

H-Gram 026: Operations Flintlock, Catchpole, and Hailstone

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75th Anniversary of World War II

Operation Flintlock: The Invasion of Kwajalein, 31 January 1944

"Dangerous and reckless," argued Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance and Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner after Admiral Chester Nimitz made the decision to invade Kwajalein Atoll directly, bypassing other Japanese-held fortified islands in the southern Marshall Islands.

After the bloodbath on Tarawa in November 1943, U.S. Navy commanders and planners were seized by a sudden bout of retrospection and caution. Nimitz's own planners, Spruance (Commander of Fifth Fleet), Turner (Commander, V Amphibious Force), and Marine Major General H. M. "Howling Mad" Smith, all argued for taking the islands of Wotje and Maloelap in the southern Marshalls before attempting to take the

Historic Photo of the Month



The pre-World War II Navy: U.S. Battle Force at anchor off Colon, Panama, circa 1933: carriers Langley (CV-1), Lexington (CV-2), and Saratoga (CV-3), as well as the battle line and the heavy and light cruisers of the Scouting Force (NH 50122).

heavily defended islands of Kwajalein Atoll. (Wotje and Maloelap were strongly defended as well.) Even after Nimitz overruled them all, Spruance and Turner continued to push back until Nimitz, in his typical gentlemanly manner, offered to fire them if they didn't want the mission. In the end, Nimitz's audacious judgment would be vindicated.

The U.S. force that simultaneously invaded both ends of Kwajalein Atoll (and the largest lagoon in the world) was massive, including 54,000 U.S. Marine and U.S. Army assault troops, with gunfire support provided by seven pre-World War II battleships, six escort carriers,

and numerous cruisers and destroyers (about 300 ships total). The landings had to be delayed from early January to the end of the month in order to amass enough assault transports to execute the landings with two divisions of Marines and soldiers. Additional air support and cover (and suppression of other Japanese bases in the Marshall Islands) was provided by six fleet carriers and six light carriers with over 700 aircraft, accompanied by seven modern fast battleships. Japanese aircraft were swept from the skies before the landings even took place and all Japanese submarines in the area were sunk. Not one U.S. ship was lost in the operation and only a few were damaged—not severely. Numerous tactical, technical, and technological improvements had been made, all examples of the rapid implementation of lessons learned from the Tarawa landings. The battles ashore were vicious but short. The approximately 9,000 Japanese defenders fought and died almost to the last man, not knowing that their high command had already given up on holding the outermost ring of islands (including the Marshalls) and, therefore, that no reinforcement or support could get through. U.S. Marine and Army battle deaths were less than half of those on Tarawa, about 400.

With the capture of Kwajalein (and the undefended Majuro Atoll) the U.S. had acquired the bases necessary to sustain an offensive drive across the central Pacific while bypassing and strangling several other fortified Japanese-held islands in the Marshalls. The Japanese, however, also learned lessons from Kwajalein—in particular, the futility of trying to defend on the beach in the face of overwhelming U.S. Navy firepower. The Japanese would compensate and adapt, and future landings would prove far more costly for the U.S. as a result. (For more on Operation Flintlock and the invasion of Kwajalein, please see attachment H-Gram 026-1.)

Operation Catchpole: The Invasion of Eniwetok, 17 February 1944

The invasion of Eniwetok Atoll, the western-most island in the Marshalls (360 miles west of Kwajalein) was an opportunistic rush job, executed with an 8,000-man U.S. Marine and Army “reserve force” that had not been necessary to use for the landings on Kwajalein. Against a much smaller force of Japanese, the Battle of Eniwetok would cost almost as many U.S. lives as Kwajalein. A major factor was that the compressed

timeline did not allow the extensive and detailed level of reconnaissance and intelligence preparation that had preceded the Kwajalein landings. On the other hand, delay of the landings would have enabled the Japanese to continue to improve their fortification effort. The U.S. knew there were about 800 Japanese on the island of Engebi. (On account of its airfield, Engebi was the primary objective of the Eniwetok invasion.) The big surprise was that two islands thought by the U.S. to have been empty (Eniwetok and Parry) were actually occupied by 2,000 troops of the veteran Japanese First Amphibious Brigade, which had begun to arrive there on 4 January 1944.

The U.S. Navy support to the landings on Eniwetok was leaner than at Kwajalein and included three pre-World War II battleships, three escort carriers, three heavy cruisers, as well as other escorts, amphibious ships, and auxiliaries. Additional air support was provided by one of TF 58’s four carrier task groups, TG 58.4, consisting of the carrier Saratoga (CV-3) and two light carriers. Nevertheless, no Japanese air, surface or subsurface assets opposed the landings at Eniwetok Atoll, as the Japanese high command had already given up on it. The massive U.S. carrier strike on the major Japanese base at Truk was timed to ensure no air or naval forces from Truk could respond to the landings at Eniwetok (see also H-Gram 026-2).

After some initial confusion, the first landings at Engebi by two battalions of U.S. Marines went reasonably well, and the fight was over relatively quickly. Only then, however, did U.S. intelligence personnel sifting through captured documents discover just how many Japanese were on the two other islands—lands that the battleship Tennessee (BB-43) and ten troop transports had unwittingly passed within yards on entering the lagoon, while the Japanese “played possum.” This discovery necessitated a change of plans from simultaneous to sequential assault on Eniwetok and Parry islands.

The assault by two Army battalions on Eniwetok Island initially became bogged down, and the third Marine reserve battalion from Engebi was committed to taking the island. As a result, the mission to assault Parry Island was given to the two Marine battalions that had taken Engebi. The Japanese on Eniwetok and Parry put up a tough fight. However, they had not expected the landings to come from inside the lagoon rather than from the ocean side—an assumption they had also

made in Kwajalein. In the end, almost all the 3,500 Japanese defenders on the islands were killed and only about 100 taken alive. U.S. losses were about 400 killed or missing. The capture of Eniwetok prevented the Japanese from using the airfield on Engebi to attack U.S. forces in the Marshalls, and Eniwetok would be used as a forward logistics base for the invasion of the Marianas Islands planned for June 1944. (For more on Operation Catchpole and the invasion of Eniwetok, please see attachment H-Gram 026-2.)

be bypassed and left to “wither on the vine.” The raid was a huge blow to Japanese morale and a huge boost to the confidence of U.S. naval aviators, who, in addition to implementing numerous innovations during the raids, proved that U.S. carrier forces could stand and fight against large concentrations of shore-based air power and prevail. (For more on Operation Hailstone please see attachment H-Gram 026-3.)

Operation Hailstone: The Carrier Raid on Truk, 17-18 February 1944

At dawn on 17 February 1944, 72 F6F Hellcats from five U.S. fleet aircraft carriers caught the Japanese by surprise at their major fleet forward base at Truk Island, piercing the aura of impregnability of the island, which until then had been known somewhat exaggeratedly as the “Gibraltar of the Pacific.” Over the next day and a half, more than 1,200 strike sorties by more than 500 aircraft from nine aircraft carriers (five fleet carriers and four light carriers) pummeled the island in a near continuous stream of raids, flagrantly ignoring traditional “hit-and-run” carrier doctrine.

By the time the raids on Truk were over, which included the first carrier-launched night strike in U.S. Navy history, between 250 and 275 Japanese aircraft had been shot down or destroyed on the ground and 80 percent of the supplies on Truk had been destroyed, including 17,000 tons of fuel. More than 4,500 Japanese had been killed. Japanese ship losses included two light cruisers, four destroyers, three auxiliary cruisers, six other naval auxiliaries, three small warships, and 32 transports or freighters (including five tankers). U.S. losses included one fleet carrier damaged by a torpedo in an aerial night strike, one battleship slightly damaged, 25 aircraft lost, and 40 dead. Several Japanese ships were sunk by U.S. submarines and surface ships, including a light cruiser sunk by the battleships Iowa (BB-61) and New Jersey (BB-62), with Commander of the Fifth Fleet Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance on board and in tactical control. The strikes would have been even more catastrophic to the Japanese had the commander of the Combined Fleet, Admiral Mineichi Koga, not ordered his ships out of Truk just days before the strike. The Japanese would not use Truk again as a major anchorage for the remainder of the war, and in March 1944, Admiral Nimitz made the decision that Truk could



Sailors on board USS Bolivar (APA-34) receive final instructions before landings on Roi Island, Kwajalein Atoll, 31 Jan. 1944. A chart of ship-to-shore movements for Roi and Namur Islands is on exhibit at right (80-G-57950).

