WNHA

Western Naval History Association

Newsletter Volume V, No. 3 Autumn 2024-Winter 2025

Editor's Remarks

Our seventh annual WNHA Symposium will be held aboard the USS Midway Museum in San Diego on February 1st and 2nd. A preview of the projected topics and presenters is described in the accompanying column. This issue also contains book reviews from John Burtt, and feature articles from Leonard Heinz and Stephen Mclaughlin. Len Heinz examines the decision to launch a strike on the Japanese carriers late in the day during the Battle of the Philippine Sea on 20 June 1944, and Stephen McLaughlin takes us on a tour of the Marine Museum Den Helder which preserves the history of the Dutch Navy.

Please remit your 2025 membership dues of $60.00 via PayPal at info@wnha.net or send your check made payable to the WNHA to Vince O'Hara, 631 E J Street, Chula Vista, CA, 91910.

2025 Symposium Preview

Announcing the 7th Annual Naval History Symposium of the Western Naval History Association onboard the USS Midway Museum, 1-2 February 2025

The Western Naval History Association will hold its 2025 naval history symposium on Saturday, 1 February and Sunday, 2 February aboard the USS Midway Museum on the waterfront in San Diego. The program runs from 0845 to 1615 (8:45 AM to 4:15 PM) each day and includes presentations, workshops, and roundtable debates.

The symposium is open to the public. The fee to attend is $60, which includes coffee service and lunch on both days (there is no better deal than that)! Attendance is included as a benefit of paid membership and the fee will include membership.

Presenters this year include: Richard Frank, Ed Offley, David Winkler, Parks Stephenson, Leonard Heinz, Carla Rahn Phillips, Thomas Snyder, Brian Walter, Hal Friedman, and Jon Parshall…All of them

noted authors of books on naval history.

Topics will include:

--USS Scorpion's fate: structural failure, a "hot torpedo," or Soviet submarine attack?

--Diving on warship wrecks

--The Juan Carrillo Controversy and the Spanish Exploration of San Diego Bay

--Radar in World War II Pacific night battles

--Vietnam War retrospective

--Collecting naval postal covers

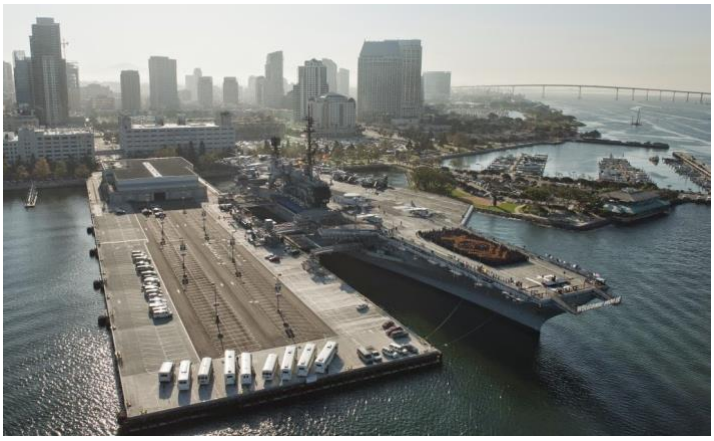
…other subjects will include naval hospitals, naval logistics in World War II, the creation of historical documentation, and more!

Don't miss this rare opportunity to mingle with people who care about naval history, who teach it, who write it, and a few who have created it.

Participants must register in advance online at www.wnha.net or via email to jburtt47@gmail.com.

The membership/attendance fee can be paid via PayPal at the www.wnha.net site or you may mail a check care of Vincent O'Hara at 631 E J St, Chula Vista, CA 91910. If assistance is required please email info@wnha.net. The Western Naval History Association is a volunteer IRS 501(c) (3) non-profit headquartered in San Diego.

The Midway Museum is hosting our symposium once more.


Parking is available on the pier alongside.

The Dutch Navy Museum
by Stephen McLaughlin

Bridge and gun mount from the missile frigate *De Ruyter*.

I recently had an opportunity to visit, along with my (long-suffering) wife, the superb Dutch Navy Museum (https://www.marinemuseum.nl/en/) in Den Helder, Holland. The train trip from Amsterdam to Den Helder takes a little over an hour, and it's a 20-minute walk from the station to the museum; by cab it's only a few minutes.

The museum extends over several buildings of an old shipyard and covers virtually every aspect of the history of the *Koninklijke Marine* (Royal Navy), founded in 1815, although it also has a gallery devoted to the great Dutch admirals of an earlier age – Tromp, De Ruyter, and Evertsen. The main building houses an excellent collection of ship models, naval artifacts and paintings, extending from the heyday of the navy's history. In other nearby buildings there are displays of weapons, shipbuilding, the lives of shipyard workers, and a subdued room devoted to *Shout-bij-nacht* (Rear Admiral) Karel Doorman, the gallant but ill-fated commander of the ABDA naval force lost at the Battle of the Java Sea.

The museum includes more than just models and mementos. There are three actual warships on the grounds: the innovative triple-hulled postwar submarine HNLMS *Tonijn*, the beautifully restored ironclad ram HNLMS *Schorpioen*, and the World War II-era minesweeper HNLMS *Abraham Crijnssen*, which has the unusual distinction of once disguising itself as an island to escape attack by the Japanese. Nearby is the bridge of the guided missile frigate HNLMS *De Ruyter*. Visitors can clamber all over these ships, and nearby is a moving memorial to those lost as sea.

Throughout the museum most the of the placards and signs are in Dutch and English (and sometimes other languages as well). Those intending to visit should be aware that the museum does not have a café, just a few vending machines for candy and soda, although there are several restaurants nearby. There is a giftshop, with books (in Dutch and English), nautical-themed clothing, etc.

