

Turkey Shoot

By John T. Correll

The Battle of the Philippine Sea, June 19-20, 1944, marked the end of Japanese naval airpower as a significant factor in World War II. It was the single biggest aircraft carrier battle in history.

The first day is remembered as “the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot,” in which US Navy pilots and anti-aircraft gunners shot down more than 300 Japanese airplanes. Before the two-day battle was over, the Japanese had lost five ships, including three fleet carriers, and a total of 476 airplanes and 450 aviators.

The Japanese fled with the ships and aircraft they had left. The carriers would not again be an effective force in the war except as decoys to distract the oncoming Americans.

The battle was part of Operation Forager, the amphibious invasion of the Marianas. Under the cover of air superiority from US carriers, ground forces took Saipan, Guam, and Tinian, 1,500 miles from Tokyo and the Kanto Plain and within range for B-29 bombers.

For whatever reason, the Marianas Turkey Shoot never achieved the popular fame of the carrier battles at Midway and

Leyte Gulf. It was also overshadowed by the other war news that month from halfway around the world: The Allied landings in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, to begin the invasion of occupied Europe.

However, naval history buffs still argue about the Turkey Shoot and how Adm. Raymond A. Spruance—the non-aviator in command of the US Fifth Fleet—might have conducted the battle, but didn’t.

REVERSAL OF FORTUNES

The heyday of the Japanese navy in the Pacific did not last long. At Midway in June 1942, five months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Imperial Fleet lost four carriers, one cruiser, and 322 airplanes on the same day.

Expecting fast conquest, Japan did not provide for replacing losses in aircraft and trained aircrews. Japanese technology did not keep pace and the once-superior A6M Zero fighter was soon outclassed by the US Navy F6F Hellcat and the Army Air Forces P-38 Lightning.

The outer defensive perimeter—running through the Gilbert Islands in the central Pacific around to New Guinea and Sumatra—was no longer secure. By


1944, the Japanese had scaled back their plans but still hoped to hold a shorter inner perimeter, anchored on the east by the Mariana Islands.

Japan’s greatest hero, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, who had planned the Pearl Harbor attack, was dead, his airplane shot down over the jungles of New Guinea in 1943 by AAF P-38s. There was no one of comparable stature to take his place.

Meanwhile, the US armed forces were engaged in an intramural argument about strategy. Gen. Douglas MacArthur called for a push northward from New Guinea through the Philippines led, of course, by MacArthur. Adm. Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations, advocated an island-hopping approach across the central Pacific where Adm. Chester W. Nimitz was in command.

King had an unusual ally in Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, commander of the Army Air Forces. Arnold, who rarely agreed with King on strategy, wanted bases in the Marianas from which his new B-29 bombers could strike the Japanese home islands.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff came down squarely on both sides of the issue, direct-



It was the biggest carrier battle of all time. It also gained bases from which B-29s could strike Japan.

ing an invasion of the Marianas in June 1944 with invasion of the Philippines to follow a few months later.

Operation Forager, drawn up by King, would strike at three islands in the Marianas chain: Saipan, Tinian, and Guam.

Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo, who commanded the strike on Pearl Harbor, had been relegated to relatively minor positions since the defeat of his carriers at Midway. In 1944, he was commander of the Central Pacific Area Fleet on Saipan, which was not as impressive as the name suggested. It consisted of patrol craft, coastal vessels, and some ground forces.

Ironically, the first target of the Operation Forager attack would be Saipan.

JAPAN'S DESPERATE PLAN

The main Japanese naval strategy in World War II was the "Decisive Battle," inspired by Adm. Heihachiro Togo's victory over the Russian fleet at Tsushima Strait in 1905 in the Russo-Japanese War.

In 1944, the Imperial Navy was desperately seeking such an engagement, upon which the outcome of the war might turn.

The force created to stop the Americans was the Mobile Fleet, to which virtually all of Japan's remaining carriers, battleships, and cruisers were assigned. The commander was Vice Adm. Jisaburo Ozawa.

