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THE BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF
23 - 26 OCTOBER 1944
(LEYTE CAMPAIGN)

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THE BATTLE FOR LEYTE GULF

23 - 26 OCTOBER 1944

(LEYTE CAMPAIGN)

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph is the story of a Naval Operation, the Battle for LEYTE GULF, during the period 23-26 October 1944.

This battle was the greatest naval action of the Second World War and the largest engagement ever fought on the high seas. It is made up of four separate actions in three different bodies of water, and includes air, sub-surface and surface actions.

In order to orient the reader, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the major events which led up to this operation.

Central Pacific Forces, commanded by Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, launched the Allied major offensive in the Pacific with the invasion and seizure of the GILBERT ISLANDS in November 1943. This success was followed with the invasion of the MARSHALL ISLANDS in January 1944, and the MARIANAS ISLANDS in June 1944. (See Map A)

Meanwhile the Southwest Pacific Forces, under the command of General MacArthur, were forcing their way northward in NEW GUINEA.

The thrusts of the MacArthur-Nimitz forces pointed to the southern PHILIPPINES.

Plans called for landings on MINDANAO on 20 December 1944, as the first step in the recapture of the PHILIPPINES. (1)

Results of carrier-plane strikes over MINDANAO and LUZON in September and other information gathered showed Japanese forces weaker than had been previously estimated. Upon the recommendation of Admiral Halsey, Admiral Nimitz, and General MacArthur, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered a change of plans to shift the invasion of the PHILIPPINES to LEYTE and the date to 20 October 1944. (2)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Tables of organization of the Third and Seventh U.S. Fleets and the Japanese force are included in this writing to assist the reader in readily identifying units, commanders and vessels mentioned in the following discussion. It should be pointed out that the tables of organization do not list the numerous supply or "trains" vessels but rather only those vessels which actually took part in the battle action.

THE SEVENTH FLEET

As directed by General MacArthur, Admiral Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet was to "transport and land the Army inside LEYTE GULF; sink opposing surface forces and clear the skies of enemy planes; hover air power over our long attack and support convoys; prevent the Japanese from reinforcing LEYTE from the West; clear all adjacent waters for future operations; press a submarine offensive and at the same time

(1) A-1, p. 303

(2) A-2, p. 200

provide life guard services and establish in LEYTE GULF a naval force sufficient to support current and future operations." (3)

The Seventh Fleet was divided into three task forces: 77, 78 and 79. Admiral Kinkaid was in over-all command of the fleet as well as Task Force 77. Task Force 78, commanded by Rear Admiral D. E. Barbey, was an amphibious force as was Task Force 79, commanded by Vice Admiral T. S. Wilkinson.

Task Force 77 was further divided into four principal task groups: A flagship Group - Admiral Kinkaid; a Bombardment and Support Group - Rear Admiral Oldendorf; a Close Covering Group - Rear Admiral Berkey; and an Escort Carrier Group - Rear Admiral T. L. Sprague. (4)

The Bombardment and Support Group was subdivided into two task units: Fire Support Unit North and Fire Support Unit South. This subdivision was made to provide separate supporting units for the two landings to be at LEYTE.

The Escort Carrier Group was subdivided into three smaller carrier groups: Northern, Middle, and Southern Groups.

Admiral Kinkaid's tentative battle plan in the event of an attack by enemy naval forces was to have the Bombardment and Support Group and the Close Covering Group position themselves between the landing forces and the enemy and assisted by airstrikes from the Escort Carrier Group, destroy the enemy. (5)

(3) A-1, p. 311

(4) A-1, p. 454-456

(5) A-3, p. 27

THE THIRD FLEET

The Third Fleet under the command of Admiral Halsey was directed by Admiral Nimitz to "cover and support forces of the Southwest Pacific;...destroy enemy naval and air forces in or threatening the PHILIPPINES area, and to protect air and sea communications along the Central Pacific Axis." (6)

The vessels of the Third Fleet supporting the operation were organized as Task Force 38, commanded by Vice Admiral M. A. Mitscher. The task force was divided into four Task Groups: Task Group 38.1, Task Group 38.2, Task Group 38.3, and Task Group 38.4. (7)

To carry out his mission Admiral Halsey's plan was to make carrier strikes on the northern PHILIPPINE, OKINAWA and FORMOSA airfields during the period A minus 10 to A minus 7. "A" was used instead of "D" to designate invasion day. From A minus 4 to A day, the Third Fleet would cruise up and down off the coasts of LEYTE, LUZON and SAMAR. On A day the fleet would position itself off LEYTE to support the invasion. Following the invasion the fleet would remain in position to launch air strikes as needed to render further support to the invasion forces.

THE JAPANESE SITUATION AND PLAN

The fleet which still remained at the disposal of the Japanese in the late summer of 1944 was strong but unbalanced. There still remained the heavy surface forces of battleships and cruisers but there was a great lack of much

(6) A-3, p. 28

(7) A-1, p. 452-454

needed destroyers and aircraft carriers. A greater weakness lay in the shortage of trained carrier pilots to operate the planes still available. Out of necessity the fleet was forced to be split; with the heavy surface forces based at LINGGA near the fuel supply while the few carriers were based in the home waters of Japan near the training sites of their pilots.

To meet any invasion of the PHILIPPINES, which was sure to come, the Japanese had developed a plan titled Sho No. 1. (8) Under this plan the Japanese fleet, commanded by Admiral Toyoda, was divided into two forces: No. 1 Diversion Attack Force, Vice Admiral Kurita; and the main body, Vice Admiral Ozawa. (9) Admiral Kurita's force was based at LINGGA while Admiral Ozawa's force was based in the home waters of Japan.

The plan originally called for Admiral Ozawa's forces to attempt to decoy any American naval forces away from the invasion site while the heavy forces of Admiral Kurita moved in to destroy the landing forces. This plan was changed shortly before being placed into effect. The No. 2 Diversion Attack Force, Vice Admiral Shima, was removed from Admiral Ozawa's forces and given the mission to assist Admiral Kurita in destroying the landing forces. It is well to point out here that Admiral Shima being based in the north had no knowledge of Admiral Kurita's detailed plans. (See Map B)

(8) A-6, p. 281

(9) A-3, p. 14

The Sho No. 1 plan for the defense of the PHILIPPINES was one of desperation and if need be, called for the sacrifice of the entire fleet. As stated by Admiral Toyoda after the war: "Should we lose in the PHILIPPINES, even though the fleet were left, the shipping lane to the south would be completely severed. If the fleet came back to Japanese waters it would be without fuel. If it went south, it could not receive arms and munitions. There was no sense in saving the fleet at the expense of the loss of the PHILIPPINES." (10)

THE LEYTE LANDING

As the first American Rangers landed on the small islands at the mouth of LEYTE GULF on 17 October 1944, the Japanese placed Plan Sho No. 1 into effect.