H-026-1: Operation Flintlock-The Invasion of Kwajalein, 31 January 1944

H-Gram 026, Attachment 1

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

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With the capture of Tarawa and Makin Islands in the Gilbert Islands at the end of November 1943, the U.S. prepared for the next move, the invasion of the Marshall Islands, the capture of which would be key to sustaining the U.S. drive across the central Pacific and ultimately to Japan. However, the bloodbath on

Tarawa gave everyone pause. Despite the U.S. having overwhelming superiority in all domains, the Japanese defenders on Tarawa had fought courageously, almost to the last man, and made the U.S. Marines pay dearly to take the island. Almost as many Marines died in three days of fighting on Tarawa (about 1,000) as died in five months on Guadalcanal. The U.S. Navy suffered severe losses off Makin Island as well.

Press reporting of the capture of Tarawa was highly negative, and there were significant recriminations and repercussions within the U.S. military. Given the high casualties for such a small piece of ground, many questioned the wisdom of the U.S. Navy's "island hopping" strategy. One influential critic in particular was General Douglas MacArthur, who advocated that the Central Pacific strategy be

abandoned in favor of his advance up the northern coast of New Guinea toward the Philippines.

Despite criticism from many quarters, including from families of those killed on Tarawa, Admiral Chester Nimitz remained steadfast, even after he flew to Tarawa on 25 November 1943, only a couple of days after it had been secured, and saw first-hand the high cost and carnage involved. Nimitz directed that an extensive "lessons learned" effort be undertaken and that maximum effort to incorporate those lessons take place before the invasion of the Marshall Islands (see also H-Gram 025). One of the most influential of these lessons-learned studies was completed on 30 November 1943 by Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, commander of the Amphibious Forces in the capture of Tarawa and Makin. (Turner would also command amphibious operations in the Marshalls.) Turner determined from accurate intelligence that the key island in the Tarawa Atoll, Betio, had been greatly reinforced in the three months leading up to the attack, the lesson being that it was important not to give the Japanese advanced indication of impending attack. (This would seem self-evident, but it was easier said than done.) Turner also determined that the next invasion would require more and better aerial reconnaissance; more submarine scouting; pre-landing reconnaissance and obstacle demolition; more ships, especially destroyers for on-call gunfire support; more landing craft; three times as much pre-landing bombardment and three times as much ammunition; and numerous other technical and tactical changes. On 2 December 1943 Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance, Commander of the Fifth Fleet, approved Turner's recommendations. Admiral Nimitz's approval was soon to follow.

Although by November 1943 U.S. Navy carrier forces in the vicinity of the Gilberts and Marshalls had overwhelming superiority, the lack of experience in many of the aviators and flight deck crews showed. During November 1943, of 831 planes aboard aircraft carriers in the central Pacific, 73 were lost to operational accidents. (Although the new Hellcat fighters were great airplanes, they turned out to be prone to blown tires on recovery aboard the carriers.) However, in keeping with Admiral Nimitz's principle that the way to gain

combat experience was through combat, Nimitz wasted no time in ordering a series of fast carrier strikes on the Marshall Islands within days of the fall of Tarawa and Makin.

The fast carrier force assigned to attack the Marshall Islands was designated Task Force 50, under the command of Rear Admiral Charles A. "Baldy" Pownall. He also retained command of Task Group 50.1 with the new Essex class carriers *Yorktown* (CV-10) and *Lexington* (CV-16); the new light carrier *Cowpens* (CVL-25); four heavy cruisers, including San Francisco, New Orleans, and Minneapolis, all having been repaired after severe damage during battles off Guadalcanal and given improved anti-aircraft capabilities; and a light anti-aircraft cruiser. TF 50 would also include TG 50.3, commanded by Rear Admiral Alfred E. Montgomery, with the carrier *Essex* (CV-9), the battle veteran *Enterprise* (CV-6), the new light carrier *Belleau Wood* (CV-24), one heavy cruiser, two new light cruisers and one light anti-aircraft cruiser. The combined force included 386 aircraft: 193 F6F Hellcat fighters, 104 SBD-5 Dauntless dive-bombers, and 89 TBF Avenger torpedo bombers. The strike itself would consist of 249 aircraft, of which 158 were dive and torpedo bombers.

At 0600 on 4 December 1943, TF 50 commenced launch, with a 0750 time over target, Kwajalein Atoll. (Kwajalein Atoll is the largest in the world, roughly 100 nautical miles long and in some places over 30 nautical miles wide.) Strikes were planned at Roi, on the north side of the atoll, and Kwajalein Island, at the southeastern tip. In response, the Japanese launched about 50 fighters and a heavy triple-A barrage over target. The strike on Roi by *Essex* and *Lexington* aircraft was hampered by a communications snafu and effective Japanese ground camouflage. Only 12 Hellcats went in to strafe and managed to destroy just three Japanese bombers and 16 fighters on the ground, leaving 30 to 40 Japanese aircraft undamaged. However, 18 Japanese fighters and 10 bombers were shot down. In the meantime, 41 SBD dive bombers and 36 TBF torpedo bombers attacked the old Japanese light cruiser *Isuzu* and several other small ships. *Isuzu* dodged almost all the bombs and torpedoes. Only two bombs hit the ship, jamming her rudder but not

sinking her. Several torpedoes hit the largest Japanese transport at Roi, the destroyer *Asakaze Maru*, which blew up in a spectacular explosion.

Concurrent with the attack at Roi, aircraft from *Enterprise* and *Yorktown* attacked the island of Kwajalein, which was the principle Japanese naval and submarine base on the atoll, with about 30 vessels in the lagoon. Three Japanese supply ships were sunk, and the light cruiser *Nagara* was damaged. At the seaplane base at Ebeye Island, 18 float-planes were destroyed. All told, the raids on Roi and Kwajalein cost the Japanese about 55 planes, whereas the U.S. lost five. Most of the Japanese merchant ships; all naval vessels and 30 to 40 bombers escaped destruction. Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison noted somewhat acerbically that "the 'Big E' (*Enterprise*) had done relatively better when Admiral Halsey directed the first strike on Kwajalein, 1 February 1942."

At this point, Rear Admiral Pownall made a controversial decision (one that would cost him his job.) Although the plan called for a second wave of strikes to be launched at noon, and the senior aviators in the Task Force strongly advocated launching more strikes to take out the remaining Japanese aircraft, Pownall opted for caution and decided to withdraw, concerned that with the Japanese now fully alerted to their presence, the surviving Japanese aircraft represented a very serious threat. Up to this point in the war, U.S. carrier doctrine had been based on "hit and run" tactics. Staying put and duking it out with an alerted land-based air threat was generally considered a bad idea. Nevertheless, Pownall found himself on the wrong side of the cusp of a paradigm shift. In the History of U.S. Naval Operations in WWII, Morison treated Pownall's cautious decision with much more kindness and understanding than did Nimitz or CNO King. Morison also noted that unlike Rear Admiral Arthur Radford's Task Group (see also H-Gram 025), Pownall had no night intercept capability, and if he did not withdraw when he did, he could expect to face significant risk of night torpedo attack by Japanese bombers. (As it turned out, he faced it anyway.)

The Japanese tried hard to make Pownall's fears become reality. Between 1000 and 1100, three Japanese Kate torpedo bombers from Roi or Maloelap attacked the carrier *Lexington*. All three got through the fighter defenses but were hit by anti-aircraft fire from the *Lexington*, crashing close aboard with one torpedo passing only 100 yards astern of the carrier. At 1248, as *Yorktown* was launching a strike on Wotje Island (in the southern Marshalls) four more Kates successfully avoided radar detection and fighter intercept and attacked *Yorktown*; three of the Kates were shot down by escorts and one turned away.

Pownall's attempt to withdraw at high speed was thwarted by rough seas, forcing him to slow from 25 to 18 knots. As a result, the U.S. force remained in range of Japanese aircraft, and during the course of the evening somewhere between 30 and 50 Japanese bombers in at least 14 distinct raids attempted night torpedo attacks, all thwarted by maneuver and opening distance until finally, at 2333, one Japanese plane hit *Lexington* in the stern with a torpedo, killing nine men, wounding 35, destroying her steering engine, and jamming the rudder hard left. Through superb damage control, the crew was able to center the rudder, which enabled the carrier to steer with her engines, all while fighting off more air attacks. Despite the Japanese attacks, the remainder of TF 50 withdrew unscathed.

Pownall, however, did not escape unscathed. The commander of Pacific Fleet Air Forces, Vice Admiral John H. Towers, pushed to have Pownall relieved for being insufficiently aggressive. His view, and that of other aviators (Pownall was an aviator too) was that the best way to defend the carriers was to attack the Japanese bombers at their base. Yet it wasn't so clear-cut. The bombers that attacked TF 50 at night staged through Nauru Island and might well not have been caught on the ground in a second attack on Roi. That Towers coveted Pownall's job himself, a well-known fact, made the whole thing a bit unseemly. Nevertheless, Nimitz and CNO King also viewed Pownall's action as insufficiently aggressive.