Ozawa pulled the Mobile Fleet together at Tawi Tawi in the southern Philippines. All told, he had nine carriers with 450 combat aircraft, five battleships, 13 cruisers, and 28 destroyers. It was a large force, but as Ozawa knew, badly outnumbered by the US Fifth Fleet.

In addition to the airplanes on his carriers, Ozawa could call upon hundreds of land-based aircraft dispersed to islands around the perimeter from Guam to New Guinea to assist.

The plan was to lure the Fifth Fleet into open water west of the Marianas where the land-based airplanes would destroy a third of the US ships before the opposing carrier forces engaged. Mobile Fleet aircraft would finish off the rest.

Offsetting to some extent his shortage in numbers, Ozawa had several tactical

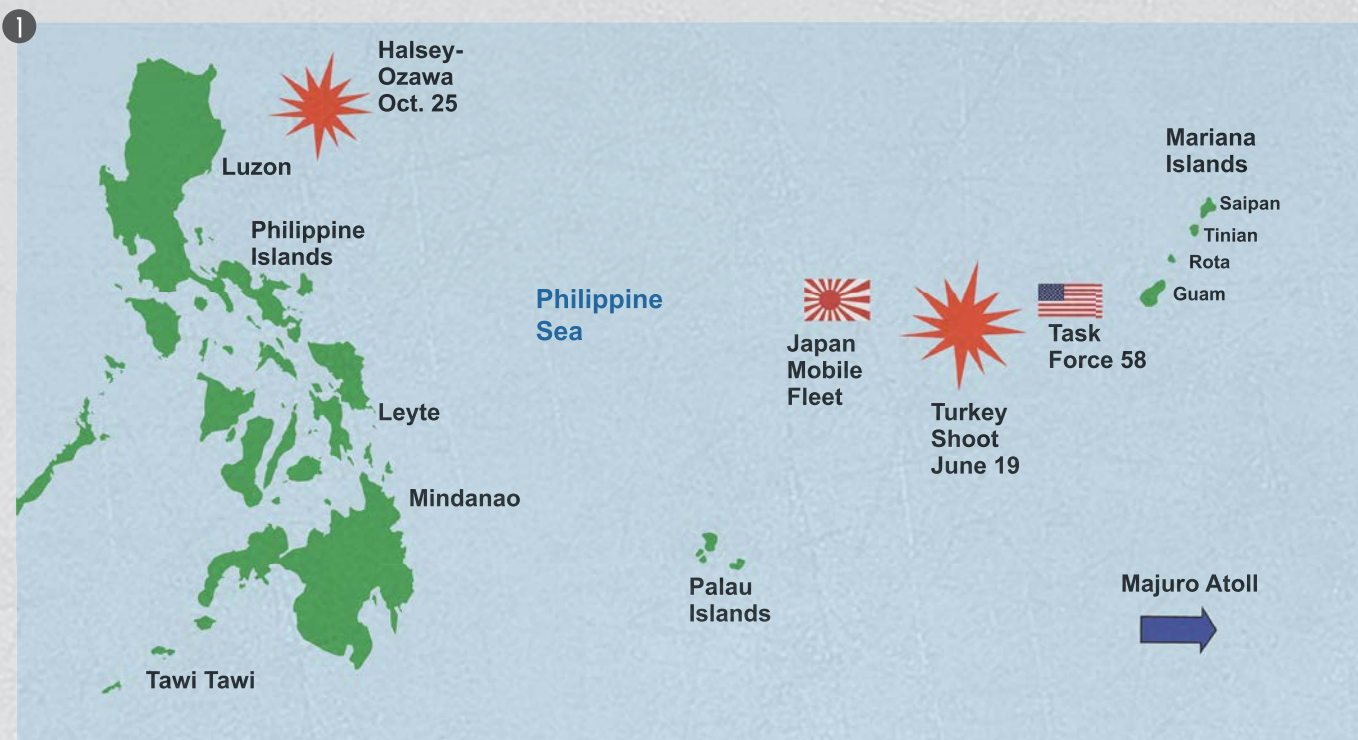
advantages. His airplanes—lacking armor and self-sealing fuel tanks—were lighter and had greater range. He could attack from 100 miles farther away than the Americans could. The Americans would be far from support bases; Ozawa would have bases nearby.

