

Back to the



349596

General Douglas MacArthur and a group of U.S. Army and Philippine officers wade ashore at Leyte Island.

Philippines Part 2

By John M. Elliott

Once the decision was made to invade Leyte, it became necessary to determine the next step in the advance towards Japan. Two courses of action were considered. The first was to bypass Luzon and jump to an invasion of southern Formosa with a simultaneous landing on the coast of China. This would provide an easier route to supply the eastern China airfields, which were to support B-29 raids against Japan. The second course of action was to invade Luzon and then work back to consolidate the entire Philippine archipelago. While it appeared that Formosa would be the best from a strategic point, Luzon was more favorable logistically.

Japanese offensives in eastern and southeastern China overran the last air bases from which the China-based Fourteenth Air Force could effectively support an invasion of either Formosa or Luzon. This reduced the urgency for the development of a port on the coast of China. By the same token, one of the main reasons for seizing Formosa—to secure a steppingstone to China—became much less desirable. In the end, the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided to invade Luzon, bypass Formosa and continue the advance north through Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands.

The best landing site on Luzon was Lingayen Gulf, the same approach used by the Japanese in 1941–1942 that led to Manila through the Central Plains. Airfield construction at Leyte continued to fall behind schedule and aircraft based there would be unable to support the Lingayen Gulf invasion. The decision was made to route the invasion convoy through the confined waters of the Visayans, which required more air coverage than the previously considered route around the northern end of Luzon.

To provide this cover, a base would be needed on Mindoro. The landings at Mindoro and Luzon stretched the amphibious shipping available to the utmost. This required numerous changes in plans and the dates that these landings—as well as the follow-on assaults against Iwo Jima and Okinawa—could take place.

A few days prior to the Mindoro invasion, General George C. Kenney stated that the Army Air Forces (AAF) would not be ready to take responsibility for air cover of the Mindoro convoy. In addition to the delays in building new airfields and weather problems, the inexperience of his pilots would preclude their taking off before daylight or landing after dark. Due to this, it was necessary to borrow escort carriers (CVEs) from the Central Pacific and arrange for Third Fleet cover and support and the help of land-based Central Pacific aircraft. The CVEs were to operate in the Sulu Sea to protect the convoy during hours when the AAF could not be present. The aircraft complement on these ships was changed to 24 fighter and 9 torpedo bombers from the normal 16 and 12. Third Fleet's Task Force (TF) 38 was to prevent the Japanese from launching air attacks from Philippine fields during the approach, landing and unloading.

The move to Mindoro was one of the boldest during the war in the Pacific. Driving this wedge into the central Philippines required bypassing several important enemy-held islands. This new air base would be 262 miles away from our nearest base in Leyte and beyond the normal range of land-based fighter planes.

On 13 December 1944, the main convoy was being protected by 12 aircraft from the CVEs and 35 land-based

Marine *Corsairs*. At about 1500, a kamikaze "Val" sneaked in low from astern and crashed into the light cruiser *Nashville* killing 133 personnel. Later, a destroyer was hit resulting in a loss of 14. Several other kamikaze attacks were launched but were destroyed prior to reaching their target. The landing on the 15th was an amphibious group commander's dream as everything worked according to plan. That, however, was not to last. Twelve minutes after the AAF arrived to relieve the carrier-based aircraft, a kamikaze group arrived. Hits were made on a CVE and two landing ships, tank (LSTs) were destroyed. Air attacks against the later supply convoys were also conducted by kamikazes. By 30 January 1945, no enemy forces capable of organized action remained in northwest Mindoro and further mopping up was left to the Filipino guerrillas. It had been a tough nut to crack, but the four airstrips constructed there were well worth the effort in the protection they gave convoys going to Luzon.

By this time, the Kamikaze Corps, which had first been encountered during the battle for Leyte, had become a real problem to the Navy. It was estimated that 1 in 4 found a target and did some damage, and 1 in 33 sank a ship as it completed its one-way trip. All personnel returning to the U.S. and Australia were warned not to mention the kamikazes, and mail was carefully censored for any hint of them to prevent the enemy from knowing how effective the attacks were. It was not until April 1945, during the Okinawa campaign when it was impossible to suppress the news, that the world became aware of this new form of attack. One means of combating this threat was to change the aircraft complement aboard the big

Naval Aviation in WW II

carriers. *Essex*-class carriers were now to have 73 fighters, 15 bombers and 15 torpedo bombers in lieu of the 38, 36 and 18 previously carried.