Three days later, 20 October 1944, at precisely 1000 hours, the first landing craft touched down on the beaches of LEYTE. Task Force 78, was landing Tenth Corps in the TACLOBAN area in the northern reaches of LEYTE GULF. Task Force 78 was supported in the landing by Fire Support Unit North 77.2.1, commanded by Rear Admiral G. L. Weyler and Rear Admiral R. S. Berkey's Close Covering Group 77.3. (11) In the south, in the vicinity of SAN JOSE and DULAG, the 24th Corps was being landed by Task Force 79, supported by Fire Support Unit South 77.2, commanded by Rear Admiral J. B. Oldendorf. (12) (See Map A)

(10) A-1, p. 335
(11) A-1, p. 316
(12) A-1, p. 316

Resistance was light and by noon all of the assault waves and reserve battalions had been put ashore. In the afternoon the unloading of cargo was begun. Late in the day General MacArthur was put ashore. He had fulfilled his promise to return.

Resistance to the landing might have been much stronger except for the havoc caused by the Third Fleet in its air strikes preceding the invasion. During the strikes on OKINAWA, FORMOSA and the NORTHERN PHILIPPINES, 650 planes were destroyed on the ground and in the air, while the Third Fleet lost 89 planes. (13)

The next two days, the 21st and 22d of October, the vessels were engaged in fighting off air strikes and furnishing further fire support for the landed troops. All things considered the amphibious operation had been very successful and gone off smoothly.

NARRATION

THE BATTLE OF THE SIBUYAN SEA

As soon as the Sho No. 1 plan was put into effect, Admiral Kurita's force put to sea from LINGGA. The force put in at BRUNEI on the northwest coast of BORNEO to top off with fuel. While in BRUNEI BAY, last minute plans for the attack were made. The force was divided into two parts: the main body of the First Diversion Attack Force remained under command of Vice Admiral Kurita, while a smaller force was to be commanded by Vice Admiral Nisimura. Admiral Kurita's Central Force was to sail northward, pass through

(13) A-1, p. 331

SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT, thence south along SAMAR and into LEYTE GULF from the east.' At the same time Admiral Nishimura's Southern Force was closing LEYTE GULF from the west through SURIGAO STRAIT. The result was to be a pincer movement to destroy the American transports by a junction of the two forces at dawn on 25 October. (14) Both forces set sail from BRUNEI on 22 October with much confidence of success. (See Map C)

Shortly after midnight of the night 22-23 October, the Central Force was detected by two American submarines, the DARTER and DACE, as it steamed northward off the coast of PALAWAN. (15) The submarines held off their attack until daylight so that a more complete estimate of the size of the force could be made. During the hours of darkness the two submarines continued tracking the enemy force and made numerous contact reports. The task force was estimated to be eleven heavy vessels, accompanied by smaller vessels, traveling in two columns. Just prior to dawn the DARTER, commanded by Commander D. H. McClintock, and the DACE, commanded by Commander B. D. Claggett, took up positions for the attack. The DARTER was to hit the left column first; while the DACE, five miles ahead, was to hit the right column.

At 0532, the DARTER fired all ten of her bow tubes at the leading cruiser of the left column and immediately swung about to bring the stern tubes to bear on the second cruiser in line. Five hits on the first target and four

(14) A-1, p. 337

(15) A-3, p. 35

hits on the second target were counted before the DARTER submerged below periscope depth.

The task force changed course to the right only to come under the fire of the DACE. As the column neared, the DACE made preparations to engage the third vessel in the right column. Commander Claggett fired six torpedoes and was able to count four hits before diving deep.

Both submarines were immediately taken under depth charge attack, but neither received any damage.

The DARTER'S first target was later identified as the heavy cruiser ATAGO, Admiral Kurita's flagship, which sank; and the second target was the heavy cruiser TAKAO which was seriously damaged. The DACE'S target was the heavy cruiser MAYA, which also sank. (16)

The American submarines ANGLER and GUITARRO acting on information recovered from the DARTER and DACE began searching for the enemy task force. Radar contact was made by the ANGLER shortly after dark. The ANGLER was unable to launch an attack but continued to track the force as it made its way northward toward MINDORO STRAIT. The GUITARRO made contact early on the morning of the 24th as the enemy task force turned southeast and made its approach to MINDORO STRAIT.

At first reports of the submarine contacts off PALAWAN, Admiral Halsey began to prepare his fleet for operations to the west of the PHILIPPINES. Admiral McCain's task group had been ordered to retire to ULITHI to resupply.

(16) A-3, p. 37

The three remaining groups were ordered to refuel on 23 October and to then proceed toward the PHILIPPINE coast in order to launch search planes on the morning of the 24th. (17)

By dawn of 24 October the three task groups had reached their assigned stations and began to launch their search teams.

Task Group 38.2, commanded by Admiral Bogan, lay about fifty miles off the eastern end of SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. Its assigned sector ran from MANILA BAY on the north to the SULU SEA on the south.

Task Group 38.4, Admiral Davison, was 160 miles southeast of Task Group 38.2 and about sixty miles off the southern tip of SAMAR and had a sector covering into the SULU SEA west of PAWAY and NEGROS ISLANDS.

Admiral Sherman's force, Task Group 38.3, was about sixty miles off POLILLO ISLAND with the assigned search sector west of LUZON from LINGAY GULF on the north to MIN-DORO STRAIT on the south.

The search sectors of the three task groups were arranged so that they consisted of overlapping arcs extending over a 300 mile radius from the carriers and covered all possible entrances to the islands. (18)

The search teams consisted of fighters and fighter-bombers from each task group. Fighter planes were stationed at 100 and 200 mile points from the carriers to act as radio relay stations.

(17) A-3, p. 44

(18) A-3, p. 47

At 0820 the first contact report was received by Admiral Halsey. The report placed five battleships, nine cruisers, and thirteen destroyers south of MINDORO ISLAND. (19)

Task Groups 38.3 and 38.4 were immediately ordered to close on Task Group 38.2 and launch air strikes on the sighted task force. Shortly thereafter, at 0846, Admiral McCain's force, Task Group 38.1, was ordered to turn about and to return to LEYTE. (20)

As reports were coming in on the contact with the Central Force in the SIBUYAN SEA, search teams made contact with an enemy force in the SULU SEA southwest of NEGROS ISLANDS. This was Admiral Nishimura's force of two battleships, one heavy cruiser, and four destroyers. (21) This report was the first knowledge of the existence of an enemy southern force.