As it turned out, Pownall got Towers' job, and Towers was bumped up to Deputy Commander in

Chief Pacific Fleet. Vice Admiral Marc "Pete" Mitscher was appointed to command the Fast Carrier Task Force (which would be designated TF 58) instead. Mitscher's selection by King and Nimitz to command TF 58 was somewhat to the consternation of Vice Admiral Spruance, the Fifth Fleet Commander, who was not consulted. The relationship between Spruance and Mitscher after the Battle of Midway was characterized by a degree of mistrust. Nevertheless, both of them got over it and went on to be very effective in battles that followed.

Having stripped Vice Admiral Halsey, Commander of Third Fleet and U.S. Naval forces in the final stages of the Solomon Islands campaign (see also H-Gram 024) of his battleships and heavy cruisers for the higher priority Gilbert operations, Nimitz decided to send some of them back, at least temporarily. While heading from the Gilberts to the Solomon Islands, a Task Group under the command of Rear Admiral Willis Lee (victor of the night battle off Guadalcanal on 14-15 November 1942) bombed and bombarded Nauru Island. The carrier *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) and light carrier *Monterey* (CV-26), with future President Gerald Ford on board, dropped 51 tons of bombs on the island, while the six new battleships--*Washington* (BB-56), *North Carolina* (BB-55), *Indiana* (BB-58), *Massachusetts* (BB-59), *South Dakota* (BB-57), *Alabama* (BB-60)-- hit the island with 810 16-inch and 3,400 5-inch rounds from a range of only 1,500 yards. Fifty-four 16-inch guns being fired would have made a great photo, but there doesn't appear to be any, unfortunately. Also, unfortunately, the planes that had attacked Pownall's carriers were already gone. The destroyer *Boyd* (DD-544), while successfully rescuing the crew of a downed U.S. aircraft, was hit in the engine room and stack by Japanese shore battery fire, killing 12 men total, including everyone in the boiler room. About eight to ten Japanese aircraft were destroyed for a loss of four U.S. aircraft.

The invasion of the Marshall Islands would prove to be one of Admiral Nimitz's biggest tests of leadership, as the heavy losses at Tarawa and Makin injected a heavy dose of caution into U.S. commanders and planners for the operation, similar to that demonstrated by Rear Admiral Pownall. The

major question revolved around which atolls in the Marshalls to take first; whether to take the more audacious course and invade Kwajalein directly, or take one or more of the islands in the southern Marshalls first, as stepping stones. There were several possibilities in the southern Marshalls to include Wotje, Maloelap, Mili, or Jaluit, all of which had airfields and were heavily defended, as was Kwajalein itself.

Nimitz's planners advocated taking one of the southern islands first. Vice Admiral Spruance, Rear Admiral Turner, and Marine Major General Holland M. "Howling Mad" Smith, all argued in favor of taking Wotje and Maloelap first. (Smith would later argue that Tarawa should have been skipped in favor of going directly to Kwajalein, but by mid-December 1943 he was in line with Spruance and Turner.) Nimitz heard out all the arguments, and at the decision brief on 14 December, he announced that the U.S. would go directly to Kwajalein and bypass the southern Marshall Islands, which would necessitate neutralizing their airfields from the air. Spruance, Turner and Smith pushed back on Nimitz, but he would not budge. After the meeting was over, Spruance and Turner stayed behind and continued to press their case that going directly to Kwajalein was "dangerous and reckless" to the point that Nimitz finally told them that if they didn't want to do it, he would find someone else who would. Nimitz's specific rationale for defying his own staff and senior commanders is not clear. It is likely that after witnessing firsthand the results of the Tarawa assault, he reasoned that taking any island in the Marshalls was going to be a bloody affair, so better to take the one we really wanted and needed than take several just to play it "safe" at what would prove likely to be a high additional cost.

Under the plan approved by Nimitz, the U.S. would first take the essentially undefended atoll of Majuro, which had a magnificent lagoon (but no airfield), and which would serve as a base and logistics (and rest and relaxation) hub for numerous strikes by the Fast Carrier Task Force over the next months, until the capture of Ulithi in late 1944. While Majuro was being secured, the U.S. carriers would pound the other Japanese-occupied islands in the Marshalls before assaulting both ends of Kwajalein

simultaneously. (The principal air base was at Roi-Namur to the north, and the principal naval submarine base and nearby seaplane base were at Kwajalein to the south. Roi-Namur and Kwajalein Islands are about 45 miles apart.) Of note, although there are many atolls and islands in the central Pacific, very few of them were suitable for airfields, which had to be large enough, flat enough, and oriented to the prevailing east-west winds. It was these relatively few islands that the Japanese occupied and that the U.S. and Japan fought over (or bypassed).

The problem with attacking Kwajalein at both ends at once was that it would require two divisions of troops, and there were not enough assault transports to carry them. This resulted in a series of delays, from 1 to 17 and then 31 January 1944, giving the Japanese more time to improve their defenses on Roi-Namur and Kwajalein and to make more progress on a bomber airfield on Kwajalein. However, the Japanese were busy wasting their time trying to improve the defenses of islands the U.S. had no intention of invading. What the Japanese forces in the Marshalls didn't know was that they were pretty much on their own, as the Japanese high command had already given up on trying to defend the outer ring of islands—the Gilberts, Marshalls, Solomons, and even the eastern Carolines, including Truk—and were focusing their defensive effort on another ring of islands—the Marianas, western Carolines (Yap, Palau, Peleliu) and the western end of New Guinea. The Japanese in the Marshalls shifted some troops to reinforce the southern islands of Wotje and Maloelap in the

incorrect assumption that the U.S. would attack there first. This still left 9,000 Japanese defenders on Kwajalein Atoll.

Namur Island, Kwajalein Atoll, photographed from a U.S. aircraft on 30 January 1944, before it was wrecked by pre-invasion bombardment. Note the many buildings and the pier (with a "hammerhead" crane) of the Japanese base there. Roi Island is in the far upper left. Virtually everything seen here was destroyed in the next few days (80-G-213594).

Operation Flintlock

The overall commander of Operation Flintlock was Admiral Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, at his headquarters in Pearl Harbor. The operation would be executed by Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Commander of the Fifth Fleet, embarked on the heavy cruiser *Indianapolis* (CA-35.) Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner would command TF 51, the Joint Expeditionary Force, embarked on *Rocky Mount* (AGC-3) with the Commander Expeditionary Troops, Marine Major General H. M. "Howling Mad" Smith. *Rocky Mount* was a new type of specially configured amphibious command, control, and communications ship, based on what Rear Admiral Hewitt had improvised *Ancon* (AP-66) at the Salerno landings in Italy in September 1943 (see also H-Gram 021).

The joint expeditionary force (TF 51) included 297 ships (not counting carrier task forces or submarines) and 54,000 Marine and Army assault troops. TF 52, commanded by Rear Admiral Turner, was designated the Southern Attack Force, which would land the U.S. Army 7th Infantry Division on the island of Kwajalein at the southern end of Kwajalein Atoll. TF 53 was under the command of Rear Admiral Richard L. Conolly, embarked on *Appalachian* (AGC-1, sister ship of *Rocky Mount*) would land Major General Harry Schmidt's 4th Marine Division on the islands of Roi and Namur (joined by a sand spit and a causeway) at the northern end of Kwajalein Atoll. TG 51.1, with the 22nd Marine Regiment embarked and under the command of Captain D.W. Loomis, USN, was the designated reserve force.



The Southern Attack Group was supported by the old battleships *New Mexico* (BB-40), *Mississippi* (BB-41), *Idaho* (BB-42), and *Pennsylvania* (BB-38), heavy cruisers, light cruisers, destroyers, and the escort carriers *Manila Bay* (CVE-61), *Coral Sea* (CVE-57), and *Corregidor* (CVE-58). The Northern Attack Group was supported by the old battleships *Tennessee* (BB-43), *Colorado* (BB-45), and *Maryland* (BB-46); heavy cruisers, including Spruance's flagship *Indianapolis* (CA-35); light cruisers, destroyers, and the escort carriers *Sangamon* (CVE-26), *Suwanee* (CVE-27), and *Chenango* (CVE-28).