The American carriers, steaming west from their anchorage at Majuro Atoll in the Marshall Islands, would have the easterly tradewinds at their backs. To launch or recover aircraft, they had to swing around into the wind, turning away from the enemy. Ozawa, facing into the wind, could launch and recover while moving forward.

On the other hand, Ozawa's Zero fighters were no match for the US Hellcats. His pilots were minimally trained and had little flying experience. His meager fuel supply did not allow expansive operations.

On June 15, Adm. Soemu Toyoda, commander in chief of the Imperial Fleet, sent a message to the Mobile Fleet: "The rise and fall of Imperial Japan depends on this one battle," he

Fighter contrails paint the sky during the Marianas Turkey Shoot in 1944.



US Navy photos



said—the same words used by Togo at Tsushima.

BLACK SHOE ADMIRAL

In command of Operation Forager would be Spruance, regarded by CNO King as “the most intelligent officer in the Navy.” Spruance had the complete trust of Nimitz as well.

Although the main strength of his command was a carrier task force, Spruance was not an aviator. He had been a cruiser officer for most of his career before coming to special prominence as leader of the carrier victory at Midway and—despite the grumbling of some airmen—was now commander of the US Fifth Fleet.

Between the world wars, battleships had been displaced by carriers as the

foremost ships of the navy. Some senior officers, notably King and Adm. William F. Halsey Jr., had qualified as naval aviators in midcareer. Others, notably Nimitz and Spruance, did not.

With a big carrier battle looming, many of the “brown shoes”—so called because naval aviators wore brown shoes with their working uniforms—would have preferred one of their own in command instead of the “black shoe” Spruance.

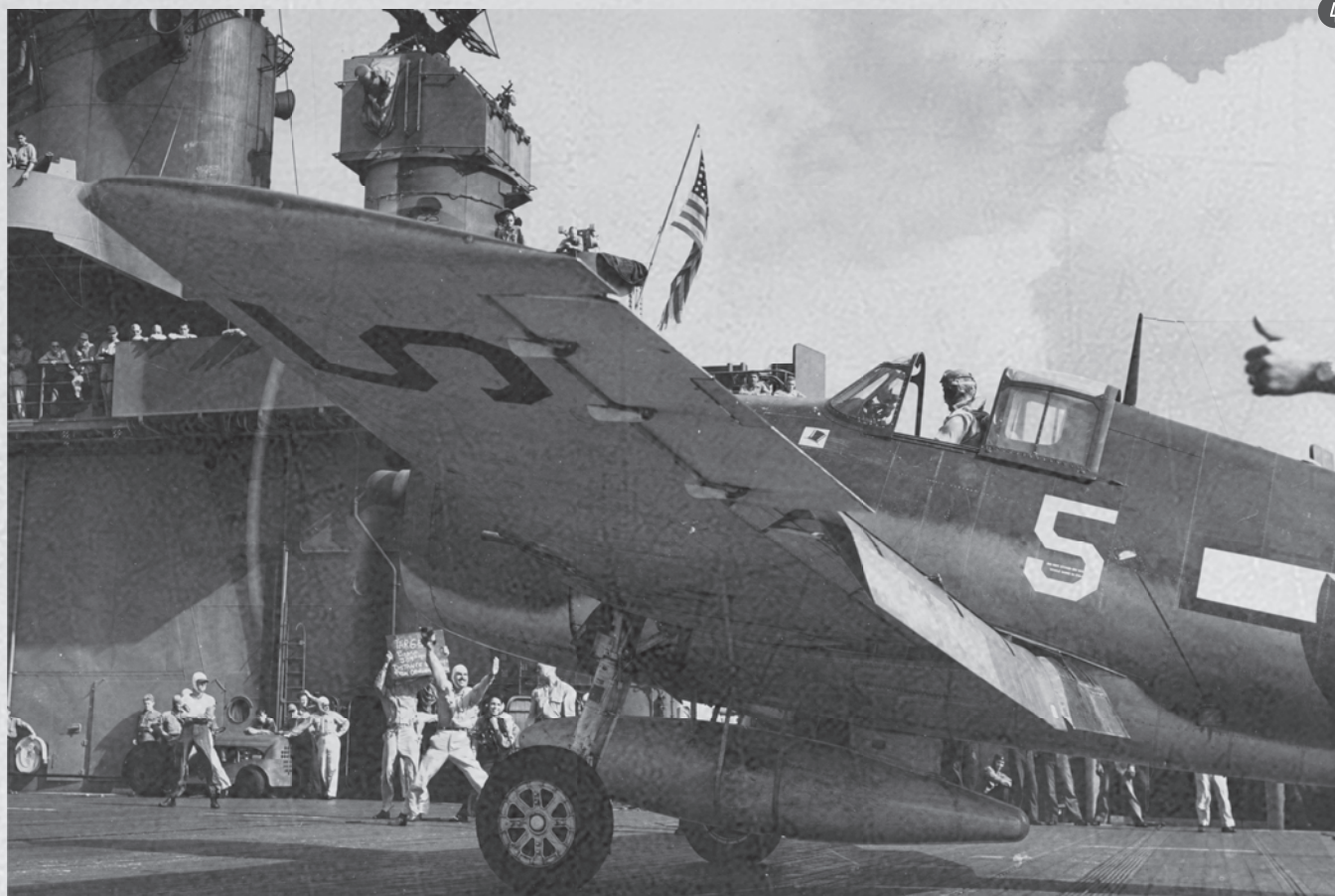
The Fifth Fleet had been built up to extraordinary strength and consisted of more than 800 ships grouped into two task forces.