If Admiral Davison proceeded northward, as ordered by Admiral Halsey, to close on Task Group 38.2, his planes would not be able to maintain contact with the newly discovered Southern Force. Admiral Halsey deemed the enemy Central Force more dangerous and left the Southern Force to be handled by Admiral Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet.

In addition to its dawn search teams Task Group 38.3 had launched a special twenty plane sweep to strike at the MANILA airfields. As a result, only a minimum number of fighters remained to maintain combat air patrol over the group. The carriers were hastily preparing the majority

(19) A-2, p. 211
(20) A-2, p. 214
(21) A-3, p. 51

of their planes for a strike as soon as the search planes made contact. Before the strikes could be launched a large enemy raid of about forty planes was discovered closing from the west. A second group of sixty planes was soon picked up following the first group, and shortly thereafter a third and larger group was picked up on radar at a distance of sixty miles. It was then necessary to launch some of the planes that had been reserved for the strike to strengthen the combat air patrol. The ships of the task group then took to the cover of a few convenient rain squalls.

The fighters were able to break up any organized attack against the carriers. However, a few enemy lone planes did get through the screen. A total of 110 planes were shot down. (22)

At 0938 a lone bomber dived from a low cloud and scored a direct hit on the carrier PRINCETON. (23) The bomb exploded between the main and second decks causing flames to spread through planes stored on the hangar deck. The flames continued to spread and soon a series of explosions shook the ship causing loss of pressure on all firemain.

At this time the task group was preparing to depart southward to join Task Group 38.2. The light cruiser BIRMINGHAM, antiaircraft cruiser RENO, and four destroyers, IRWIN, MORRISON, GATLING, and CASSIN YOUNG, were detached to assist the PRINCETON.

The BIRMINGHAM moved alongside the PRINCETON to assist in checking the fires. Suddenly without warning the whole

(22) A-1, p. 370

(23) A-2, p. 215

after end of the PRINCETON exploded. The horrible results are unbelievable. On the BIRMINGHAM 220 men were killed instantly and another 420 men were seriously injured. (24) All of the personnel that had remained aboard the PRINCETON were either dead or injured.

After all personnel had been removed, the RENO moved in and fired two torpedoes into the PRINCETON. Within forty-five seconds all that remained above the surface was fire. (25)

The remainder of Task Group 38.3 in its movement southward to join Admiral Bogan's force was occupied in fighting off several air attacks which caused no damage to the task group.

Since some of the enemy planes participating in these raids were carrier type planes, a search was launched to the north and northeast to seek the suspected carriers. (26)

Meanwhile off SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT, the carriers of Task Group 38.2 were launching their planes to carry out strikes against the enemy Central Force.

At 0910 a strike consisting of nineteen fighters, twelve bombers, and thirteen torpedo planes was launched from the INTREPID and CABOT. The enemy task force was sighted east of MINDORO ISLAND moving northeast through TABLAS STRAIT. A coordinated attack was launched in the face of intense anti-aircraft fires, but the torpedo planes were able to score two hits on a battleship and one hit on

(24) A-3, p. 69
(25) A-1, p. 372-373
(26) A-3, p. 64

each of two heavy cruisers. One of the heavy cruisers was damaged seriously enough to force it to return to BRUNEI.

(27)

At 1245 the second strike from Admiral Bogan's carriers sighted the Central Force. It too was greeted with a hail of anti-aircraft fire, but once again the low flying torpedo planes were able to slip through. They scored three hits on a battleship. Dive bombers placed two 1000 pound bombs on the same target and one additional hit on another battleship.

The Central Force was hit again at 1330. This attack was made by planes from Admiral Sherman's carriers LEXINGTON and ESSEX. (28) At this time the Central Force had reached a point halfway across the SIBUYAN SEA and was still steaming toward SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT.

Late in the afternoon planes from Admiral Davison's carriers, ENTERPRISE, FRANKLIN, BELLEAU WOOD, and SAN JACINTO, attacked the Central Force and inflicted heavy damage.

At 1600 hours Admiral Kurita turned his Central Force about and steamed westward. (29)

Shortly before 1800 hours the last air strike of the day hit the Central Force. Planes from Task Group 38.2 managed to register two torpedo hits on one of the battleships.

Throughout the day of the 24th the Central Force had

(27) A-1, p. 373

(28) A-3, p. 62

(29) A-1, p. 375

been subjected to five air strikes. As a result the force had lost one battleship, sunk; one heavy cruiser, badly damaged and forced to retire to BRUNEL; one destroyer, badly damaged and also forced to retire. The remainder of the vessels had received some damage but were still seaworthy and able to fight when the need arose.

Consequently Admiral Kurita planned to again reverse his course, pass through SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT at 0100, 25 October, and thence proceed southward off SAMAR to LEYTE GULF. (30)

During the afternoon's battle Admiral Halsey, fearing that the Central Force might survive the air strikes and be able to pass through SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT, drafted a new battle plan. At 1512 a dispatch was sent to all forces of the Third Fleet stating four battleships, three light cruisers, and fourteen destroyers "WILL BE FORMED AS TF 34 UNDER VADM LEE, COMMANDER BATTLE LINE X TF 34 WILL ENGAGE DECISIVELY AT LONG RANGES X". (31) To further amplify this dispatch Admiral Halsey later contacted his task group commanders by voice radio informing them: "If the enemy sorties (through SAN BERNARDINO) TF 34 will be formed when directed by me." (32)

The dispatch was to play an important part in the ensuing battles.

At 1640 the Japanese carriers were sighted 200 miles from CAPE ENGANO. (33) This was the first information on

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- (30) A-1, p. 376
(31) A-2, p. 214
(32) A-2, p. 214
(33) A-1, p. 378

Admiral Ozawa's Northern Force. This sighting coupled with the actions of the previously sighted Central and Southern Forces indicated a combined attack was planned by the Japanese.

Admiral Halsey was now faced with a decision as to his next course of action. He had three alternatives:

1. He could guard SAN BERNARDINO with the entire fleet and wait for the Northern Force to strike.

2. He could leave Task Force 34 to cover SAN BERNARDINO and strike the Northern Force with his carrier planes.

3. He could leave SAN BERNARDINO unguarded and strike the Northern Force with his entire fleet.

The first plan was rejected because it left all the initiative of action to the Japanese and permitted them free use of their carrier force.