Within the assault forces were multiple new types and modifications to amphibious craft, many incorporated with extraordinary rapidity based on Tarawa lessons learned. These included 24 new Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) modified as gunboats with 40-mm, 20-mm, and .50-caliber canons and machine guns, with some cannons configured to fire 72 rockets to impact just before the first troops hit the beach. The LVT amphibious tractors used at Tarawa had been replaced by a new and significantly modified type, the LVT-A1, which had been configured to provide close-in machine gun fire support, and the more numerous LVT-A2, configured to carry troops (and with the term amphtrac usually shortened to amtrac, "alligator" or "gator").

Supporting Operation Flintlock was TF 58, the Fast Carrier Force, under the command of Rear Admiral Marc. A. "Pete" Mitscher. His was an extremely powerful force of six fleet carriers, six light carriers, and more than 700 aircraft, divided into four task groups. TG 58.1, commanded by Rear Admiral John. W. Reeves, with 199 aircraft on the veteran *Enterprise* (CV-6), new *Yorktown* (CV-10), and *Belleau Wood* (CVL-24), as well as the new battleships *Washington* (BB-56), *Massachusetts* (BB-59), and *Indiana* (BB-58), with escorts. TG 58.2, commanded by Rear Admiral Alfred Montgomery, had *Essex* (CV-9), *Intrepid* (CV-11), and *Cabot* (CVL-28); 212 aircraft; and the new battleships *South Dakota* (BB-57), *Alabama* (BB-60), and *North Carolina* (BB-55); and escorts. TG 58.3, commanded by Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman, with *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), *Monterey* (CVL-26), and *Cowpens* (CVL-25), with 156 aircraft and the new, just-arrived

battleships *Iowa* (BB-61) and *New Jersey* (BB-62), with escorts. TG 58.4, commanded by Rear Admiral Samuel P. Grinder, had the venerable *Saratoga* (CV-3), the new *Princeton* (CVL-23), and the new *Langley* (CVL-27); 139 aircraft; no battleships as such but rather the brand-new class of heavy cruisers *Baltimore* (CA-68) and *Boston* (CA-69); and escorts.

Rear Admiral John H. Hoover was in command of land-based planes and was embarked on seaplane tender *Curtiss* (AV-4) at Tarawa. This force included more than 350 combat planes based at or staging through the airfield Tarawa (re-named "Mullinnix Field" after Rear Admiral Henry Mullinnix, lost aboard the escort carrier *Liscome Bay*, CVE-56) and new fields on Makin and Abemama Islands (the original "O'Hare Field") in the Gilberts. B-24s staged through Tarawa for strikes on the Marshalls, while on Tarawa sat 44 Navy fighters for defense, seven Catalina seaplanes, and 49 bombers. These planes conducted extensive aerial reconnaissance of the Marshall Islands, in conjunction with extensive submarine reconnaissance. Vice Admiral Charles Lockwood, commander of submarine forces in the Pacific, also assigned six submarines to cover possible Japanese lines of approach; three submarines covered the major Japanese base at Truk, and one each covered the islands of Kusaie and Ponape in the eastern Carolines and Eniwetok at the far western end of the Marshalls.

Mitscher's Fast Carrier Force began working over Japanese airfields in the Marshalls beginning on 27 January 1943. Armed with detailed photo intelligence and precise strike plans, these strikes were far more effective than those of 4 December 1943. As of 27 January 1943, the Japanese had about 150 operational aircraft in the Marshalls. By D-day on 31 January, there were none. The last Japanese fighter seen in the air over Kwajalein had been shot down on 29 January. The strikes also sank or damaged virtually all the Japanese shipping still in the lagoon. (All major Japanese warships had departed.) The power of TF 58 had been so overwhelming that not one U.S. naval vessel would be attacked by Japanese aircraft during the entire Marshall operation.

TF 58 flew more than 6,200 sorties during the operation, 4,021 of them over target. U.S. air losses were 17 Hellcats and five Avengers to enemy fire, as well as 10 Hellcats, 14 Avengers and three dive bombers to operational accidents, with a total loss of 24 pilots and 24 aircrewmen. The attacks on Kwajalein would also be the debut of fighter planes armed with forward-firing rockets, which would be used in a ground attack (and later anti-ship) role. Even the big four-engine PB2Y-3 Coronado seaplanes based at Midway got in the act, flying four-night bombing missions against Japanese-held Wake Island (which was within Japanese bomber range of Kwajalein) between 30 January and 9 February 1943.

Japanese submarines in the area fared no better than their aircraft. Of four Japanese Sixth Fleet submarines in the Marshalls, all four were sunk. Exactly which submarines were sunk by which ships remains unclear. *Walker* (DD-517) sank a submarine, probably *RO-39*, on 1 Feb with a single depth charge attack. (Accounts in Morison and at combinedfleet.com match on this. Some Japanese sources differ.)

On the night of 4-5 February, battleship *New Jersey* radar detected a submarine at a range of 21 nautical miles. Destroyer *Charette* (DD-581) and destroyer escort *Fair* (DE-35) were dispatched to investigate. *Charette* dropped depth charges on sonar contact and then *Fair* fired a forward Hedgehog pattern, which sank the submarine. (This would be the first Japanese submarine to be sunk by the Hedgehog weapon, which could fire a pattern of depth charges forward or abeam, rather than rolling the depth charges off the stern, the traditional way.) Morison identified this submarine as *I-21*, but Japanese sources indicate *I-21* was sunk by aircraft from escort carrier *Chenango* (CVE-28) in November 1943. Combinedfleet.com identifies the submarine sunk by *Charette* and *Fair* as *I-175*, the submarine that sank the *Liscome Bay* (CVE-56) off Makin Island in November 1943.

All sources seem to agree that *RO-40* was sunk on 15 February near Kwajalein by the combined attacks of the destroyers *Phelps* (DD-360) and *MacDonough* (DD-351) and minesweeper *Sage* (AM-111). Morison

also credits *Nicholas* (DD-449) with sinking Japanese submarine *I-11* on 17 February. At the time, *Nicholas* was only given credit for a "probable," and Japanese sources suggest *I-11* was sunk by a mine in the same period on a mission to the Ellis Islands (staging area for the assaults on Tarawa and the Marshalls). Others suggest this was actually *I-175*. Still other sources confuse the issue even more by giving credit to *Nicholson* (DD-442), which does not appear to have arrived in the area at that time. I'm not going to be able to solve this mash up, but the bottom line is that of the Japanese submarines sent to defend the Marshalls, none returned. The combined loss was more than 350 men.

The capture of Majuro Atoll on 31 January proceeded without a hitch. The three Japanese defenders actually surrendered. Majuro would serve as an advance logistics base, which would include the largest fleet of U.S. tankers (more than 14) assembled to date. The use of Majuro obviated the need for most refueling at sea while underway during the Marshall operations. Majuro would technically be the first Japanese territory (in Japanese control before the start of the war) to fall to U.S. forces during World War II.



Marines from the 4th Marine Division coming ashore under fire on Namur Island, Kwajalein Atoll, 1 February 1944. They are debarking from a LVT(2) amphibious tractor. In background is the collapsed "hammerhead" crane at the end of Namur's pier (80-G-21344).

On 31 January 1944, the Northern Attack Force commenced landing elements of the 4th Marine Division on Roi-Namur, with the initial landings intended to capture two small islands to secure the passes into the lagoon nearby. Based on intelligence, Rear Admiral Turner had determined that Roi-Namur would be a tougher target than Betio was at Tarawa. In many respects, he was correct. However, the Japanese were not expecting the landing to come from inside the lagoon and had arrayed their defenses to defend against an assault from the seaward side. Three days of air and battleship bombardment had destroyed all 83 of the Japanese aircraft on Roi as well as many fortifications. Battleships firing from only a mile off the beach poured 6,000 tons of shells onto the islands, compared to 2,400 at Tarawa. The seizure of the small islands flanking the entrances to the lagoon was hampered by rough seas, but the objectives were accomplished by the end of the first day. U.S. artillery emplaced on the islands along with LCI gunboats continued firing on Japanese positions during the night.

At 0100 on 1 February 1944 three U.S. destroyers opened rapid fire to cover a beach reconnaissance by navy raiders in rubber boats launched from the destroyer-transport *Schley* (APD-14). This reconnaissance confirmed that the lagoon-side beaches were suitable for landing and that there would be no repeat of the Tarawa tide/reef complications. By this time, battleship bombardment had killed many defenders, but it was lifted long enough for a daybreak reconnaissance by underwater demolition teams (UDT) under the command of Lieutenant Commander John T. Koehler, the first such use of UDTs (a lesson from Tarawa) for last minute check and clearance of beach obstacles. The two drone boats used by UDTs ran amok, but the mission was otherwise successful. The arrival of the LSTs into the lagoon, however, was accompanied by much confusion, which took time to sort out. Nevertheless, by 1157 the first wave of Marines hit the beaches, assisted by accurate close-in gunfire support by the *Johnston* (DD-557) under the command of Lieutenant Commander Ernest Evans. (Evans and *Johnston* would achieve lasting

fame at the Battle off Samar in October 1944, but Evans established an early reputation for taking his ship closer to the beach than any other destroyer in support of Marines.) At 1245 a huge Japanese ammunition dump on Namur exploded and debris raining down was responsible for killing 20 Marines. Tough fighting ensued, but by 1418 on 2 February, Roi-Namur was secured.

