
Back to the Philippines

Part 1

By John M. Elliott

Early in 1944, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed Allied forces in the Pacific to begin an offensive towards the Philippine Islands. The recapture of these islands would be a major step in the defeat of Japan. Operating from bases in the Philippines, the Allies could cut Japanese lines of communication to the rich, conquered territories of Netherlands East Indies, French Indochina, Thailand, Burma and Malaya. These losses would also support further advances against Formosa, the China coast and Japan itself.

Almost as soon as General Douglas MacArthur assumed command of the Southwest Pacific Area, after being ordered by President Roosevelt to leave the Philippines, he began planning his move back to the Philippines. He visualized this as a succession of amphibious landings along the north coast of New Guinea and into the southern Philippines. This approach, he felt, could quickly achieve the strategic objective of cutting the Japanese supply lines to the Netherlands East Indies. However, this concept did not coincide with that of the JCS, who had decided that an advance through the Central Pacific would be strategically more effective.

In direct conflict with Gen. MacArthur's concept, the JCS felt that the longer Southwest Pacific route would be more costly in terms of men, aircraft, money, time and ships. A seldom-considered point was that the Central Pacific route was better because there would be less jungle and swamp warfare with attendant tropical diseases than would

an approach through New Guinea. Finally, there was a practical limit to the Japanese air and ground forces which could be deployed on the small Central Pacific islands, while these assets could be placed on New Guinea and the islands between it and Mindanao in quantities limited only by the availability of shipping. Another factor that weighed heavily in JCS thinking was the potential of the Army Air Forces' (AAF) new offensive weapon, the B-29 bomber. Joint Chiefs of Staff plans called for extensive bombing of the Japanese home islands, but there was some doubt concerning the continuing operations from bases in China. However, air bases in the Mariana Islands, less than 1,500 miles from Tokyo, would provide B-29 bases that the Japanese would be unable to retake.

While all of these factors made the Central Pacific approach strategically, tactically and logistically best to the JCS, they also felt it would be undesirable to move all Allied forces from the Southwest and South Pacific areas out of Japanese contact, which had been established during the campaign to reduce Rabaul. They felt that the utilization of both routes would prevent the Japanese from knowing where the next blow would fall.

The JCS made the decision that the approach to the Philippines would be made through both routes but with priority to the Central Pacific, which appeared strategically more decisive. Central Pacific forces would move towards the Philippines by way of the

Marshalls, Carolines and Palaus, while South Pacific forces would move up the northern coast of New Guinea and into the islands between the northern peninsula and Mindanao.

Upon reaching the northern peninsula of New Guinea, it would become necessary to protect both flanks prior to moving north into the Philippines. Halamahara, on the left flank, was a principal distribution point for the eastern part of the Netherlands East Indies and became a focal point for the Japanese defense of the southern approaches to the Philippines. On the right flank, the Palaus in the western Carolines were heavily defended and as the operations in the Marianas were taking longer than expected, the decision was made to occupy only the three largest islands in the southern portion. Airfields could be developed on Angaur, Peleliu and possibly Ngesebus to extend Allied control over the Western Pacific and support the Philippine invasion.

The Japanese had prepared an elaborate defense system in the southern Palau to stop invaders at the beaches. In the event these failed, the defenders were to fall back to previously prepared defenses inland utilizing the caves and natural terrain features of the ridge line down the center of the island.

Task Force 38, under Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, was to conduct strategic air support missions hitting the enemy naval forces threatening landing operations in the western Carolines. He was also to provide air support for the simultaneous landings

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at Morotai north of Halamahara and in the Palaus. The III Amphibious Corps was under the command of Major General Roy S. Geiger, USMC, a Naval Aviator, who was to be the ground force commander for the assault on the Palaus. This force basically was composed of the 1st Marine Division and the 81st Infantry Division, U.S. Army. The assault of Morotai was to be conducted by the 31st Division, U.S. Army.

Little resistance was expected against the Morotai invasion, and since it was extremely important to rapidly develop airfields on the island, there was no preliminary air or naval bombardment prior to D day that would prevent a tactical surprise. However, land-based Allied aircraft did conduct heavy raids on Japanese bases within range of Morotai. Air support on D day was provided by Task Force 38 and escort carrier (CVE)-based aircraft which continued to provide support until airfields were constructed. Landing on 15 September 1944, the 31st Division met little opposition and quickly moved inland to take its objectives. Japanese troops on Morotai showed little offensive spirit, choosing to escape rather than to attack or defend prepared positions. Nor did the Japanese command at Halamahara reinforce the island. Airfield construction proceeded slowly due to lack of adequate good surfacing material, as well as bad weather conditions.

The far-ranging Third Fleet carriers providing air support for the Palau and Morotai operations reported Japanese strength in the southern Philippines to be weaker than expected. Based on the decision to bypass some of the islands in the western Carolines that had previously been marked for attack, release of troops assigned to these assaults made it possible for Gen. MacArthur to plan an attack directly to Leyte, bypassing Mindanao. While there were no actual sorties flown against Leyte by Morotai-based aircraft, they did fly support over southern Mindanao and later against targets in the Netherlands East Indies and the Japanese oil center at Balikpapan, Borneo. The Morotai fields, secured at an extremely low cost, were well worth the taking.

