

# SEMAPHORE

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## 60 YEARS ON: LEYTE GULF 1944

Following the initial Japanese advance in late 1941 and early 1942, and the halting of the offensive in the Solomons and New Guinea, the United States, supported by its allies, began its trans-Pacific assault. This campaign followed two lines of advance: the first, commanded by General Douglas MacArthur, along the northern coast of New Guinea, and the second, commanded by Admiral Chester Nimitz, through the island chains of the central Pacific. By 1944 these two lines began to converge on the 'Taiwan-Luzon-China' triangle. At a meeting on 26 July 1944 with his two theatre commanders, US President Roosevelt decided that the next objective would be the Philippine Islands.

Although the liberation of the Philippines is generally seen in a political context, it also offered important strategic implications. If the Japanese lost their hold in the Philippines, their Empire would be cut in two, and maintaining the flow of oil to the home islands would become even more difficult. The Allies would also gain another staging base for subsequent assaults on islands closer to Japan.

The retaking of the Philippines began with an assault on the Leyte Gulf-Surigao Strait area. Planning was complicated by the huge distances involved, for while the Normandy landings on 6 June 1944 were conducted 50 nautical miles across the English Channel, Leyte Gulf was more than 500 nautical miles from the main staging areas in Morotai and Palau. Much of the logistic support had to be sourced from the US west coast, more than 5000 nautical miles from the front. The assault would also take place beyond the range of land-based aircraft, hence all air support would need to come from US Navy aircraft carriers. The advance from Morotai to Leyte in one bound was a calculated risk, as the Allied forces would be ringed by Japanese airfields and land-based aircraft with greater staying power than the aircraft from USN aircraft carriers.<sup>1</sup>

Commanded by Vice Admiral Kinkaid, USN, the US Seventh Fleet and assigned elements of the US Third Fleet together formed Task Force 77 and the Central Philippines Attack Force, and comprised 157 combat ships (including 6 battleships, 11 cruisers and 18 escort carriers), 420 amphibious ships and 84 patrol, minesweeping and hydrographic vessels. Another 17 aircraft carriers, 6 battleships, 16 cruisers and 56 destroyers of the Third Fleet, under Admiral Halsey, USN, were tasked with covering the invasion. The Royal Australian Navy's contribution to Kinkaid's force, under the command of Commodore Collins, consisted of the heavy cruisers *Australia* and *Shropshire*; the destroyers *Arunta* and

*Warramunga*; the infantry landing ships *Westralia*, *Kanimbla* and *Manoora*; the frigate *Gascoyne*; and the motor launch *HDML 1074*. The RAN was also represented in Task Group 77.7, the Leyte Gulf Service Force of the Seventh Fleet, by the oiler *Bishopdale*, the provision ship *Merkur* and the ammunition ships *Poyang* and *Yunnan*.

Every shell, spare part, and morsel of food required for this vast armada had to be carried in ships from either the US west coast or Australia. Fuel and lubricants were sourced from the USA and the West Indies. Ammunition arrived from the USA via Australia. A third of all fresh produce came from the USA, the rest from Australia. This required a massive fleet train to carry the necessary supplies. Task Group 30.8 of the Third Fleet, which augmented the Seventh Fleet support force, comprised 34 oilers, 11 escort carriers, 19 destroyers and 26 destroyer escorts. Additional lift capacity, and an escort force, was required for supplies necessary to project and sustain the land operations.

On 10 October the assigned forces sailed from their assembly areas at Hollandia, Manus Island, Morotai and Guam. 'No one', wrote Captain Tarbuck, USN, the Senior Naval Adviser at MacArthur's headquarters, 'could see this great panorama of ships without realising the impotence of any great army engaged in oceanic warfare without control of the sea and air'.<sup>2</sup> The fleet arrived on 17 October and began bombarding Japanese shore positions and sweeping defensive minefields. On 18 October *Gascoyne* and the American minesweeper *YMS 393* entered San Pedro bay and laid channel markers and shoal water buoys.

On the morning of 20 October Task Group 78.3, which included *Westralia*, *Kanimbla* and *Manoora*, entered Leyte Gulf and commenced landing operations at Panaon Island. Within 45 minutes the three Australian ships had disembarked over 2800 troops of the US 21<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team on the undefended island. The main landings at Tacloban and Dulag were accompanied by a full bombardment from battleships, cruisers, destroyers and rocket ships, including *Australia*, *Shropshire*, *Arunta* and *Warramunga*. By that afternoon the situation was secure enough for MacArthur to wade ashore and make his famous 'I have returned' broadcast. Shore based opposition to the landings was light and Japanese aircraft made only sporadic attacks during the day.

On the following morning, the two Australian cruisers were attacked by a lone Japanese dive-bomber, which crashed into the port side of *Australia*, killing 30 crew and wounding 64, many of them skilled and experienced bridge and gunnery control personnel. The Commanding Officer,



Sea Power Centre - Australia  
Department of Defence  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
seapower.centre@defence.gov.au



Captain Dechaineux, was killed and Commodore Collins was wounded.<sup>3</sup> *Australia* was the first Allied vessel at Leyte hit by a suicide aircraft; although this was not part of the organised *kamikaze* attacks on the Allied forces, which began four days later, but the act of an individual pilot.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of the casualties and damage *Australia*, escorted by *Warramunga*, sailed for Manus Island. These were the only Australian casualties of the operation.