The Southern Attack Force commenced its attack on the island of Kwajalein and nearby islands at the southern end of Kwajalein Atoll on 30 January 1944 when the battleship *Washington* bombarded one of the islands flanking a key passage into the lagoon. Other ships bombarded the islands over the next day. Although the passes were assumed to be defended, which is why the small islands flanking them had to be taken as a precursor to the landings, as at Roi-Namur, the Japanese did not anticipate that the assault would come from the lagoon side, nor did they anticipate that the LVTs would be able to cross the reefs. The flanking islets did not in fact have artillery, nor were the passes mined or obstructed. In addition, Kwajalein Island was so narrow that there was no opportunity for the Japanese to conduct a defense in depth.

The initial U.S. Army preliminary landings went reasonably well, although in one instance troops were landed on the wrong island. On the plus side, however, the troops that landed on the wrong island also went aboard a beached Japanese vessel and found a trove of 75 secret charts of lagoons and harbors across the Pacific, which proved extremely valuable intelligence for future operations. By 1 February, the appropriate islets had all been secured.

Heavy battleship bombardment of Kwajalein continued over several days. The new battleships *Massachusetts*, *Indiana*, and *Washington* bombarded the island on 30 and 31 January *Pennsylvania*, *Mississippi*, *New Mexico*, *Idaho*, and three heavy cruisers took over. At 0618 on 1 February the battleships resumed firing and the destroyers *Ringgold* (DD-500) and *Sigsbee* (DD-502) entered the lagoon and covered the arrival of the amphibious ships and craft. (*Ringgold* had done the same at Tarawa, after nearly sinking the U.S.

submarine *Nautilus* (SS-168), and been hit by two Japanese dud rounds. She and *Sigsbee* were unscathed.) This time, unlike at Tarawa, the amphibious assault and supporting fires were executed so well that within 12 minutes, 1,200 troops of the U.S. Army 7th Infantry Division (veterans of the landings at Attu and Kiska in the Aleutians) were ashore without a single casualty, although after about two hours Japanese resistance began to stiffen considerably. Tough fighting continued on Kwajalein Island until 6 February.

By 7 February landings had been completed on 30 different islets around the Kwajalein lagoon without one U.S. ship being sunk and with only a few hits from Japanese shore batteries. The entire operation cost 372 soldiers and Marines killed (195 at Roi-Namur and 177 in the south). Of 3,563 Japanese defenders on Roi-Namur only 91 were taken alive (40 of whom were Korean laborers), and in the south, of 5,112 Japanese defenders, only 174 were taken alive, including 125 Koreans. The hard lessons of Tarawa had been put into practice, and Admiral Nimitz's insistence on going straight to Kwajalein was vindicated. The Japanese also learned the lesson that defending at the beach was a bad idea in the face of overwhelming U.S. Navy firepower. Instead, the Japanese began planning to defend from caves and tunnels in the interiors of islands, which would result in much higher U.S. casualties in future operations.

The Japanese also showed that despite their string of defeats, they were still capable of audacious action. At 0230 on 12 February 1944, six Japanese four-engine flying boats from Saipan, which had staged through Ponape, bombed Roi-Namur, hitting the U.S. supply dump and initiating a massive explosion that destroyed 80 percent of the ammunition, food, construction gear and other supplies on the island, killing 25 and wounding 130 men. None of the Japanese aircraft was shot down. However, no other Japanese forces were in a position to exploit this success.

(Sources for this section include Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, vol. VII, Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls. Also: The Admirals: Nimitz,

Halsey, Leahy and King: The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea, by Walter R. Borneman, 2012; The Fleet at Flood Tide: America at Total War in the Pacific, by James Hornfischer, 2016. Additional sources include Naval History and Heritage Command Dictionary of American Fighting Ships [DANFS] for U.S. ship histories and combinedfleet.com for Japanese ship histories.)



H-026-2: Operation Catchpole—The Invasion of Eniwetok, 17 February 1944

H-Gram 026, Attachment 2

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

February 2019

Surprised by the relative ease of capturing Kwajalein (see also H-Gram 026-1), Vice Admiral Spruance and Rear Admiral Turner quickly began lobbying Admiral Nimitz to capture Eniwetok Atoll, 325 miles

west-northwest of Kwajalein (and 1,000 miles east of the Marianas) before the Japanese could send reinforcements. The Japanese surprise air raid on Kwajalein on 12 February only added additional urgency. An airstrike on Eniwetok on 30 January by Rear Admiral Sherman's carrier task force had destroyed all 15 Betty medium bombers present, but there was risk that these could quickly be replaced. Vice Admiral Spruance and Rear Admiral Turner's plan was to use the 8,000-man Marine reserve force that had not been needed for the Kwajalein assault. The plan was quickly approved and designated Operation Catchpole, with a D-Day accelerated to 17 February 1944. The Japanese had anticipated U.S. action, and in response to the fall of Tarawa, part of the 1st Amphibious Brigade of the Imperial Japanese Army had arrived at Eniwetok on 4 January 1944 in order to fortify it. Even another

week's delay in mounting the operation to capture Eniwetok would have resulted in greater cost.

Like Kwajalein, Eniwetok was an atoll consisting of a number of small low-lying islands ringing a central lagoon about 50 miles in circumference. At the north end lay Engebi Island, the only one with an airfield, and at the south end lay Eniwetok Island. There were only two passages into the lagoon, one of them, the "Wide Passage" at the southern end, with significant shoals, and, as it turned out, mines--the first minefield discovered in the Marshalls. (The classified Japanese charts captured at Kwajalein proved invaluable to the Eniwetok operation.) Engebi was the main objective, but the only way to reach it from the lagoon side was through the one passage (the "Deep Passage") at the southeastern end of the lagoon between Parry and Japtan islands, north of the island of Eniwetok. Japanese forces on the islands included about 700 army and 50 navy personnel on Engebi as well as another 800 on Eniwetok and 1,350 on Parry.

The Eniwetok Expeditionary Group (TG 51.11) was commanded by Rear Admiral Harry W. Hill, embarked on *Cambria* (APA-36), an attack transport fitted in additional communications capabilities. The primary component of the force was the nine transports of the former Kwajalein Reserve Force, commanded by Captain D.W. Loomis, who was embarked on attack transport *Leonard Wood* (APA-12). Five of the transports embarked the 22nd Marine Regiment, while the other four embarked two battalions of the 106th Regimental Combat Team of the U.S. Army's 27th Infantry Division. The new landing ship dock *Ashland* (LSD-1) embarked tanks and two destroyer-transport *Kane* (APD-18) and *Schley* embarked scout detachments. The force also included nine LSTs, and six LCIs. The fire support group, commanded by Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf, included the old battleships *Pennsylvania*, *Colorado*, and *Tennessee*; the heavy cruisers *Indianapolis* (Vice Admiral Spruance had temporarily transferred his flag to the battleship *New Jersey* for the Truk Island Raid); *Portland* (CA-33), *Louisville* (CA-28); and 15 destroyers. Close air support was provided by the escort carriers *Sangamon*, *Suwanee*, and *Chenango*, with four escorting destroyers.

U.S. carrier air strikes on Eniwetok commenced on 16 February 1944 with aircraft from TG 58.4 (*Saratoga* and light carriers *Princeton* and *Langley*) commanded by Rear Admiral Samuel P. Ginder. No Japanese ships, submarines or aircraft opposed the landings on Eniwetok. Air strikes by VII Air Force bombers flying from Tarawa (900 miles each way) neutralized any Japanese air threat from Ponape Island, while the bulk of TF 58 Fast Carrier Force was striking the major Japanese base at Truk and thus ensuring that no Japanese forces from there could threaten the Eniwetok landings.



Four SBD-5 Dauntless scout bombers fly over the northern part of Eniwetok Atoll, on 18 February 1944 (80-G-218609).