Task Force 38 left Ulithi on 11 December 1944 to make preliminary strikes on Luzon airfields, which threatened the Mindoro operation. Massive strikes over three days resulted in 270 aircraft destroyed and 3 or 4 freighters and 1 Japanese-type LST heavily damaged.

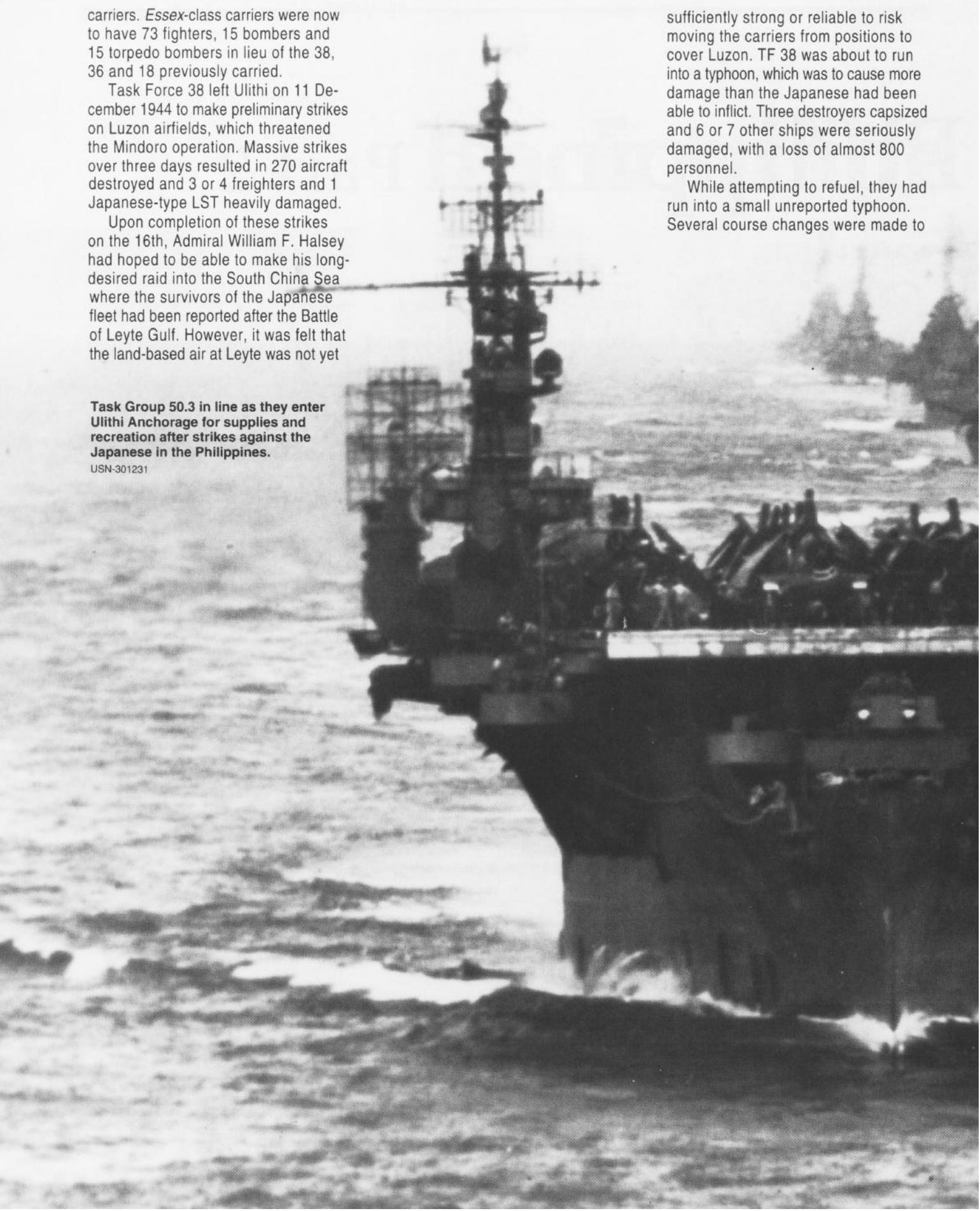
Upon completion of these strikes on the 16th, Admiral William F. Halsey had hoped to be able to make his long-desired raid into the South China Sea where the survivors of the Japanese fleet had been reported after the Battle of Leyte Gulf. However, it was felt that the land-based air at Leyte was not yet

sufficiently strong or reliable to risk moving the carriers from positions to cover Luzon. TF 38 was about to run into a typhoon, which was to cause more damage than the Japanese had been able to inflict. Three destroyers capsized and 6 or 7 other ships were seriously damaged, with a loss of almost 800 personnel.