The Japanese Navy activated its Operation SHO-1 defence plan as soon as the Allied assault forces were sighted on 17 October. The Japanese attack was scheduled for 25 October because of the time required to fuel the ships and embark aircraft. The Japanese naval forces, organised into Northern, Centre and Southern Forces, sailed on 22 October to intercept the Allied invasion force. The Japanese mustered one fleet aircraft carrier, 3 light aircraft carriers, 6 battleships, 2 hybrid battleship-carriers, 13 heavy cruisers, 6 light cruisers, and 31 destroyers. The Northern Force aircraft carriers were intended to distract and divert the American fast aircraft carrier group while the two Japanese battleship groups entered Leyte Gulf and attacked the invasion shipping. On paper this was a formidable force, however, there were a number of major weaknesses, primarily the lack of trained aircrews.

Three naval engagements were fought in the battle for Leyte Gulf on 24-25 October 1944. At the Battle of the Surigao Strait the Japanese Southern Force night attack on the landing forces was repulsed by Admiral Kinkaid's covering forces, including *Shropshire* and *Arunta*. Two Japanese battleships and three destroyers were sunk without loss to the Allied force, and a damaged heavy cruiser succumbed to air attack the following day.

Admiral Halsey ordered his ships to intercept the approaching Northern Force. In doing so he left the San Bernadino Strait unguarded, subsequently sparking a major controversy as to whether his main focus should have been to destroy the Japanese fleet or protect the landings. Thus, the US fleet carriers were successfully lured away from the entrances to Leyte Gulf, opening a path for the Japanese Centre Force.

At the Battle of Cape Engano the Northern Force lost four aircraft carriers, a light cruiser and four destroyers, before the remaining force withdrew. At the Battle off Samar Island the Japanese Centre Force attacked the US Navy Escort Carrier Force, which was left exposed by Halsey's departure. This enemy force of powerful fast battleships and cruisers sank an escort carrier and two destroyers, but lost three heavy cruisers in return and withdrew without attacking the landing forces in Leyte Gulf. The failure of the Centre Force to press home its attack on the landing forces meant that the Japanese Northern Force aircraft carriers had been sacrificed in vain.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf cost the Imperial Japanese Navy heavily,<sup>5</sup> effectively destroying it as an offensive force. The potential naval threat to this and future Allied invasions was removed, and the need to provide extensive protection to logistics forces was also greatly reduced. The Japanese had failed to achieve their objectives whilst the Allies would ultimately achieve theirs. Several important lessons can be drawn from the Leyte Gulf operation.

A key principle of war is the selection and maintenance of the aim of an operation. The aim of SHO-1 was to disrupt the landings by attacking the transport shipping in Leyte Gulf. The Centre Force became distracted by its attack on the Escort Carrier Group, instead of carrying through the attack on the transport shipping. At the same time, the Allied force also failed to clearly select its aim. Halsey believed his primary role was destroying the Japanese fleet, while MacArthur believed Halsey's primary role was protecting the landings. This should have been clarified by higher command prior to the operation. Kinkaid's covering force was almost out of ammunition after the previous day's bombardments and the Surigao Strait night action. Had the Centre Force pressed home its attack the landing force could have suffered serious losses and the invasion might have been placed in jeopardy.

Another key principle of war is sustainment. As Leyte Gulf demonstrated, the difficulty of sustaining maritime power projection operations over extended distances should not be underestimated. The logistics effort was enormous, with extended and potentially vulnerable supply lines stretching over 5000 nautical miles. Of particular note is the substantial additional effort required to protect the ships of the logistic force, removing escort vessels and aircraft from offensive operations.

A third key principle of war is cooperation. Units of the RAN provided essential capabilities that complemented those of the US Navy at Leyte Gulf. Capabilities such as the infantry landing ships, logistics ships and survey ships were what might now be termed 'niche' capabilities. The RAN's ability to operate in Allied coalitions and alliances, from 1901 to the current day, has been predicated on cooperation, in terms of shared or substantially similar doctrine, equipment and control arrangements.

The landings and naval battles at Leyte Gulf in October 1944 demonstrated the utility of maritime forces in power projection operations. Amphibious ships moved troops 500 nautical miles to landing beaches. Logistics ships moved vital stores, ammunition and rations, directly and indirectly, over 5000 nautical miles to maintain land and naval forces in the area of operations. Sea-based air power provided essential air cover to the fleet and land forces in an operation beyond the range of Allied land-based aircraft. In all but the latter, the RAN made a small, but still substantial, contribution to the successful outcome of the operation.

<sup>1</sup> Royal Navy, *Naval Staff History Second World War: War with Japan, Volume VI; The Advance to Japan*, British Admiralty, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Gill, G.H., *Royal Australian Navy, 1942-45*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1968, p. 501.

<sup>3</sup> The current RAN submarines HMAS *Collins* and HMAS *Dechaineux* commemorate these officers.

<sup>4</sup> Gill, *Royal Australian Navy, 1942-45*, p. 511. He notes that instances of suicide attacks by damaged aircraft had been observed since 1942. The first organised *kamikaze* attacks occurred on 25 October 1944 in the attack on the US escort carriers *Santee* and *Suwannee*.

<sup>5</sup> Sunk: battleships *Musashi*, *Fuso*, *Yamashiro*; fleet aircraft carrier *Zuikaku*; light aircraft carriers *Zuiho*, *Chitose*, *Chiyoda*; heavy cruisers *Nachi*, *Atago*, *Maya*, *Chikuma*, *Chokai*, *Suzuya*, *Mogami*; light cruisers *Tama*, *Noshiro*, *Abukuma*; destroyers *Nowake*, *Hatsutsuki*, *Akitsuki*, *Yamagumo*, *Michishio*, *Asagumo*, *Hayashimo*, *Fusinami*, *Shiranuhi*. Damaged: battleships *Yamato*, *Ise*, *Hyuga*; heavy cruisers *Kumano*, *Takao*, *Myoko*; light cruiser *Yahagi*; destroyer *Kiyoshima*.