The second plan was also rejected because it split the forces of the Third Fleet and would leave Task Force 34 open to air attack.

The third plan was adopted because it preserved the integrity of the Third Fleet, left the initiative with American forces and offered a chance to surprise the Northern Force. Admiral Halsey was also under the impression that the Central Force had been seriously damaged by the air strikes. (34)

Therefore Task Groups 38.2 and 38.4 were ordered to turn northward and Task Group 38.3 was ordered to join them

(34) A-1, p. 379

as they passed on their way to attack the Northern Force. Task Group 38.1 was ordered to close with the other task groups as soon as possible.

At 1950 the following dispatch was sent to Admiral Kinkaid by Admiral Halsey: "CENTRAL FORCE HEAVILY DAMAGED ACCORDING TO STRIKE REPORTS X AM PROCEEDING NORTH WITH 3 GROUPS TO ATTACK CARRIER FORCE AT DAWN". (35)

Upon receipt of this dispatch Admiral Kinkaid assumed that the three carrier groups were proceeding northward and that Task Force 34 remained to guard SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. Admiral Kinkaid did not realize that the previous dispatch forming Task Force 34 had not been addressed to him but was merely an intercepted transmission. He, of course, did not receive the voice radio transmission of Admiral Halsey's stating Task Force 34 would be formed only upon Admiral Halsey's direct order.

The Japanese plan had begun to work. The heavy naval units were being drawn away from LEYTE by the Northern Force, a Northern Force which had a total of 110 planes aboard its four carriers. (36)

THE BATTLE OF SURIGAO STRAIT

When Task Group 38.4 was ordered north to assist in the strikes on the Central Force early on the morning of 24 October, the Seventh Fleet was faced with the problem of engaging the advancing Southern Force.

Continuous contact reports received indicated the Southern Force would attempt a passage of SURIGAO STRAIT

(35) A-2, p. 217

(36) A-3, p. 131

on the night of 24-25 October. At 1443 hours on the 24th Admiral Kinkaid radioed his fleet to prepare for a night engagement. (37)

SURIGAO STRAIT is the connecting link between LEYTE GULF and the MINDANAO SEA. It is approximately thirty miles in length and varies in width from twelve miles at its southern entrance to about twenty-five miles on the LEYTE GULF end. (See Map D)

Admiral Oldendorf was placed in tactical command of the Seventh Fleet units with Rear Admiral Weyler commanding the battleline and Rear Admiral Berkey commanding the right flank forces (cruisers and destroyers). (38)

Admiral Oldendorf's plan was to plug SURIGAO STRAIT at the LEYTE GULF exit. To do this the six old battleships would form the battleline and cruise back and forth at a slow speed. Both sides of the battleline were to be flanked with cruisers and destroyers. A force of thirty-nine PT (Patrol Torpedo) boats would cover the southern entrance and five destroyers were to form a picket line deep into SURIGAO STRAIT.

The plan of action called for torpedo attacks to be launched by the PT boats and destroyers to slow down the enemy, and the fire of the heavy battleships and cruisers to destroy him.

Since the Seventh Fleet had heavily supported the LEYTE landing forces with bombardment missions, the ammunition situation at this time was critical. The battleships were

(37) A-1, p. 352

(38) A-1, p. 352

left with only 20 to 30 percent of their allowance of armor piercing shells and about 12 percent of regular bombardment shells. The destroyers had on board only about 20 percent of their normal allowance of 5-inch projectiles.

(39) The battleships were therefore ordered not to engage targets until the range was somewhat below 20,000 yards. At this range it was felt that firing would be more effective.

By night fall all ships were in position and waiting for the oncoming Southern Force.

At 2215 hours on 24 October radar contact was made by one of the PT boats at a point sixty miles southwest of the lower entrance to the strait. The first 3-PT boat section immediately swung into position for an attack. However, before torpedoes could be launched all three boats were taken under fire and were forced to retire.

The next PT boat section made contact at 0035 hours 25 October and was able to launch two torpedoes before being driven off. The results were unobserved due to evasive measures taken to escape the heavy firing.

The heaviest attack by the PT boats was launched at about 0200 when three sections of boats launched twenty-one torpedoes at the Southern Force. (40) Again results were not observed due to the heavy firing and the necessity of laying down smoke to facilitate retirement.

There were no hits confirmed by the PT boats, but they had managed to cause the enemy to slow down and take evasive measures.

(39) A-3, p. 95

(40) A-3, p. 100

At 0215 the enemy was picked up on radar at a distance of twenty-five miles from the battleline.

The five destroyers, Destroyer Squadron 54, forming the picket line were next in line to meet the oncoming Japanese.

Destroyer Squadron 54 made its attack in two groups---RENEY, MCGOWAN, and MELVIN on the east side of the strait, and MONSSEN and MCDERMUT on the west. Both groups were successful in launching their torpedoes but with no visible results. The Southern Force continued on its course up the strait.

At 0300 Destroyer Squadron 24 was released from its position on the right flank to sweep down the strait. It too was divided into two groups to launch its attack. Captain McManes, commander of the squadron, in the HUTCHINS led the DALY and BACHE into the fray. The other group was led by Commander A. E. Buchanan in the HMAS ARUNTA accompanied by the KILLEN and BEALE.

The well aimed results of this attack were decisive. Three destroyers YAMAGUMO, MICHISHO, and ASAGUMO, were hit with the YAMAGUMO sinking immediately and the other two badly damaged. Admiral Nishimura's flagship YAMASHIRO received one or more hits causing her magazines to explode. (41) Admiral Nishimura informed his force of the damage and ordered "You are to proceed and attack all ships". (42) This was the last order to be given by Admiral Nishimura.

Only the cruiser MOGAMI, battleship FUSO, and the

(41) A-3, p. 108

(42) A-1, p. 357

the destroyer SHIGURE were able to comply.

At 0337 the left flank screen of destroyers, Destroyer Squadron 56, was ordered to attack. The squadron, commanded by Captain R. N. Smoot aboard the NEWCOMB, divided into three sections. Section 1--NEWCOMB, RICHARD P. LEARY, and A. W. GRANT, was to attack the enemy column on the left center. Section 2--HALFORD, BRYANT, and ROBINSON, was to attack the column on the left flank. Section 3--HEYWOOD L. EDWARDS, LEUTZE, and BENNION, was to hit the right flank of the column.

Sections 2 and 3 were able to launch their torpedoes and retire along the coastline. Section 1, however, in its frontal attack received extremely heavy fire and did not fare so well as the other two sections.