The striking arm was Task Force 58, commanded by Rear Adm. Marc A. Mitscher, a longtime aviator deeply experienced in carrier operations. TF 58

was so large it took almost five hours to clear the lagoon as it departed from Majuro. It included battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, but the heart of the task force was seven fleet carriers and eight light carriers with 904 combat aircraft.

Mitscher’s pilots were mostly experienced veterans. His principal aircraft were fast F6F Hellcat fighters, SB2C Helldiver dive bombers, and TBF/TBM Avenger torpedo airplanes. Among the complement of the carriers were two future US Presidents. Lt. Gerald R. Ford was assistant navigator on *Monterey*. Ensign George H. W. Bush was an Avenger pilot on *San Jacinto*.

Task Force 51 under Vice Adm. Richmond K. Turner brought the 127,000 amphibious assault troops who would



conduct the invasion. In addition to the transports and landing craft, Turner had combat vessels, including battle-ships, but they were of the older and slower kind.

THE INVASION BEGINS

While Ozawa was exploring ways to induce the decisive battle, Spruance was focused on his central mission of capturing the Marianas. In early June, he moved the Fifth Fleet into position west of Saipan—although not as far west as Ozawa had hoped—and systematically attacked the land bases on Guam, Iwo Jima, Chichi Jima, Saipan, and other islands where the Japanese had pre-positioned aircraft.

The invasion force, one Army and two Marine Corps divisions under Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Holland M. “Howlin’ Mad” Smith, landed on Saipan June 15. Seventy thousand Americans were ashore by June 19, meeting fierce resistance and taking heavy casualties.

By then, unknown to Ozawa, the US attacks had already wiped out nearly all of the land-based Japanese aircraft in the area except for about 50 still operational on Guam.

Mitscher’s scouts discovered the location of the Mobile Fleet in the Philippine Sea, some 400 miles from the Marianas. Mitscher proposed to Spruance that TF 58 pull away and go after the enemy carriers but Spruance would not approve it.

“The carrier ‘people’—the crews of the 15 fast carriers, the pilots, and the admirals—wanted to strike the Japanese fleet,” said naval analyst Norman Polmar. “They had had enough of the strikes against island airfields and fortifications.” They “had not yet been pitted against the Japanese fleet. The aviators wanted a fight.”

Spruance held firm to his primary responsibility, the security of the Saipan beachhead. He would not weaken the carrier defensive screen and leave the landing force vulnerable to a Japanese end run.