On D-day, 17 February, U.S. cruisers and destroyers opened fire on the islets flanking the Deep Passage. There was no response from the Japanese, who were, according to Morison, "playing possum." Because a minefield was discovered in the Wide Passage, entry through the Deep Passage was delayed in order to enable it to be swept as well, which took two hours. No mines were found there. The battleship *Tennessee* preceded the transports into the lagoon, none of which were challenged by the Japanese on the flanking islets. The transports then transited the ten miles across the lagoon to arrive off Engebi by about 1230. Unfortunately, rampant confusion also arrived as the submarine chaser *SC-1066*, designated as the convoy guide, took station off the wrong islet (where the Marines intended to set up artillery). Following a series of additional snafus, Rear Admiral Hill relieved the skipper of *SC-1066* on the spot and gave Captain Loomis a severe wire-brushing. Marine Brigadier

General Watson fired his regimental artillery commander. Despite the confusion, the reconnaissance party successfully accomplished its mission and the Marine artillery was put ashore on islets near Engebi, which they bombarded all night.

At dawn on 18 February, three U.S. battleships and a heavy cruiser opened fire on Engebi from two directions, accompanied by airstrikes and a destroyer providing close-in support. At 0843, two Marine battalions went ashore, meeting little resistance at the beach and quickly securing the airfield. The third Marine battalion then went ashore to eliminate remaining resistance. By 1450 the island was declared secure, although isolated resistance continued for another day. U.S. casualties included 85 Marines killed and 166 wounded. The Japanese lost 1,276 killed and 16 captured. U.S. intelligence officers, on sifting through enemy documents on Engebi, discovered that there were far more Japanese troops on Eniwetok and Parry Island than had been estimated. Having learned lessons from the very extensive U.S. aerial reconnaissance of Tarawa and Kwajalein, the Japanese had adopted very effective camouflage and concealment. They also managed to hold their fire as U.S. ships transited the Deep Passage. This necessitated a change of plans. Instead of the U.S. Army 106th Regimental Combat Team assaulting Eniwetok Island and Parry Island simultaneously, the islands would be assaulted sequentially, and the third Marine battalion of the 22nd Regiment would re-

embarked and transported from Engebi back across the lagoon in order to act as a reserve for the Army assault on Eniwetok.

Commencing at 0710 on 19 February, heavy cruisers *Portland* and *Indianapolis*, as well as LCI gunboats and two destroyers, opened fire on Japanese positions on Eniwetok Island. They were trying to make up for lost time as previous bombardments by air and sea had been cursory under the mistaken belief that the island was unoccupied. The bombardment was interrupted briefly for air strikes, but it was essentially too little too late. Both battalions of the 106th RCT were put ashore, and both quickly became bogged down on the beach as an eight-foot sand dune just inland thwarted movement off the beach by LVTs. Nevertheless, the Army troops fought their way across the narrow island to the ocean shore and then defeated a Japanese counter-attack by about 300 to 400 troops. At about 1425, the Marine battalion in reserve was committed to the battle to eliminate the Japanese from the western end of Eniwetok. The Marines continued to attack throughout the night and beat back a Japanese counter-attack that reached the battalion command post before being repulsed. The island was not declared secure until 21 February. The capture of Eniwetok cost 37 U.S. lives and 94 wounded. The Japanese lost 800 dead and 23 prisoners.

Parry Island turned out to be the most heavily defended of the three islands and included the headquarters of General Nishida's 1st Amphibious Brigade. The defenses were actually well-thought-out, but fortunately for the U.S., a document captured on Eniwetok had the defense plan for Parry. Instead of the Army assaulting the island, the mission was given to the two Marine battalions that had first gone ashore at Engebi. On 20 February, Marines seized the islet of Japtan across the Deep Passage from Parry and set up artillery to bombard it. For three days, Parry Island was blasted by the battleships *Pennsylvania*, *Tennessee*, and *Colorado*; the heavy cruisers *Louisville* and *Indianapolis*; and aircraft from *Sangamon*, *Suwanee* and *Chenango*.



Marines and Coast Guardsmen proudly display a Japanese flag, picked up by one of them during the capture of Engebi Island, Eniwetok Atoll, 19 February 1944 (80-G-216033).

D-day for Parry Island on 22 February got off to a bad start with a "friendly fire" incident. At 0805 six LCI gunboats were maneuvering to support the Marine landing, three on the right flank and three on the left flank. At 0845, the destroyer *Hailey* (DD-556) opened fire on assigned targets near the beaches. At the same time the LCIs on the right flank were preceding the LVT amphtracs when they were obscured by smoke blowing back from the shore bombardment. In the reduced visibility, *LCI-442* was hit by a *Hailey* projectile bursting overhead, killing six and wounding five men. *LCI-440* was then hit twice, killing seven men and wounding 39. *LCI-365* was also hit before *Hailey* got the word to cease fire. In the subsequent investigation, Rear Admiral Hill cleared the skipper of *Hailey* of blame, attributing the incident to the smoke and dust, and praising the gallantry of the LCI crews. Fortunately, the rest of the battle went better, with the Marines reaching the shore at 0900. Although the Marines met strong resistance, they were in control of the island by the end of the day. The cost to the Marines was 73 killed or missing and 261 wounded. Of the approximately 1,330 Japanese on Parry Island, 105 were captured and the rest killed, including Major General Nishida.

With the capture of Majuro, Kwajalein and Eniwetok, the U.S. had the islands it needed to sustain the advance across the central Pacific. Japanese strongpoints on the islands of Jaluit, Mili, Maloelap, Wotje, and Nauru were bypassed, their aircraft destroyed, their airfields put out of commission by regular bombing missions, and their garrisons starved for supplies and food. U.S. ships occasionally bombarded the islands, as much for target practice as anything, although on 18 March 1944 a shore battery on Mili succeeded in hitting the battleship *Iowawith* two 4.7-inch shells. Other than embarrassment to the embarked flag officer, Vice Admiral Willis A. Lee, damage to the new battleship was negligible.

(Sources for this section include Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, vol. VII, Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls. Also: The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy and King: The Five-Star Admirals Who

Won the War at Sea, by Walter R. Borneman, 2012; The Fleet at Flood Tide: America at Total War in the Pacific, by James Hornfischer, 2016. Additional sources include Naval History and Heritage Command Dictionary of American Fighting Ships [DANFS] for U.S. ship histories and combinedfleet.com for Japanese ship histories.)



Japanese shipping under air attack in Truk Lagoon, as seen from a USS Intrepid (CV-11) aircraft on the first day of raids, 17 February 1944. Dublin Island is at left, with Moen Island in the background. Four of these ships appear to have been hit by this time (80-G-215151).

H-026-3: Operation Hailstone—Carrier Raid on Truk Island, 17–18 February 1944

H-Gram 026, Attachment 3

Samuel J. Cox

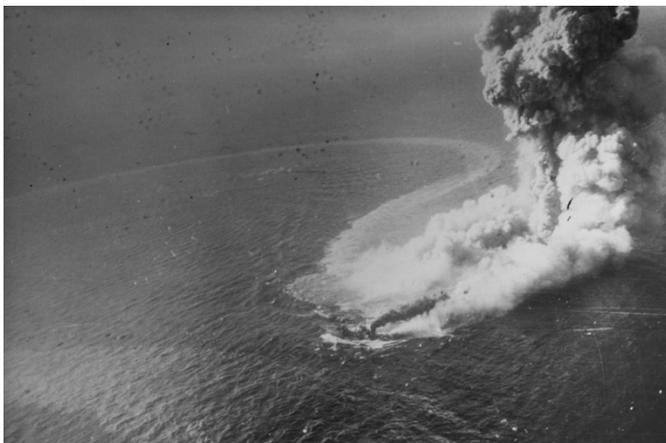
February 2019

Through the interwar years and into World War II, the Japanese Mandate island of Truk in the Central

Caroline Islands had developed a forbidding reputation as an impregnable stronghold, the “Gibraltar of the Pacific,” which was somewhat exaggerated. The Japanese had been very secretive about what they were doing there after having acquired it from the Germans during World War I and kept it under a mandate from the League of Nations. The Japanese had in fact heavily fortified the island. Its strategic location made it the preferred base of the carriers and battleships of the Japanese Combined Fleet in the first two years of the war, and many an intelligence reports for impending battles began with the Japanese marshaling forces at Truk for their next offensive operation. Air and naval forces at Truk could quickly be shifted from there to counter U.S. actions from

New Guinea to the Solomons to the Gilberts, Marshalls, Wake Island, and the Marianas. What the Japanese didn't anticipate was three simultaneous U.S. advances in New Guinea, the Solomons and the Marshalls that resulted in their forces being severely jerked around, wasting a lot of scarce fuel and often being in the wrong place at the wrong time. U.S. submarines, once fixes had been implemented for faulty torpedoes, increasingly found the waters around Truk to be favorable hunting grounds.