While attempting to refuel, they had run into a small unreported typhoon. Several course changes were made to

Task Group 50.3 in line as they enter Ulithi Anchorage for supplies and recreation after strikes against the Japanese in the Philippines.

USN-301231

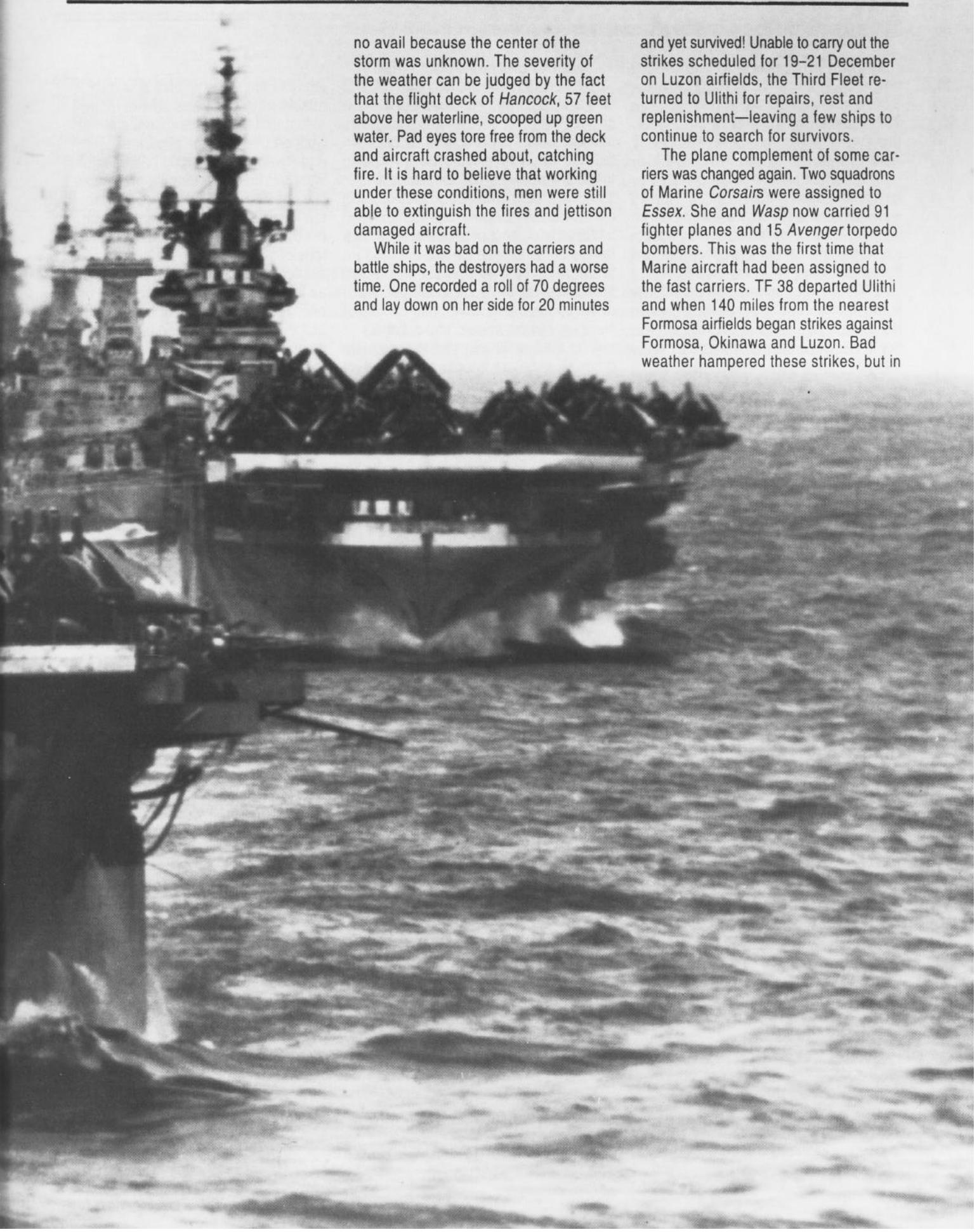


no avail because the center of the storm was unknown. The severity of the weather can be judged by the fact that the flight deck of *Hancock*, 57 feet above her waterline, scooped up green water. Pad eyes tore free from the deck and aircraft crashed about, catching fire. It is hard to believe that working under these conditions, men were still able to extinguish the fires and jettison damaged aircraft.

While it was bad on the carriers and battle ships, the destroyers had a worse time. One recorded a roll of 70 degrees and lay down on her side for 20 minutes

and yet survived! Unable to carry out the strikes scheduled for 19–21 December on Luzon airfields, the Third Fleet returned to Ulithi for repairs, rest and replenishment—leaving a few ships to continue to search for survivors.

The plane complement of some carriers was changed again. Two squadrons of Marine *Corsairs* were assigned to *Essex*. She and *Wasp* now carried 91 fighter planes and 15 *Avenger* torpedo bombers. This was the first time that Marine aircraft had been assigned to the fast carriers. TF 38 departed Ulithi and when 140 miles from the nearest Formosa airfields began strikes against Formosa, Okinawa and Luzon. Bad weather hampered these strikes, but in



Naval Aviation in WW II

one week TF 38 had flown more than 3,000 sorties and dropped approximately 700 tons of bombs. In accomplishing this they lost 86 planes, 40 of which were operational losses.

The assault convoy departed Leyte for Lingayen Gulf and learned that there were still plenty of Japanese aircraft in the Philippines. Kamikaze attacks began soon after the fleet entered the Sulu Sea. From there until they arrived off Lingayen Gulf, the convoy was subjected to numerous kamikaze attacks, which did considerable damage but sank only one CVE. Once the convoy arrived in the gulf, things were no better.

