

Chuuk Atoll consists of a submerged mountain range forming islands within a coral reef. It attracts wreck divers from all over the world because its lagoon contains one of the largest collections of sunken vessels anywhere. All of these ships foundered 75 years ago today, 17 February 1944, in an operation called Hailstone, a devastating carrier-based air attack launched by the U. S. Navy against a mysterious and greatly feared Japanese naval fortress in the Caroline Islands, then known as Truk.

Truk was never the “Japanese Pearl Harbor,” as most military personnel believed in 1944. Its large lagoon allowed high speed practice maneuvers and on its central islands, the Japanese constructed 4 airfields. Truk had minimal port facilities, one medium size dry dock, no underground fuel storage and no piers for deep draft vessels. Supplies and fuel had to be lightered to ships at anchor. Damaged vessels could be made just seaworthy enough for a trip to repair facilities in Japan. Japanese ships had minimal washing facilities so sailors on liberty looked forward to a visit to a bathhouse and then a visit to a “recreational facility” staffed by kidnapped Korean “Comfort Women.” Most commerce, restaurants and stores on the islands was managed by Chinese merchants who lived there for many years and were despised by the Japanese. Truk in fact, was a transfer station for ships bound for other South Pacific locations. Early in the war, Japan’s air power was so immense and their network of bases in the region was so extensive that reconnaissance was not possible – U. S. naval commanders admitted all we knew about Truk was “what we read in National Geographic.” Carrier commanders were reticent to approach Truk because a protracted stay offshore to launch and recover aircraft might bring a devastating counterattack from Truk’s airfields. In early 1944, advances in both the quality and quantity of Naval Aviation all but eliminated the threat of Japanese aircraft to an approaching carrier task force. Since we did not require Truk’s anchorage, we would not invade Truk but to reduce it (as the Japanese taught us in 1941) by carrier-based air attack. Carrier pilots were not entirely convinced that a raid on Truk would be easy – a cartoon from one carrier’s cruise book showed the Admiral informing the ship’s company that they were attacking Truk – and the ship’s company diving overboard!

On 4 Feb, the day Kwajalein was taken, two patrol aircraft overflew Truk and discovered the Japanese combined fleet at anchor. The sighting of these aircraft convinced combined fleet commander Admiral Mineichi Koga (who replaced Yamamoto) that an attack was imminent and he ordered the fleet to Tawi Tawi to save it for the decisive Mahanian battle which would bring ultimate victory to Japan. On 10 Feb, Koga in the super battleship Musashi, sailed for Japan. A few cruisers, destroyers and dozens of fully laden maru’s (cargo ships) remained at anchor in Truk Lagoon. The attacking task force of 9 carriers with 500 aircraft, arrived at launch position on 17 February 1944 without detection. The “Battle of Truk” commenced with the first wave of hellcats shooting down 56 enemy fighters, then freely attacking the airbases, destroying 72 aircraft on the ground. Shortly thereafter, the battle of Truk ended and the destruction of Truk commenced. An unlikely witness to the effectiveness of the air raids was Marine ace, Gregory “Pappy” Boyington who was shot down and captured near Rabaul a week earlier. His transport had just landed at Truk when the attacks began. He ran to a ditch, thrilled by the destruction and scoffing at death threats from an angry Japanese pilot hiding in the same ditch – these memories comforted him during his ensuing 18 month captivity in Japan. Boyington remained the highest scoring Marine pilot with 28 kills, just ahead of Joe Foss who downed 26.

After the fighter sweep that eliminated Truk’s aircraft, dive bombers, armed with high explosive bombs and torpedoes went after the ships – creating Truk’s wreck-diving paradise by sinking 3 light cruisers, 4 destroyers, 3 training cruisers, 6 other naval auxiliary vessels and some 25 marus and 5 vital tankers. The material losses to Japan were irreplaceable and the Combined Fleet never returned to Truk. A raid the following April completed the destruction of Truk’s airfields and its garrison spent the rest of the war as subsistence farmers, enduring daily air raids staged to ensure that Truk would never be used again. The Navy lost 25 aircraft, all but 9 crew were rescued. In a surprise Japanese air attack, the

carrier Intrepid was damaged by a torpedo and forced to return to San Francisco for six months of repairs. Not a high price for one naval base, 4 airfields, 250 enemy aircraft, and 50 ships sunk.