Fast carrier strikes in the Palaus began on 6 September, D minus 9. They also provided close air support on D Day

at Peleliu. Gunfire support commenced on D minus 3 by 4 battleships, 3 heavy cruisers, 1 light cruiser and 9 destroyers. On 18 September, simultaneous with the Morotai landings, the 1st Marine Division began landing on Peleliu. Initially, it was anticipated that Peleliu would be a tough, but short operation which could be secured in four days. As the amphibian vehicles crossed the reef they, and the beach, were subjected to mortar, artillery and automatic weapons fire from the high ground of Peleliu's central ridge system. As succeeding waves pushed ashore, Japanese fire steadily increased, providing ample evidence that the preliminary air and naval bombardment had not been as effective as hoped. In two days of heavy fighting, the most important objective, the Peleliu airfield, had been secured—but at a cost of almost 1,500 Marine casualties. The Japanese commander withdrew his forces to the ridge lines and high ground north of the airfield. Against stubborn resistance and with reinforcements being sent south from the more northerly islands, it was evident that additional troops would be needed to destroy the enemy. After a week of extremely strenuous combat, the 1st Marine Division had been temporarily halted. The division had lost just under 4,000 men. The 1st Marines had been virtually eliminated as a combat unit, with the 7th and 5th Marines also suffering heavily. Maj. Gen. Geiger directed that the 1st Marines be evacuated from Peleliu and that the 321st Regimental Combat Team be attached to the 1st Marine Division.

By the end of September, Peleliu had been secured—at the cost of 5,300 American casualties. The airfield, which was the primary purpose for seizing the island, was operational for fighter aircraft. This certainly did not mean that the fighting was over. When the III Amphibious Corps headquarters moved ashore on 12 October, Maj. Gen. Geiger declared that the assault and occupation phase of operations on Peleliu had ended. Yet, strenuous fighting remained to be done to blast the remnants of Japanese defenders from their final ridge-line positions. The 1st Marine Division left the island on 30 October having suffered 6,526 casualties. Army units continued the fighting until 27

November when hostilities finally ceased. The operation which had been expected to last only four days had continued for almost two and a half months.

After "Bloody Peleliu" was all over, it never served the purposes originally envisioned. The airstrips were not operational in time to directly support the Philippine landings as planned. It was not until 17 November that the first bomber mission was flown against a Philippine target from a field in the Palaus—almost a month after the landing on Leyte. The islands, as it turned out, were not as valuable as anticipated nor used as extensively as planned. This cost us over 9,800 American lives.

The primary purpose of the Leyte campaign was to establish an air and logistics base in the Leyte area in order to support future operations in the Luzon-Formosa-China coast area and, particularly, to nullify Japanese strength on Luzon. The return to the Philippines was to be accomplished in two phases. The first would be a preliminary operation into the Sarangani Bay area of southern Mindanao to establish land-based air forces to augment the carrier-based air support for the principal effort. The major thrust was to be an amphibious landing with forces mounted from New Guinea to seize airfields and bases on Leyte. Because of its central location, the occupation of Leyte would split the Japanese forces in the Philippines. It would also provide an excellent anchorage in Leyte Gulf and sites for bases and airfields from which land-based aircraft could attack all parts of the Philippines, the coast of China and Formosa. Rapidly changing events in the conduct of the war made it possible to eliminate the first step into the Philippines and jump directly to the assault at Leyte.

The Seventh Fleet, under Vice Admiral T. C. Kinkaid, was assigned the mission of supporting the landing. Pre-invasion bombardment was to commence on 17 October with landings to be made on the 20th. As expected, the Japanese responded to this assault with a massive naval operation destined to destroy the U.S. Navy units and crush the landing force. Once again, their plans were thwarted. (For a detailed description of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, see *Naval Aviation News*, September–October

1994.) Carrier-based aircraft continued to support the Leyte campaign till adequate facilities were constructed ashore. Marine aviation, in the form of a night-fighter squadron and four *Corsair*-equipped fighter squadrons, were deployed to the Tacloban airfield from Peleliu. These squadrons operated for a little under four weeks at Leyte but in that time flew 264 missions and destroyed 22 Japanese ships and 40 aircraft. ■

"Back to the Philippines, Part 2," will appear in *Naval Aviation News*, March–April 1995.

Ticonderoga (CV 14), foreground, and other ships form the fighting fleet at Ulithi Atoll in December 1944.

2 Jan: Eighteen Fighter Bomber Squadrons (VBFs) were established within existing Carrier Air Groups to adjust their composition to the needs of changed combat requirements in the Pacific.

11 Jan: The Bureau of Ordnance assigned the first task on Project Bumblebee to the Applied Physics Laboratory, thus formally establishing the program for development of a ramjet-powered, guided, antiaircraft weapon from which the Talos, Terrier and

Tartar missiles eventually emerged.

6 Feb: The Chief of Naval Operations directed that, following a period of training at NAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, Patrol Bomber Squadrons 109, 123 and 124 of Fleet Air Wing 2 be equipped to employ the SWOD Mark 9, Bat, guided missile in combat.

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