Between 3 and 6 January 1945, kamikaze attacks sank or damaged 25 ships, 3 of which suffered two or more attacks. The effectiveness of this new tactic is vividly revealed considering that there were only 28 kamikazes and 15 fighter escorts involved. The Japanese determined not to defend the beaches and concentrated their defenses in the mountains, making the preliminary shore bombardments unnecessary. The ships lost in this portion of the operation, however, had sacrificially served the invasion by acting as bait for the kamikazes, who expended themselves before the day of the land-

ing. The amphibious force was also attacked by kamikazes but not to the extent that the Bombardment and Fire Support Group or the Minesweeping and Hydrographic Group had been previously. The actual landing proceeded like a textbook exercise. There were few kamikaze attacks against shipping, but by the end of the day, about 30,000 tons of supplies had been landed and assault troops had advanced as much as 8,000 yards. The Japanese still had one more new weapon in their bag of tricks. On the night of the landing, a group of 18-foot suicide boats attacked the fleet. One ship was sunk and eight

USMC-98028



A Corsair fighter plane of the 2nd MAW doubles as a bomber to blast the Japanese from a gorge behind Five Sisters peaks on Peleliu.

others damaged. These boats made no further attacks at Lingayen Gulf.

With the troops ashore and proceeding towards their objectives as planned, the next step was to secure the long supply line between Mindoro and Lingayen Gulf from all means of counterattack between Tokyo and Singapore. A strike was made on Camranh Bay on 12 January 1945. There were no combatant ships as anticipated but numerous merchant ships were sunk or damaged; many were oilers. Saigon was also struck and docks, airfield facilities and oil storage ashore were hit.

Sailing north on 15 January, TF 38 launched strikes against airfields on the China coast and Formosa. Several ships were sunk but only 16 aircraft were shot down and an additional 18 destroyed on the ground. More strikes were made against the China coast and on down to Hong Kong. Once again, the weather was bad and Navy losses were greater than the enemy; most were due to anti-aircraft fire and the low altitude the aircraft were required to fly. After refueling and avoiding some additional bad weather, the fleet retired to the north around the northern end of Luzon. Again, on 21 January, fighter sweeps were launched to neutralize airfields in Formosa, the Pescadores and the Sakishima Gunto. Flying all day, with emphasis on shipping in the morning and airfields in the afternoon, a total of 1,164 sorties were flown with 104 aircraft claimed destroyed on the ground.