Instead, Task Force 58 would await the Japanese attack. Mitscher deployed his force in five circular groups, the battle-ships and destroyers posted forward to

chew up incoming airplanes with anti-aircraft fire. The US carriers were fanned out in a wide semicircle about 100 miles from Guam and Saipan.

TURKEY SHOOT

Rather than concentrating his smaller force, Ozawa chose to divide it up into four waves, launching the first one at dawn on June 19. His intent was that his airplanes would hit the US carriers, land ashore to rearm and refuel, and strike the Americans again on the way back.

Task Force 58 radar picked up the approaching bogeys just before 10 a.m. and the first Hellcats took off to meet them. At the same time, dive bombers struck the airfields on Guam so the Japanese could not land there.

The Hellcats and the gunners on the ships made short work of the first Japanese wave. The radar screens were clear within the hour. Oblivious to what was happening, Ozawa assumed that many of his airplanes had landed on Guam and that they and

1. The locations of US and Japanese forces and the places they met in battle during the Turkey Shoot. 2. Adm. Raymond Spruance as commander of Central Pacific Force in 1944. 3. Vice Adm. Marc Mitscher, commander of Task Force 58, aboard USS Lexington, his flagship, during the Marianas campaign. 4. An F6F Hellcat launches during the battle. Hellcats proved to be the Navy’s premier fighter in the last part of World War II.



the shore-based units had inflicted great damage on the American fleet.

He launched his subsequent waves at 11 a.m., 1 p.m., and 2 p.m. Of the 374 aircraft Ozawa sent out, only 130 returned, most of the others shot down by the Hellcats. Fifty more aircraft based on Guam and the neighboring island of Rota were shot down as well, and that wasn't the end of it.

The US pilots did not reach the Japanese fleet but US submarines did, sinking two carriers and sending 22 more airplanes with them to the bottom, raising Ozawa's aircraft losses for the day above 300. Hellcat pilot Lt. Cmdr. David McCampbell shot down seven enemy aircraft, on his way toward becoming the leading Navy ace of the war. By contrast, 25 Hellcats were lost.

One of the aviators on the carrier *Lexington* said the day had been akin to an "old-time turkey shoot," and the name stuck.

Around 9 p.m., Toyoda sent a message instructing Ozawa to withdraw. By midnight, the Mobile Fleet was 460 miles from Guam with Task Force 58 about 320 miles astern.

PURSUIT

That evening, with the enemy on the run, Spruance directed Mitscher to pursue and attack the next day if the Japanese position was known with sufficient accuracy. Mitscher left some of his carriers for air defense of Saipan and went in pursuit of Ozawa.

It was almost 4 p.m. on June 20 before a garbled report from scout airplane placed the Japanese fleet about 270 miles to the

northwest, at the edge of the operational range for the US aircraft.

Mitscher launched his first wave of 216 fighters, dive bombers, and torpedo attack aircraft and was preparing to send the second wave when he learned that the Japanese were 60 miles farther away than he had thought. He canceled the second wave but did not recall the first one, even though the extra distance meant they would be landing in the dark on their return.

The American aircraft plowed into the Japanese fleet and in short order sank another carrier and two oilers and shot down 80 airplanes. Seventeen US aircraft were lost in the effort.

1. A Japanese aircraft carrier (center) is pummeled by US aircraft during the battle in the Philippine Sea. 2. B-29s of the 462nd Bomb Group taxi on the West Field runway on Tinian in the Mariana Islands in 1945. Tinian was captured shortly after the Turkey Shoot, putting the Japanese homeland within range of US B-29s. 3. Lt. j.g. Alexander Vraciu, on the deck of USS Lexington, holds up six fingers to signify his kills during the Turkey Shoot.



For some of the TF 58 airplanes, it was 300 miles back to their carriers and it was pitch dark when they got there around 10:30 p.m. Many of them could not make it all the way back, their fuel tanks hitting empty before they got there. Eighty-two of the airplanes ran out of fuel and went down at sea, although nearly all of the airmen were rescued.

To help them land, Mitscher had the ships turn on their lights, even though that made them easy targets if an enemy was lurking about.