The pre-war U.S. concept that carriers should be used in a "hit and run" mode was still deeply ingrained in the U.S. Navy even into 1944. Staying put and duking it out with a large land-based air force was still considered by many to be a really bad idea, not conducive to carrier longevity. However, by early 1944, the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz, had reached the conclusion that it was time to pierce the aura of Truk and that he had sufficient carrier forces to conduct a major multi-day attack against the Japanese stronghold. With an aggressive carrier task force commander like Rear Admiral Marc "Pete" Mitscher, Nimitz had the right man for the job. As it turned out, Nimitz's counterpart, Admiral Mineichi Koga, commander in chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, made the same assessment at about the same time and decided it was time to get the Combined Fleet out of Truk.



Aerial attack on Japanese shipping during raid on Truk in the Carolines. Aerial photo by plane of VT 17 from the USS Bunker Hill (CV 17), 17-18 February 1944. Target is a Japanese destroyer of the Minekaze class (80-G-218544).

The first carrier strike on Truk, designated Operation Hailstone, was scheduled for 17 to 18 February 1944, and timed to coincide with the U.S. landings

on Eniwetok (Operation Catchpole) in the western Marshall Islands (see also H-Gram 026-2). Truk (now known as Chuuk, capital of the Federated States of Micronesia) is roughly equidistant from Eniwetok (669 nautical miles) and Rabaul (696 nautical miles) and ships and aircraft operating from Truk represented a significant threat to the Eniwetok operation. The Combined Fleet had deployed to Eniwetok in reaction to the U.S. carrier strikes on Wake Island in October 1943 (and had burned up a huge amount of scarce fuel doing so). Normally, however, due to fuel scarcity and U.S. submarines, the bulk of the Combined Fleet (including Admiral Koga's flagship, the super-battleship *Musashi*) remained inside the Truk Lagoon. The lagoon was big enough that naval gunfire from outside the reef could not reach ships anchored inside the lagoon. In the middle of the lagoon, the island of Truk was fairly large, mountainous, and heavily wooded. It was defended by about 7,500 deeply entrenched Japanese troops, and another 3-4,000 Japanese sailors ashore in support functions at air strips, seaplane bases, and repair and logistics facilities. In addition to the considerable anti-aircraft fire that could be put up from the ships in the lagoon, the island was defended by over 40 major-caliber anti-aircraft guns, although the fire control radar intended for those guns had gone down on a transport ship sunk by a U.S. submarine. Of greatest concern to any attacking force was the 300 to 400 Japanese aircraft based at five airfields on the island at any given time. (The number fluctuated considerably as aircraft were shifted around).

In preparation for the strike, two U.S. Marine Corps B-24 Liberator bombers flying from Bougainville in the Solomons conducted a high-altitude, long-range photo-reconnaissance mission (the first) over Truk on 4 February 1944. Although the imagery was incomplete due to cloud cover, plenty of lucrative targets were identified, including one battleship, two aircraft carriers, and five or six heavy cruisers. The Japanese, however, detected the flight and wasted no time understanding its import. Admiral Koga gave the order to clear out. Within days, the majority of the Combined Fleet had shifted to the west to Palau, and the *Musashi* went all the way back to Japan.

The unlucky Japanese light cruiser *Agano* was delayed departing Truk due to previous damage. *Agano* had been hit by a torpedo from a U.S. Avenger during the strike on Rabaul on 11 Nov 1943 (see H-Gram 024) and while being towed to Truk for repairs was hit by a torpedo from *Scamp* (SS-277). (*Agano's* escorts fought off an attack by *Albacore*, SS-218, the same day). Finally leaving Truk for Japan on 16 February, *Agano* was hit by two of four torpedoes from submarine *Skate* (SS-305) but remained afloat until the morning of the following day, during which the Japanese destroyer *Oite* rescued 523 of *Agano's* 726-man crew. However, *Oite* was torpedoed and sunk during the U.S. airstrikes on Truk on 17 February, during which all but 22 of *Oite's* crew and all of the survivors of *Agano* were lost. (Of note, *Skate* had put a torpedo into the super-battleship *Yamato* off Truk on Christmas Day 1943, sending the seriously damaged *Yamato* back to Japan for repairs.) By 17 February the only Japanese ships left in Truk were two light cruisers, eight destroyers, and about 50 other auxiliaries, cargo ships, merchant ships, and patrol and service craft.

The commander of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, personally assumed command of Task Force 50, shifting his flag from the heavy cruiser *Indianapolis* to the new battleship *New Jersey*. Spruance was selected for his fourth star just before the raid on Truk and was actually promoted just afterwards. The Fast Carrier Force (TF 58) was under the command of Rear Admiral Marc A. "Pete" Mitscher, who had relieved Rear Admiral Charles A. Pownall after the Gilbert Islands operations, embarked on *Yorktown*. The U.S. Force consisted of four new Essex-class carriers--*Yorktown*, *Essex*, *Intrepid*, and *Bunker Hill*--plus *Enterprise* and four light carriers *Belleau Wood*, *Cabot*, *Monterey*, and *Cowpens*, along with more than 500 aircraft. In addition, six new fast battleships, ten cruisers and 28 destroyers rounded out the force. TG 58.4, under the command of Rear Admiral Samuel P. Ginder, with *Saratoga*, *Princeton*, *Langley*, and escorts was detached from TF 58 to cover the landings at Eniwetok (Operation Catchpole), where they commenced strikes on 16 February 1944.

On 12/13 February 1944, three fast carrier task groups departed Majuro Atoll (recently captured in the Marshall Islands) and topped off from five tankers before making a high-speed run toward Truk. These task groups included TG58.1, Commander Carrier Group 1, Rear Admiral John W. Reeves consisting of *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *Belleau Wood*, three light cruisers, and one anti-aircraft cruiser; TG 58.2, Commander Carrier Group 2, Rear Admiral Alfred .E. Montgomery, consisting of *Essex*, *Intrepid*, *Cabot*, three heavy cruisers, and one anti-aircraft cruiser; and TG 58.3, Commander Carrier Group 3, Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman, consisting of *Bunker Hill*, *Monterey* (future U.S. President Lieutenant Gerald Ford in crew), *Cowpens*, and battleships *North Carolina* (BB-55), *Iowa* (BB-61), *New Jersey* (BB-62, Vice Admiral Spruance embarked), *Massachusetts* (BB-59), *South Dakota* (BB-57), *Alabama* (BB-60), and two heavy cruisers.

TF 58 reached the launch point 90 nautical miles northeast of Truk on 17 February and commenced launching an hour and a half before dawn. The first strike was a 72-plane fighter sweep from the five U.S. fleet carriers, which caught the Japanese by surprise, the Japanese having just stood down after two weeks of high alert following the B-24 reconnaissance mission. The advance fighter sweep was a new technique devised by Rear Admiral Mitscher. About 45 Japanese fighters scrambled into the air only minutes before the U.S. fighters arrived overhead, and about another 45 were able to get airborne during the course of the fighter sweep. Over 30 Japanese fighters were shot down and 40 more destroyed on the ground by strafing--all for a loss of four U.S. fighters. The fighter sweep was followed immediately by 18 Avengers dropping incendiary and cluster fragmentation bombs (another innovation) on Japanese dispersal areas. By the afternoon, no Japanese fighters were challenging the U.S. air raid. Of about 365 Japanese aircraft at Truk when the raid began, only about 100 survived, the rest having been shot down or destroyed on the ground.

Commencing at 0443, the five light carriers began a staggered launch, resulting in a near continuous stream of strike aircraft (another innovation) arriving

over Truk during the morning. During the course of the day there were 30 distinct U.S. airstrikes, delivering 369 1,000-pound bombs, 498 500-pound bombs, and 70 torpedoes. Many of the attacks went against Japanese shipping in the lagoon. The commander of Bombing Ten (VB-10), future Rear Admiral James D. Ramage, sank the merchant tanker *Hoyo Maru*. An Avenger from *Intrepid's* Torpedo Squadron 6 (VT-6), flown by Lieutenant James E. Bridges, hit the ammunition ship *Aikoku Maru*, which blew up with such force it obliterated the ship and, unfortunately, Bridges' aircraft and aircrew, too; all three were lost. The Japanese destroyer *Fumizuki* suffered a near miss, but the crew could not control the flooding and she sank the next day. The destroyer *Tachikaze* had run aground on 4 February and was still immobilized when she was hit by a torpedo and sunk. The destroyer *Oite* was hit and sunk as related above. The destroyer *Shigure*, survivor of numerous battles (and sole survivor of two) survived yet another, although she suffered serious damage with a bomb hit in her No. 2 turret, killing 21 and wounding 45.



A Mark XIII aerial torpedo hits a Japanese cargo ship during the first day of U.S. Navy carrier air raids on Truk, 17 February 1944. Note the several torpedo wakes, including one very erratic one ending with the torpedo broaching (80-G-217624).