Section 1 made its approach and successfully fired its torpedoes at 0405. (43) However, upon attempting to retire it found itself in the midst of the fires of both the Japanese and American forces.

At 0350 the enemy column had come within a range of 17,000 yards of the battleline and Admiral Oldendorf gave the order to open fire. (44) The cruisers and battleships continued to fire until Admiral Oldendorf became aware of the fact that Section 1 of the Destroyer Squadron 56 was being hit by the fires of the battleline. The order to cease fire was given at about 0410.

As soon as Section 1 was able to clear the line of fire the order to resume firing was given. At this time

(43) A-1, p. 358

(44) A-1, p. 359

however, no targets could be found on the radar screens. The largest target that had appeared on the radar screens of several ships had disappeared at 0418. This marked the sinking of the battleship FUSO.

Into the midst of this mess came Admiral Shima with his force of two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and four destroyers. Barely had his force entered the strait when at 0321 the light cruiser ABUKUMA was hit by a torpedo. The resulting damage caused the ship to drop out of the formation as the remainder of the force continued northward.

You will recall that only a last minute change of plans had sent Admiral Shima's force to the south and he knew nothing of Admiral Kurita's or Admiral Nishimura's plan of attack. The first knowledge he had that the Southern Force was in SURIGAO STRAIT was when his ships intercepted a message of Admiral Nishimura's stating that the Southern Force was receiving a torpedo attack.

By 0443 Admiral Shima could still not find any targets within range, and taking careful note of the debris and remains of Admiral Nishimura's force, gave the order to turn south and retire from battle. (45)

Admiral Oldendorf had ordered a pursuit of the retiring Japanese force at 0431. Initially assigned to this task was Destroyer Squadron X--CLAXTON, THORN, WELLES, CONY, SIGOURNEY, and AULICK. (46)

This force was soon followed by Admiral Oldendorf with the left flank cruisers LOUISVILLE, PORTLAND, MINNEAPOLIS,

(45) A-3, p. 123

(46) A-1, p. 363

DENVER, and COLUMBIA. Finally at 0643 the DENVER and COLUMBIA were detached to finish the mopping up while the rest of the force returned to LEYTE GULF. At 0707 the destroyer ASAGUMO was taken under fire and sank within a few minutes.

Only one of the ships which entered the strait under Admiral Nishimura's command escaped destruction. Two battleships and three destroyers were sunk within the strait. The heavy cruiser MOGAMI was crippled to such an extent that it was an easy target for later air strikes. The damaged destroyer SHIGUERE successfully escaped.

All but one of Admiral Shima's force escaped. The light cruiser ABUKUMA damaged within the strait later fell victim to air strikes of the Army Air Force.

Admiral Oldendorf received a hearty "Well Done" from the commander of the Seventh Fleet. The rejoicing was short lived however as a second dispatch arrived a few minutes after the first and announced that the Japanese Central Force was firing on the Escort Carrier Group off SAMAR.

THE BATTLE OFF SAMAR

At approximately 0645 hours on 25 October the escort carrier FANSHAW BAY was startled upon receipt of a contact report that announced "Enemy surface force of 4 battleships, 7 cruisers, and 11 destroyers sighted 20 miles northeast your task group and closing at 30 knots." (47)

This was the first information that the Seventh Fleet

(47) A-1, p. 384

had that the Central Force had cleared SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT.

Up to this time Admiral Kinkaid was still operating with the thought in mind that Task Force 34 had been positioned off SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT to block just such a maneuver of the Central Force.

At this time the Escort Carrier Group was disposed with its Northern Group about fifty miles off the southern half of SAMAR, the Middle Group thirty miles southeast of the Northern Group, while the Southern Group was some 120 miles to the south. (See Map E)

Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague ordered his Northern Group carriers, FANSHAW BAY, SAINT LO, WHITE PLAINS, KALANIN BAY, KITKUN BAY, and GAMBIER BAY, to immediately launch their planes and then take a due south course. Before the first plane could be launched the expected salvos began to arrive. The range at this time was fifteen miles and the first salvos received were those from the 18-inch guns of battleship YAMATO. (48)

In order to launch their planes the carriers had to assume an easterly course. This permitted the Central Force to rapidly close on the small escort type carriers.

Without waiting for orders the accompanying destroyers and destroyer escorts began making smoke for the carriers. The destroyer JOHNSTON proceeded unassisted to attack a heavy cruiser and launched a spread of ten torpedoes. Upon attempting to retire she received six large caliber hits.

(48) A-3, p. 166

The carriers meanwhile had been able to launch their planes and gradually swung to southerly course. Fortunately at this time the carriers were able to gain cover in a rain squall. As the ships cleared the rain squall at about 0740 they discovered the enemy had closed the range to about 25,000 yards. (49)

At this time the escorts were ordered to make two torpedo attacks. The destroyers HOEL, HEERMANN, and JOHNSTON would make the first attack and were to be followed by the destroyer escorts JOHN C. BUTLER, DENNIS RAYMOND, and SAMUEL B. ROBERTS.

The HOEL in making her attack came within range of 9,000 yards before launching her first torpedoes at the first battleship in the battleline. She was immediately struck by a series of 8-inch shells which knocked out one engine, three of her guns, destroyed most of her radar equipment and all of the voice radio communications equipment. Operating on one engine and steering by manual control the HOEL continued on to launch the remainder of her torpedoes at a range of 6,000 yards at the leading heavy cruiser. Upon attempting to retire the HOEL received many additional hits. The one remaining engine went out, all engineering spaces were flooded, and fires were raging in the magazines. The order was given to abandon ship. At 0855 the HOEL sank. (50)

The HEERMANN attacked the cruiser column first. At a range of 9,000 yards seven torpedoes were fired at a heavy

(49) A-3, p. 174

(50) A-1, p. 391

cruiser. Course was immediately changed to bear down on one of the battleships. At a range of 4,400 yards the remaining torpedoes were fired at the battleship KONGO. The HEERMANN received only minor damage as she was able to dart into a blinding rain squall.

As the HEERMANN made its way through the rain squall it came close to ramming the JOHNSTON. However, a collision was avoided and the ships passed close aboard. It was the last time the JOHNSTON was seen. (51)

The four destroyer escorts maneuvering behind the smoke screen of the destroyers were able to move within close range of the cruiser column before launching their torpedoes. Only the RAYMOND and BUTLER escaped with minor damage under the heavy fire layed down.