It was a different matter at sea as the kamikazes came to life again. *Langley*, *Ticonderoga* and *Maddox* were struck; *Ticonderoga* was hit by two different strikes. Upon landing aboard *Hancock*, one of our torpedo bombers was taxiing up the deck and dropped a 500-pound bomb out of the bomb bay; the bomb exploded. Casualties were heavy: 52 killed and 105 wounded. During the 22nd, a total of 682 sorties were flown against Okinawa to obtain photographic coverage for the forthcoming capture of the island. That night, TF 38 started south and returned to Ulithi for a well-earned rest.

The Marine Corps dive-bomber squadrons, which were requested from the northern Solomons, went ashore and established an airfield near Dagupan

7 Mar: Commanding Officer, CGAS Floyd Bennett Field, N.Y., reported that a dunking sonar suspended from an XHOS-1 helicopter had been tested successfully.

8 Mar: A rocket-powered Gorgon air-to-air missile was launched from a PB4Y-5A and achieved an estimated speed of 550 mph in its first powered test flight, conducted off Cape May, N.J., under the direction of LCdr. M. B. Taylor.

18 Mar–21 Jun: Carrier air support during the Okinawa campaign was on a larger and more extensive scale than any previous amphibious campaign. Fast and escort carrier planes flew over 40,000 action sorties, destroyed 2,516 enemy aircraft and blasted enemy positions with

to support the 1st Cavalry Division in its dash to Manila. Close air support procedures had been worked out with the Army while still in the Solomons, placing a forward air controller with a radio-equipped jeep with each battalion. This for all practical purposes placed a forward observer, who was a Naval Aviator, at the command posts who understood an aviator's requirements and could properly direct him to the target. The SBDs of Marine Air Groups 24 and 32 guarded the flanks of the 1st Cavalry Division and destroyed hard points in front of the advance as they spearheaded the dash to Manila.

There were numerous small landings after Luzon that followed the same general pattern of the enemy retiring to inland positions and a final mop-up by guerrilla forces. As there were no Japanese aircraft operating in the southern Philippines, the fleet did not suffer any kamikaze damage. The Eighth Army determined that it had conducted 14 major and 24 minor landings in 44 days, and the VII Amphibious Forces hung up a record for amphibious operations that is not likely to be challenged.

Naval Aviation had one more operation in the Philippines when Marine Air Groups 12, 14 and 32 were assigned the mission of close air support for the

8,500 tons of bombs and 50,000 rockets. Marine Corps squadrons ashore destroyed another 506 Japanese aircraft and expended 1,800 tons of bombs and 15,865 rockets on close air support missions. Task Force 58's time on the line (18 Mar–10 Jun) was surpassed by the escort carriers (24 Mar–21 Jun), but of several records for continuous operations in an active combat area that were marked up by the carriers during the campaign, the most outstanding was logged by *Essex* with 79 consecutive days.

23 Apr: PB4Ys of Patrol Bombing Squadron 109 launched two Bat missiles against enemy shipping in Balikpapan Harbor, Borneo, in the first combat employment of the only automatic homing missile to be used in WW II.

41st Division in the assault on Zamboanga, Mindanao. After the initial shore bombardment, the assault forces quickly moved inland. The Marine SBDs flew in from Luzon in support of the advance to supplement the F4U *Corsairs* of Marine Air Group 12. Heavy fighting took place in the hills as the Army slowly advanced, supported by Marine Corps planes and gunfire from the cruisers and destroyers offshore. These ships left on 12 March as they were needed for another landing, and their task was taken over by destroyers which continued to deliver call fire until the 18th.

Missions continued to be flown in support of operations at Davo, Malabang and Sarangani Bay on the island of Mindanao, as well as on the island of Jolo. The last hurrah for the SBD was on 31 July 1945 when the aircraft struck enemy positions along the Davo River. This was the last SBD strike of the war. The airplane that had destroyed the might of the Japanese fleet was no more.

The obligation was honored to all of those military and civilian personnel who had been abandoned three long years. The debt was paid. We had returned. ■

Mr. Elliott is a former historian in the Naval Aviation History Branch of the Naval Historical Center.