Some Japanese ships tried to escape and were sunk by waiting submarines, while others were either blocked in the lagoon by U.S. air attack or set upon by U.S. surface ships as they attempted to flee. The light cruiser *Naka* was caught trying to flee 35 nautical miles west of Truk by several waves of Helldivers and Avengers from *Bunker Hill* and

Cowpens and was hit by a bomb and a torpedo, breaking in two and sinking with the loss of 240 crewmen (210 were rescued).

As U.S. Navy aircraft were slaughtering Japanese auxiliaries and merchant ships inside the lagoon, Vice Admiral Spruance led an "around-the-atoll cruise" (TG 50.9) on 17 February to catch leakers, bombarding shore installations as it went. Consisting of the new battleships *New Jersey* and *Iowa*, the heavy cruisers *Minneapolis* (CA-36) and *New Orleans* (CA-32) (all survivors of the Tassafaronga debacle in November 1942), and four destroyers (covered by combat air patrol from the light carrier *Cowpens*), TG 50.9 caught the light cruiser *Katori*. That ship, the auxiliary cruiser *Akagi Maru*, two destroyers *Maikaze* and *Nowaki*, and a minesweeping trawler *Shonan Maru No. 15* had left Truk before the attack but had not gotten far enough away. Aircraft from several carriers had already pounded the small group. The *Akagi Maru* was hit by three bombs, causing several large explosions, and she was abandoned. Despite her own damage, *Katori* took on a number of survivors from *Akagi Maru*, although all would be lost when *Katori* itself went down. All told, 788 crewmen and 512 passengers on *Akagi Maru* were lost.

Although aircraft could have finished off *Katori*, which had already been hit by one torpedo and as many as seven bombs, Spruance wanted a surface engagement, so Mitscher waved off further air attacks on the damaged light cruiser. Aviators, and some of Spruance's own staff, viewed Spruance's decision as reckless. (I can only imagine that from the bridge of an *Iowa*-class battleship, Spruance felt pretty invincible.) Spruance directed *Minneapolis*, *New Orleans*, and two destroyers to engage the *Katori*. The destroyers *Bradford* (DD-545) and *Burns* (DD-588) fired several salvos of torpedoes at *Katori*, all of which missed. *Katori* responded with a torpedo salvo of her own, which also missed. Eventually *Iowa* fired 46 16-inch and 124 5-inch shells at the *Katori* hitting her multiple times, yet she continued to fight valiantly until the end, her guns still firing as she rolled over and sank. Although there were survivors of *Katori* in the water, none were rescued by the U.S. or the Japanese. In the end, there were no survivors

from her crew of about 300 nor were there any from those previously rescued from *Akagi Maru*.

As *Katori* met her end, the destroyer *Maikaze* valiantly stood by the *Katori* and got off a salvo of torpedoes at the *Iowa* and *New Jersey* that might have hit but for a timely warning from U.S. aircraft overhead. The *New Jersey* maneuvered and the torpedoes passed just ahead. VADM Spruance remarked, "That would have been embarrassing" (had the torpedoes hit). Like *Katori*, *Maikaze* absorbed tremendous punishment but kept firing until she was finally finished off by the U.S. cruisers, going down with all-hands. In the meantime, the little trawler *Shonan Maru No. 15* put up a valiant fight against the destroyer *Burns*. The Japanese trawler continued to fire even as she went under, also with all hands.

The *Nowaki*, on the other hand, made good her escape and was able to open considerable distance during the melee with *Katori* and *Maikaze*. *New Jersey* and *Iowa* pursued, and opened fire at the extreme range of 34,000 to 39,000 yards, straddling *Nowaki* several times and hitting her with splinters. The last salvo, at a range of 22 miles, is believed to be the longest-range gun shot at an enemy ship. (*Nowaki* would be sunk by torpedoes from the destroyer *Owen* in the Philippines on 26 October 1944.) The surface engagement ended when *Burns* was directed to dispatch a Japanese submarine chaser, the *CH-24*, which opened fire on *Burns* with her single 3-inch gun. Despite her valiant but futile gesture, *CH-24* didn't last long. *Burns* attempted to rescue about 60 Japanese survivors in the water, who vigorously resisted being rescued. Whaleboats from *Burns* were able to haul about six unwilling Japanese out of the water. With the remainder refusing rescue, but close enough to Truk that they might be rescued by the Japanese, the *Burns* dropped three depth charges onto the survivors, ensuring they would not live to fight another day.

Like the little *CH-24*, the counter-attack by the Japanese was valiant but feeble. At 1900, six or seven Kate torpedo bombers, retrofitted with radar, attacked the U.S. carrier force. Intense U.S. anti-aircraft fire kept most of the Kates away. One made

a concerted attack, and an attempt to intercept it with a night fighter guided by a radar-equipped Avenger failed. At 2211, the Kate put a torpedo into the starboard quarter of the *Intrepid*, jamming her rudder, killing 11 and wounding 17, and forcing her to withdraw for several months of repairs.

Between midnight and dawn, Mitscher pulled another innovation out of the hat, launching the first night carrier bombing attack against shipping in U.S. carrier history. Twelve specially-equipped TBF-1C Avengers from *Enterprise's* VT-10, carrying four 500-pound bombs each, conducted a night strike on remaining shipping in Truk Lagoon. In 25 runs, the Avengers scored 13 direct hits and 7 near misses (plus two direct hits on islets mistaken for ships) which actually accounted for about one third of the hits on ships achieved by the entire force during two days of strikes. Despite the November 1943 loss of Navy ace and Medal of Honor awardee Butch O'Hare in the first attempt at night intercepts by U.S. carrier fighters, the *Enterprise* continued to be the leader in night battle tactics development; after the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944, *Enterprise* would be designated as the night strike carrier, tasked with developing and executing tactics for night fighting.

Violating the "and run" part of long-standing "hit and run" carrier doctrine, at dawn on 18 February, aircraft from *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *Essex*, and *Bunker Hill* attacked Truk again. Meeting no air opposition, the carrier planes bombed and strafed airfields, hangars, storage tanks (with 17,000 tons of fuel that went up in smoke), and ammo dumps with great effect. By the time the U.S. strikes ended, U.S. carriers had flown 1,250 combat sorties, dropping 400 tons of bombs and torpedoes on shipping and 94 tons on land targets. The Japanese had lost between 250 and 275 aircraft and 75 percent of their supplies on Truk. Japanese warship losses included two light cruisers, four destroyers, two submarine chasers, one auxiliary minesweeper, and a motor torpedo boat. Additional ships sunk included three auxiliary cruisers, 16 Navy transport ships, three Army transport ships, one freighter, two submarine tenders, and—probably most valuable—five tankers. Damaged ships included two destroyers, two submarines, a repair ship, a

seaplane tender, a submarine chaser, and a target ship. One additional cargo ship was also damaged.

[DANFS], for U.S. ship histories and combinedfleet.com for Japanese ship histories.)

The cost to the United States of Operation Hailstone was one fleet carrier damaged, one battleship slightly damaged, 25 aircraft lost, and 40 dead. A number of U.S. aircrew were rescued by submarine. In one case, a Kingfisher float plane launched from the heavy cruiser *Baltimore*, flown by Lieutenant Junior Grade D. F. Baxter, flew right into the lagoon and rescued an Essex Hellcat pilot that had been shot down on the morning fighter sweep of 18 February, while nine other Hellcats held a Japanese destroyer at bay. The submarine *Searaven* (SS-196) also rescued the entire three-man crew of a *Yorktown* Avenger.

The Japanese never again used Truk as a major fleet anchorage, and the devastating carrier attack was a huge blow to Japanese morale (and a big boost to U.S. carrier pilots' morale and confidence). At the time of the attack, Allied commanders had not yet decided whether Truk would need to be invaded or could be bypassed. On 12 Mar 1944, Admiral Nimitz made the decision to bypass it.

Of the Marshalls campaign and the raid on Truk, Navy historian and Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison would write, "Courage and determination the Navy had shown from the first, but in the Marshalls it demonstrated mastery of the art of amphibious warfare; of combining air, surface, submarine and ground forces to project fighting power irresistibly across the seas. The strike on Truk demonstrated a virtual revolution in naval warfare; the aircraft carrier emerged as the capital ship of the future, with unlimited potentialities."

(Sources for this section include Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison's History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, vol. VII, Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls. Also: The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy and King: The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea, by Walter R. Borneman, 2012; The Fleet at Flood Tide: America at Total War in the Pacific, by James Hornfischer, 2016. Additional sources include Naval History and Heritage Command Dictionary of American Fighting Ships