Despite the gallant efforts of the destroyers and destroyer escorts the enemy was able to maneuver in a flanking attack to the east of the carriers. Direct hits were becoming ever increasing on the retiring carriers.

As the carriers emerged from the rain squall they found themselves scattered along a southwesterly course with the FANSHAW BAY, WHITE PLAINS, and KITKUM BAY leading. The trailing vessels, GAMBIER BAY, KALININ BAY, and SAINT LO received most of the punishment from the ever closing cruisers. The carriers fought back with what armament they had, one 5-inch gun per ship.

The GAMBIER BAY on the exposed left flank suffered continual direct hits. At 0820 a shell exploded in the

(51) A-3, p. 179

forward engine room opening a gaping hole in the skin below the waterline. Ten minutes later steering control was lost and shortly afterward a hit in the after engine room tore another gaping hole in the side of the ship below the waterline. All power was lost; water was rising rapidly within the ship; and she was beginning to list badly. At 0850 the order was given to abandon ship. (52)

The planes of the Northern Group were not able to lend much assistance to the early part of the battle. Due to the forced haste with which the planes were launched there was no time to rearm the planes or brief the pilots on missions. Many of the planes carried only 100-pound bombs and others carried mines because of previously planned missions. This type of armament could do nothing in the way of inflicting serious damage on the Japanese ships.

One strike from the KITKUN BAY, however, did prove successful. Six planes loaded with 500-pound semi-armor-piercing bombs were launched during the first phases of the battle. Only four planes reached the target, but they were able to register nine direct hits and two near misses on a light cruiser causing it to sink.

The carrier groups to the south were able to launch air strikes, but due to the distance and adverse weather, they were not successful in launching coordinated attacks until about 0900.

By 0920 two of the flanking cruisers had closed the range to 10,000 yards on the carriers. At any minute escape

(52) A-3, p. 186

to LEYTE GULF was threatened to be cut off. Suddenly the cruisers ceased fire, turned about and headed north. (53)

The sudden breaking off of action by the cruisers marked the end of the surface battle off SAMAR. The carrier groups were subjected to several air attacks afterwards.

During the morning's battle to the north, the Southern Carrier Group was taken under attack by four Kamikaze planes. Two of the planes made successful hits on the SUWANNEE and SANTEE, while the other two were knocked down by anti-aircraft fire. (54) At this same time the SANTEE was hit amidships by a torpedo from an undetected submarine. Both ships were quickly repaired and were able to continue flight operations within a short time.

The Northern Group was attacked at 1049 by six Kamikaze planes. Hits were made on the KITKUN BAY, SAINT LO, and KALININ BAY. The resulting damage on the SAINT LO caused it to sink at 1125. (55)

Before leaving the discussion of this battle it might be well to examine some of the reasons why Admiral Kurita broke off action and retired when he did. (56)

Having no air reconnaissance of his own, Admiral Kurita was not aware of the carrier force until he had actually sighted it. Even after sighting it he had no way of telling the size or composition of the force which he was engaging.

Once the attack was launched it became a disorganized pursuit. Each ship maneuvered at its own speed and in its own manner.

(53) A-1, p. 398
(54) A-3, p. 208
(55) A-3, p. 211
(56) A-1, p. 417

The torpedo attacks launched by the destroyers caused his force to become even more widely scattered.

The smoke screen combined with the rain squalls made visibility at the best, fair. The radar equipment used was not good enough to permit accurate blind firing.

At the time of breaking action Admiral Kurita was not aware of the fact that two of his cruisers had closed to a range of 10,000 yards.

His cruisers had been hit heavily. Three of them were so badly damaged that they had to be sunk by their own destroyers. A fourth cruiser was damaged enough to force it to retire to MANILA.

Admiral Kurita later stated that he still intended to force his way into LEYTE GULF, but before he could do this it would be necessary to collect his ships and weigh the situation.

He still had four battleships, two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and seven destroyers. He felt that this might not be a sufficient force especially if the American forces were lying in wait for him at LEYTE GULF. Also, he was way behind schedule and felt that he would not be able to coordinate with the Southern Force as it came through SURIGAO STRAIT. He did not know that the Southern Force had already been defeated.

As he had intercepted a message of Admiral Ozawa's planning a night torpedo attack, he felt it best to turn north in an attempt to join with Admiral Ozawa.

This ended the threat of the Central Force to LEYTE GULF.

THE BATTLE OFF CAPE ENGANO

It will be remembered that at 1950 hours on 24 October Admiral Halsey informed Admiral Kinkaid that he was proceeding north with three groups to attack the Northern Force.

Shortly after midnight, 25 October, night search planes were launched from the INDEPENDENCE to locate and maintain contact with the Northern Force. At 0205 contact was made with a force of five ships at a distance of eighty miles and shortly after a second group of six large ships was contacted. (57)

Later sightings established the Northern Force as being made up of one large carrier, three light carriers, two battleships with after flight decks, three light cruisers, and at least eight destroyers. (58)

The close proximity of the Northern Force caused Admiral Mitscher, then in tactical command, to reshuffle his force and place the heavy surface ships, Task Force 34, well in front of the carriers.

At dawn search planes were sent out to regain the contact that had been lost shortly after the first sightings. Attack groups, comprised of fighters, dive bombers, and torpedo bombers, took to the air soon afterwards. The attack groups were to precede the fleet and launch their strikes as soon as contact had been made by the search planes.

While awaiting reports, Admiral Halsey received the first of a series of messages from Admiral Kinkaid. The first message, received at 0648, asked if Task Force 34

(57) A-1, p. 404

(58) A-2, p. 218

still guarded SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. Admiral Halsey's immediate reply that Task Force 34 was with the three carrier groups heading north did not reach Admiral Kinkaid until after the escort carriers were being shelled by Admiral Kurita's Central Force.

At 0730 the Northern Force was contacted 130 miles northeast of Task Force 38. The attack groups were immediately ordered to launch their strikes.

The first strike arrived at about 0800. Initially, air opposition consisted of about fifteen or twenty fighters, but these were quickly disposed of and for the remainder of the day, air opposition did not exist. (59)

Working on the carriers first, the air strikes, under the direction of Commander David McCampbell, smothered a small carrier, the CHITOSE, and it sank immediately. A large carrier, the ZUIKAKU, received a torpedo hit that damaged its steering gear. Two other small carriers, ZUIHO and CHOYODO, received bomb hits. The CHOYODO was forced to drop out of formation. The light cruiser TAMA was torpedoed, and the destroyer AKITSUKI was sunk.