On the same day as the Truk raid, U. S. Marine and Army units commenced the operation on Eniwetok Atoll. The day before the fleet entered the lagoon, carrier-based air raids destroyed all remaining Japanese aircraft on Eniwetok allowing our large warships to sail within a mile of the landing beaches. Pre-invasion bombardment from point-blank range killed many of the defending garrison on the northern island of Engebi, survivors were in a state of shock. On 18 February, the Marines landed on Engebi, destroying the remnants of its 1200 man garrison by the next morning. The Army and Marines also landed on Eniwetok Island that day. Due to a shorter bombardment, much of its fortifications and the most of its 800 man garrison remained intact. Soldiers and Marines had to attack numerous prepared positions and deadly spider-holes (covered holes from which Japanese popped out behind American lines.) Two major counterattacks failed to break American lines and by 20 Feb. Eniwetok Island was in American hands. Attacks on other islands of the Atoll eliminated all but 140 of the 3500 Japanese defenders. Eniwetok was officially declared secure on 23 February 1944 and became a crucial forward base. About 370 Americans were either killed or missing, some 900 were wounded in the Battle of Eniwetok. The battle confirmed the effectiveness of our basic amphibious doctrine which would not again be altered. By Spring, 1944, Japan's network of "unsinkable aircraft carriers," island airfields with overlapping radii of operations was gone. Major air and sea bases at Rabaul, Truk, Kavieng, the Gilberts and the Marshalls were never again to threaten allied air and sea operations east of Japan's "last resort" defenses – the Marianas. Even as Japanese commanders learned of the Marshalls defeat, they never lost faith in a final clash of super battleships – a repeat of their 1905 victory at Tsushima against Russia. While the Combined Fleet waited for its chance, Nimitz planned the invasion of the Marianas that commenced 9 days after the cross-channel invasion of France. Although these two massive amphibious operations in both the European and Pacific theaters of war would culminate in the complete destruction of the AXIS, the postwar world would never know peace and security. To this, Enewetak as it is called today, bears silent witness.

A look at Enewetak Atoll on Google Maps, reveals a landscape much as it existed before even the first inhabitants arrived, except one of the Atoll's islands is missing. Elugelab Island was vaporized in the first tests of America's new hydrogen bombs in 1952. Two massive craters mark its place. At least 6 craters are visible from the satellite view, (including the Runit Island Dome, where radioactive soil scrapped from the islands' surfaces is entombed,) permanent evidence of the 43 nuclear devices detonated when Enewetak was part of the Pacific Proving Grounds. Since the last atomic test in 1958, the U. S. Government has spent millions to clean up Enewetak Atoll - sacrificing many more soldiers to radiation diseases in that effort – but Engebi and other northern islands remain unsafe for humans.

The Government estimates that by 2050, the radioactive half-life of the fallout will decay to a level safe for humans again. Ironically, Enewetak may not last that long. Sea level rise due to climate change is slowly inundating the atoll, already lapping at the edges of the Runit Dome. Its radioactive contents will soon leach into the already irradiated Enewetak Lagoon. Each new typhoon causes worse flooding on Enewetak Island than the previous storm and not long in the future, the entire Atoll will be submerged. What the conventional explosives of the Pacific War and 32 megatons of nuclear blasts could not accomplish, climate change will - on the day the relentless sea forces the last human to leave Enewetak. Climate change or not, isn't the fact that Enewetak will remain uninhabitable for 100 years following the last nuclear detonation proof enough that the time is upon us to finally and forever excise from the human character that flaw which rationalizes nuclear weapons and war itself? As a student of World War II and a child of the Nuclear Age that followed it, I refuse to concede that such a goal is impossible.