Estimates vary for the two days of Japanese losses, including airplanes that crashed or were aboard the carriers when they sank. Naval historian William T. Y'Blood's count of 476 airplanes and 450 aviators lost is widely accepted as authoritative.

The US invasion force took Saipan July 18, Tinian on Aug. 1, and Guam Aug. 10. In Tokyo, the government of Premier Hideki Tojo fell the day the loss of Saipan was announced. In a cave on Saipan, Nagumo shot himself to death.

SPRUANCE UNDER FIRE

Even though Ozawa was down to 34 aircraft, he still had most of his ships, including six carriers. Almost immediately an outcry arose among the aviators that Spruance had let the Japanese fleet escape.

The view at naval air headquarters at Pearl Harbor was, "this is what comes of placing a non-aviator in command over carriers." Rear Adm. Joseph J. "Jocko" Clark, who commanded four carriers in the battle, said that a more decisive victory

might have ended the war in a few days.

Adm. John H. Towers, deputy commander of the Pacific Fleet and the most senior naval aviator on Active Duty, demanded that Nimitz fire Spruance for incompetence. Nimitz ignored him.

Then and later, King heaped praise on Spruance for sticking to his basic obligation. When he landed on Saipan following the battle, he told Spruance, "You did a damn fine job there. No matter what other people tell you, your decision was correct."

"We cannot assume that fortune would have favored the strong—it did not do so at Midway," said Samuel Eliot Morison, the most respected naval historian of World War II. "Our dive- and torpedo-bombers would probably have sunk some of the Japanese carriers, but the Japanese might have sunk some of ours. And the 'Turkey Shoot' could never have made such a spectacular score if Mitscher had to divide his air forces between offense and defense."

HALSEY GOES FOR THE BAIT

"Without its air arm, the [Japanese] fleet was crippled, and the six carriers that survived were useful only as decoys to lure another American admiral to do what Spruance declined to do," Morison said.

Morison's reference was to the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October, supporting MacArthur's return to the Philippines. The main naval force there was the US Third Fleet, commanded by Halsey, who had most of the ships that had been with the Fifth Fleet at Saipan, including Mitscher and his 15 carriers and 800 airplanes.

The strongest Japanese naval force was the First Striking Force under Vice Adm. Takeo Kurita, consisting of two battleships and other surface combatants approaching from the west.

Ozawa's fleet, with only four carriers and 13 airplanes left, was north of Leyte Gulf, unable to do anything except perhaps draw Halsey away from protecting the invasion convoys. Ozawa sent a few of his ships to make a demonstration to catch Halsey's attention, which they did.

Leaving the defense of the invasion transports to a subsidiary force from the US Seventh Fleet, Halsey took the entire Third Fleet—carriers, battleships, cruisers, and destroyers—in chase of Ozawa.

Ozawa lost all four of his carriers and his handful of airplanes, of course, but he had succeeded in his purpose. The US force avoided disaster only because Kurita, fearful of being caught between two American fleets, withdrew prematurely.

Contrary to Jocko Clark's surmise, destruction of the Mobile Fleet did not end the war in a few days, but after that, the Japanese naval air threat was mostly from kamikaze suicide attack units, first organized during the battle for the Philippines.

Ozawa went on to become commander in chief of the Imperial Fleet, or what was left of it. In 1945, Spruance succeeded Nimitz as commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet.

The greatest strategic value from the Turkey Shoot was US possession of the Marianas, where fleet, submarine, and logistics bases as well as airfields were established. Nimitz moved his headquarters to Guam in January 1945.

The ultimate legacy of Operation Forager was the success of the B-29s. The first of them arrived Oct. 12 and flew their first mission against Tokyo Nov. 24. Over the months that followed, the B-29s reduced the infrastructure of the Japanese home islands to rubble.

It was from Tinian that the two B-29 atomic bomb missions launched Aug. 6 and Aug. 9, 1945, finally breaking the Japanese will to continue the war and inducing the Imperial surrender. ★

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "All Eyes on Khe Sanh," appeared in the March issue.