While the planes were making their attack, Admiral Halsey received two messages from Admiral Kinkaid requesting aid and stating his escort carriers were being fired upon by the Central Force. (60)

At this word Task Group 38.1 was ordered to turn to the aid of the Seventh Fleet at the best possible speed.

At this same time, 0830 hours, the second strike group was being launched to hit the Northern Force. (61)

(59) A-3, p. 140

(60) A-2, p. 219

(61) A-3, p. 143

At 1000 hours, Admiral Halsey received two messages. One from Admiral Kinkaid again requesting that Task Force 34 be sent to his aid and the other from Admiral Nimitz requesting the location of Task Force 34. (62)

Admiral Halsey had no other choice then to send Task Force 34, which at this time was making preparations to move in on the cripples of the Northern Force, to the aid of the Seventh Fleet. Accordingly Task Force 34 and Task Group 38.2 were ordered to change course and proceed toward SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. Task Groups 38.3 and 38.4 were to remain under command of Admiral Mitscher and were to continue to attack the Northern Force.

Since a great deal of reshuffling of forces and refueling was needed, it was 1115 hours before the run south was started. (63)

While the move was being made to the south by the newly created force, Task Force 38 struck again at the Northern Force.

The second air strike hit at 1000 without much resulting damage.

The third strike at 1330 rained heavy damage on the ZUIKAKU and the ZUIHO. Finally at 1414 the ZUIKAKU sank and was soon followed by the ZUIHO.

At 1429 a cruiser force--SANTA FE, MOBILE, WICHITA, and NEW ORLEANS, were detached under the command of Admiral DuBose to destroy the remaining cripples of the Northern Force. By 1625 the cruiser force had closed to a range of

(62) A-2, p. 220

(63) A-2, p. 221

15,000 yards and immediately commenced firing. The CHOYODO was shelled heavily and by 1647 had sunk.

The cruisers continued the attack and overtook and sank the destroyer HAKATSUKI at 2100 hours. By now the remains of the Northern Force was some fifty miles northward and the pursuit was called off. At 2150 the ships closed up and headed southeast for a rendezvous with the carriers the following morning.

Although the battle was over as far as the Third Fleet was concerned, the Northern Force was still to receive further punishment.

The submarine JALLEO at 2305 fired four torpedoes at the cruiser TAMA from a range of 700 yards resulting in its sinking. (64)

The Battle off CAPE ENGANO closed with the sinking of the TAMA.

MOP-UP

The Central Force after breaking off action at SAMAR on 25 October headed North. While on his way north in an attempt to join Admiral Ozawa, Admiral Kurita decided his fuel was too low and so changed course for SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT.

By 2130 all except one of Admiral Kurita's ships passed through SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. Admiral Halsey had not been able to arrive in time to block the escape of the remains of the Central Force. At 0056 the one remaining ship, the

(64) A-3, p. 161

destroyer NOWAKE, was taken under fire by the cruisers VINCENTES, BILOXI, and MIAMI and was sunk. (65)

At dawn on 26 October, Admiral Bogan joined with Admiral McCain, and at 0600 the two Task Groups launched their first strike against the retreating Central Force.

Admiral Kurita's force was contacted as it headed south in TABLAS STRAIT along the east coast of MINDORO. A torpedo attack stopped the NOSHIRO dead in the water, and a dive bomber attack finished sinking her. (66)

The crippled KUMANO was also hit again by bombs and torpedoes and left dead in the water.

By late afternoon what remained of Admiral Kurita's Central Force had reached the SULU SEA beyond the range of the Third Fleet.

To briefly summarize the actions of the Battle of LEYTE GULF it can be said that the Third and Seventh Fleets successfully defended the LEYTE GULF area and destroyed almost the entire Japanese attacking force. As a result of this action, the Japanese naval force offered no serious threat for the remainder of the war. As stated by Admiral Ozawa after the conclusion of hostilities, "After this battle the surface forces became strictly auxiliary, so that we relied on land forces, special (Kamikaze) attack, and air power." (67)

A tabulation of the losses of both the Japanese and American forces between the 23rd and 26th of October follows: (68)

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- (65) A-1, p. 414
 - (66) A-1, p. 415
 - (67) A-3, p. 230
 - (68) A-3, p. 229

<u>TYPE SHIP</u>	<u>JAPANESE</u>	<u>AMERICAN</u>
Battleships	3	0
Large Aircraft Carriers	1	0
Light Aircraft Carriers	3	1
Escort Aircraft Carriers	0	2
Heavy Cruisers	6	0
Light Cruisers	4	0
Destroyers	9	2
Destroyer Escorts	0	1
Total Combatant Ships Lost:	<u>26</u>	<u>6</u>

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISMS

1. DIVISION OF COMMAND

The lack of a unified command for the American naval forces participating in this operation can be considered as an invitation to almost certain disaster. The extra amount of time necessary for one fleet commander to communicate with another through the different command channels denied each of being kept fully abreast of the situation. As in the case of the location or even existence of Task Force 34 much confusion resulted. Plans were made by Admiral Kinkaid based on the assumption that Task Force 34 was located at SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT. When inquiries were made of Admiral Halsey to confirm this assumption, the question was answered by shellfire from the Japanese Central Force before a reply could be received from the Third Fleet Commander. The fact that all was not lost as a result of this shocking surprise off SAMAR can be attributed

to the actions of the well trained subordinate commanders who time and again made heroic efforts to turn the Japanese Central Force.

The Japanese also were guilty of division of command. Admiral Shima's force acting independently prepared to enter action at SURIGAO STRAIT entirely ignorant of the plans of Admiral Kurita and Admiral Nishimura. Had Admiral Shima's force been combined with that of Admiral Nishimura, it is entirely possible that the combined force might well have been successful in the passage of SURIGAO STRAIT. The success of such a combined operation would have brought havoc down upon the American shipping in LEYTE GULF and also upon the troops ashore. It would seem that in an operation of this size and importance nothing would be left to chance, especially anything as important as command functions.

2. INTELLIGENCE

In this operation we see several examples of commanders making plans based on faulty intelligence. The battle damage reports given by the Third Fleet pilots convinced Admiral Halsey that even if the Japanese Central Force did pass through SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT they would be so weak that the Seventh Fleet would have little trouble in destroying them. Consequently, no provision was made by the Third Fleet to control the strait. By the time the Seventh Fleet was aware that the strait had been left unguarded it was too late, they were already engaged with the enemy.

