken the bait and was engaging the Ozawa fleet. The Center Force had suffered heavy air attack from aircraft launched by Taffy-3 during the melee and Kurita believed that these strikes were being launched by Halsey's main force. Although Kurita's battleships were still intact and Taffy-3 effectively destroyed, Kurita decided to break off the attack and withdraw rather than press on to the Leyte Gulf on his primary mission. RADM Clifton Sprague, commander of the battered Taffy-3 heroically gave chase – his sailors exclaiming, "Come on, they're getting away!" Kurita's inexplicable decision has sparked heated controversy to this day, his worst critics being former IJN officers who blamed the battle's loss on

Kurita's lack of aggressive spirit. RADM Sprague was convinced that Kurita withdrew because his ships were too damaged to continue.

Off the Luzon coast, William F. Halsey overtook the Decoy Force of Adm. Jisaburo Ozawa - 3 carriers, two hybrid carriers, 3 light cruisers and 9 destroyers. Ozawa initiated the Battle of Cape Engano, launching nearly all his aircraft which were promptly destroyed by American combat air patrols. U. S. carrier air counterstrikes sank the Zuikaku, last of the 6 carriers that attacked Pearl Harbor and with it, 2 light carriers and a destroyer, with 1 light carrier and cruiser damaged before Ozawa retired to Japan. Halsey accomplished what his instincts and training compelled him to do - but not what his primary mission required him to do and left the defense of Leyte to the extreme valor and sacrifice of a small force of escort carriers and destroyers. Modern historians are shocked by desperate messages by RADM Clifton Sprague, Admiral Nimitz and even FDR warning Halsey about the Kurita fleet. As such, "Bull's Run" still elicits volumes of criticism after 75 years.

Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi commanded the Japanese First Air Fleet in the Philippines at the time of the Battle of Leyte. The veteran aviator opposed the creation of suicide squadrons but as the war worsened for Japan, came to refine and employ this desperate tactic as Japan ran out of qualified pilots and American anti-aircraft screens and combat air patrols made it more difficult for inexperienced pilots to accurately drop bombs or launch torpedoes at our warships. A single A6M "Zero," armed with one 250kg bomb, flown directly into an American vessel by a pilot willing to sacrifice his life, could do more damage than a squadron of dive bombers or torpedo planes. The Kamikaze traded his life for possibly 1,000 enemy lives, while theoretically saving that many Japanese lives. (More on the Kamikaze and Onishi in a subsequent essay.) Onishi launched a suicide attack on the battered remnants of Taffy-3 bravely giving chase to the retiring Center Force. One aircraft managed to penetrate the air defense screen and crash into the escort carrier St. Lo. The St. Lo eventually sank, the first American victim of the Kamikaze, dozens more would follow.

The battles of Samar and Cape Engano arguably were Pyrrhic victories for their respective commanders, but the overall battle of Leyte Gulf was a decisive victory for the U. S. Navy, resulting in the complete destruction of the Imperial Japanese Navy. By January, MacArthur's forces completed a pincer action north and south of Leyte's central mountain range and with assistance from the Filipino resistance and civilian transporters, converged to liberate the island of Leyte at a cost of 15,600 casualties (3,500 KIA.) Ironically, false reports from Japanese propaganda that the Americans had suffered a major defeat in the Leyte Gulf battle (born of Shima's ambiguous message) resulted in a large Japanese troop convoy barging into American controlled waters off Leyte. They successfully landed reinforcements who lengthened the ground battle but the returning Marus were caught by American planes and destroyed. Fighting in Philippines continued for another 10 months in Luzon until VJ day. Outside of China, the last Japanese occupied territory in the East Indies was being liberated by Commonwealth forces. For America, the final battles of the Pacific War would be fought on actual Japanese soil - and over it. November 1944 saw the beginning of the strategic bombing of Japan. An emergency airfield was needed midway between the Marianas bomber bases and Japan. A remote district of Tokyo, Sulfur Island (Iwo Jima in Japanese) was perfect. Iwo's emergency field eventually saved 25,000 airmen - but not before 7,000 marines died to capture it in late winter of 1945.

75 years ago, with acceptance of Allied demands of unconditional surrender unlikely, Operation Olympic, America's plan to invade Kyushu (the southernmost home island of Japan) as a base for the final assault on Tokyo, seemed inevitable. The Kyushu invasion needed a base, the Ryukyu Islands, specifically the island of Okinawa was chosen. Here would be fought the last and costliest battle of the Pacific War. Okinawa would seal the fate of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Japan and the post-war world.