Had Admiral Kinkaid known prior to this time that Task Force 34 had steamed northward with the Third Fleet, it is a certainty that he would have ordered a thorough patrolling of the SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT area. It will be recalled also that one of Admiral Kurita's reasons for breaking action when he did off SAMAR was because he had no way of determining the size of the force with which he was engaged and consequently did not want to be led into a trap. The contact off SAMAR to begin with was as much of a surprise to Admiral Kurita as it was to the American forces. Admiral Kurita's force had no planes of its own to perform reconnaissance, and the Japanese land based planes in the PHILIPPINES made no effort to cooperate with the naval forces in this matter. Had more cooperation between forces been shown it is certain that more accurate intelligence could have been formed.

3. MISSION

Admiral Kurita's decision to break off action and turn northward on the 25th of October was a complete disregard of the mission that had been given him. When he again changed his mind and decided not to attempt to join Admiral Ozawa but rather to retire through SAN BERNARDINO STRAIT, he showed that he was a leader that established his own missions with complete disregard for the assigned task. It will be remembered that the heavy ships of the Seventh Fleet had been dangerously low on ammunition before engaging Admiral Nishimura's force and the supply was even lower

following this battle. Had Admiral Kurita determinedly tried to carry out his mission of entering LEYTE GULF, it can be safely assumed that he would have been partially successful in accomplishing his mission of destroying the American transports in the gulf.

LESSONS

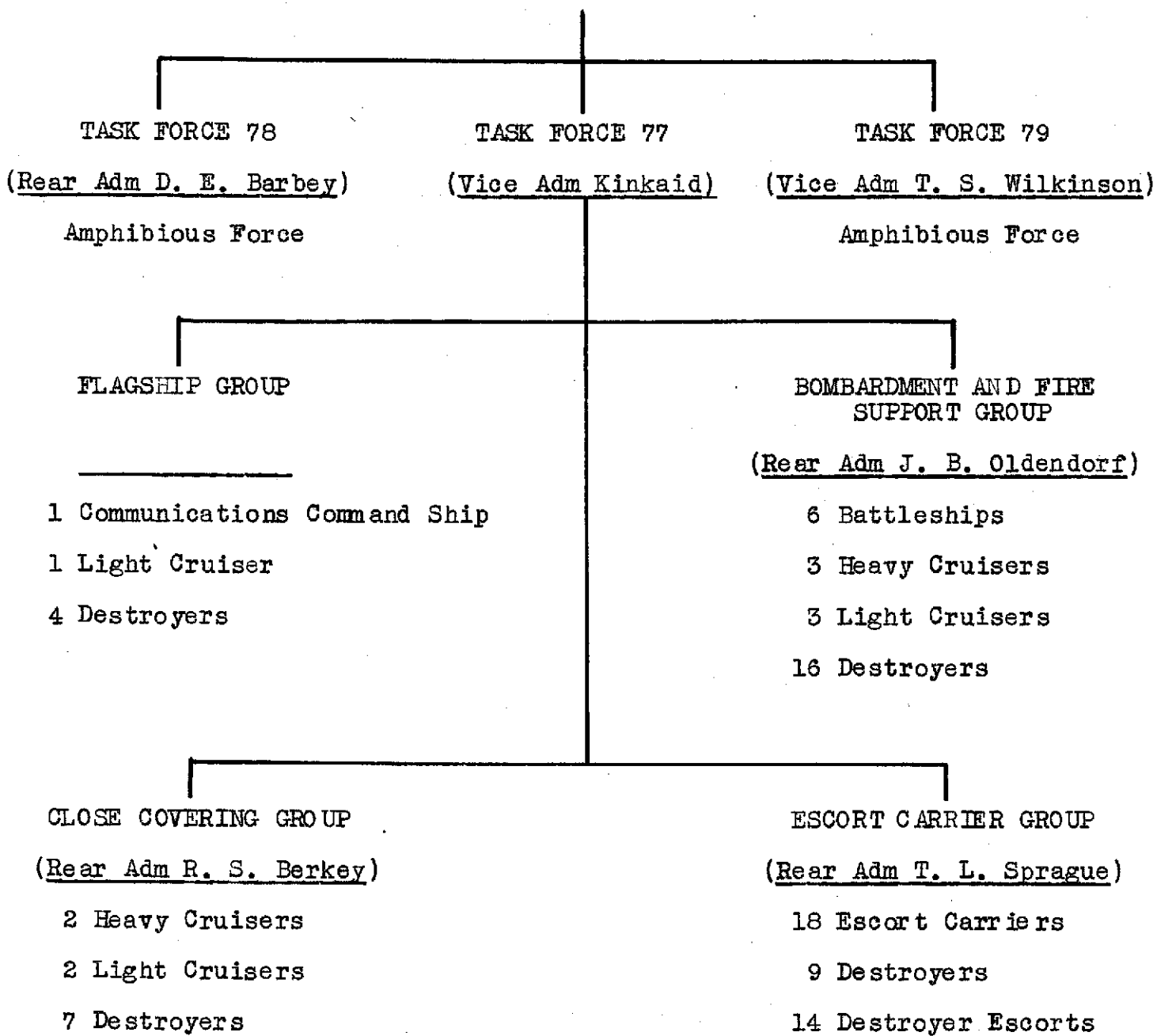
1. The lack of a unified command for participating forces in a large scale operation is an invitation to almost certain disaster.

2. The gathering of accurate intelligence requires the close cooperation of all forces of a command.

3. A commander must keep his mission in mind and vigorously pursue all means possible to accomplish his mission for success in battle.

SEVENTH FLEET

(Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid)



THIRD FLEET

(Admiral William F. Halsey)

TASK FORCE 38

(Vice Admiral M. A. Mitscher)

TASK GROUP 38.1

(Vice Admiral J. S. McCain)

3 Large Aircraft Carriers
2 Light Aircraft Carriers
4 Heavy Cruisers
2 Anti-Aircraft Cruisers
14 Destroyers

TASK GROUP 38.2

(Rear Admiral G. F. Bogan)

1 Large Aircraft Carrier
2 Light Aircraft Carriers
2 Battleships
3 Light Cruisers
16 Destroyers

TASK GROUP 38.3

(Rear Admiral F. C. Sherman)

2 Large Aircraft Carriers
2 Light Aircraft Carriers
2 Battleships
4 Light Cruisers
13 Destroyers

TASK GROUP 38.4

(Rear Admiral R. E. Davison)

2 Large Aircraft Carriers
2 Light Aircraft Carriers
2 Battleships
2 Heavy Cruisers
15 Destroyers

JAPANESE COMBINED FLEET

(Admiral Toyoda)