Finally, if you are in The Netherlands, there are two other museums well worth a visit by naval historians. Although most people think of Amsterdam's famous Rijksmuseum as an art museum, it also includes a hall devoted to models of naval vessels, from the sailing era to the late 19th century. There is also a gallery devoted to the great age of Dutch naval power in the 17th century, with paintings, artifacts, a giant ship model and – the *pièce de résistance* – the transom from the English ship-of-the-line *Royal Charles*, captured in 1667 during De Ruyter's daring raid on the Thames

Finally, also in Amsterdam is the *Scheepvaartmuseum*, devoted to merchant shipping, although there are a few naval items scattered about. The museum includes a full-scale replica of the sailing merchantman *Amsterdam* of the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*), the Dutch east India company. A building nearby houses the elaborate royal barge of King Willem I, last used in 1962. After your tour you can enjoy a beverage and a pastry in the museum's beautiful central courtyard.

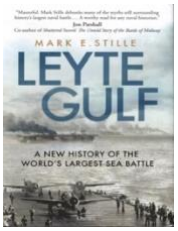
Aerial view of Den Helder with submarine *Tonijn* and ram *Schorpioen* near center.

Light cruiser *Tromp* model display.

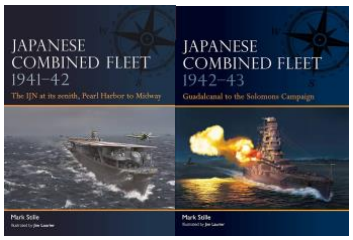
Nineteenth century steam ram *Schorpioen*.

Diorama depicting minesweeper *Abraham Crijnssen* camouflaged as an island in the East Indies during World War II.

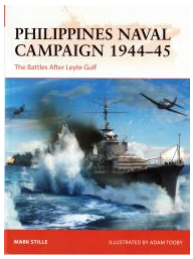
Book Reviews



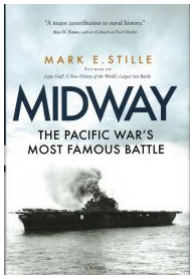
Leyte Gulf: A New History of the World's Largest Sea Battle. Mark Stille. London: Osprey Publishing, 2023. 320 pp. Notes. Biblio. Index. Images. Maps. Photos. $30.00 Reviewed by John D. Burtt.



Japanese Combined Fleet: 1941-42 and ***1942-43.*** Mark Stille. London: Osprey Publishing, 2023. 80 pp. Notes. Index. Images. Maps. Photos. $23.00 each. Reviewed by John D. Burtt



Philippines Naval Campaign: 1944-45. Mark Stille. London: Osprey Publishing, 2024. 96 pp. Notes. Index. Images. Maps. Photos. $25.00. Reviewed by John D. Burtt.



Midway: The Pacific War's Most Famous Battle. Mark Stille. London: Osprey Publishing, 2024. 400 pp. Notes. Biblio. Index. Images. Maps. Photos. $30.00. Reviewed by John D. Burtt.

Mark Stille has been a busy author of late and has continued his wide looks at Pacific navies, like *The United States Navy in World War II* (Osprey, 2021) and the *Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific War* (Osprey, 2014) and more focused look at battles, such as *Leyte Gulf* (Osprey, 2023.) He has added several more excellent books to his resume.

One of the newest additions to Osprey's catalog is the Fleet series which looks at world Fleets. As most Osprey series, the Fleet series follows a standard pattern, discussing a Fleet's purpose, its ships, then how the Fleet operated, which included essays on logistics, doctrine, command and control, etc. This is followed by details of the Fleet in action. The format allows a really good comparison with opposing fleets, such as the U.S. Navy verses the Imperial Japanese Navy, or the British Royal Navy verses the Italian *Regia Marina*.

Mark Stille's contribution initially was *Japanese Combined Fleet, 1941-1942: The IJN at its Zenith, Pearl Harbor to Midway* (Osprey, 2023.) Here much of the discussion on the IJN was its obsession with Decisive Battle, the same type of surface ship battle that would bring a war to an end as the battle of Tsushima ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Inter and Early War Japanese doctrine called for night action by destroyers and cruisers to attrite the enemy before the Fleet's battleships engage and win a daylight slugfest, after which the enemy (aka the United States) would call a halt to combat and negotiate. As Stille points out the IJN had the logistics for a short war; after all the Decisive Battle would stop the war quickly. When that didn't happen, logistics became a problem. In addition, the Japanese distain for Intelligence, led them to use intelligence ONLY to support operations already planned, rather than the other way around.

Stille gives you a good view of where the IJN stood at the start of the war, with discussions on their gunnery (good), torpedoes (exceptional,) antiaircraft defenses (inadequate,) and aircraft (long range, poorly protected.) The one thing missing is a discussion of their lack of radar. He then discusses Pearl Harbor, Java Sea, the Indian Ocean raid, Coral Sea and finally Midway where the bulk of the IJN – eight carriers, 11 battleships, 14 heavy cruisers and 61 destroyers – was involved in a convoluted plan for the Decisive Victory.

While an excellent resource in itself, this first Fleet book is enhanced by Stille's next addition, *Japanese Combined Fleet, 1942-1943: Guadalcanal to the Solomons Campaign* (Osprey, 2024.) Here the comparison with Then is contrasted with what the IJN was confronted with Now, after the disaster of Midway. Among the major changes in Fleet actions was the switch from focus on battleships to destroyers. Initially their emphasis on night action pre-Decisive Battle paid dividends in nighttime clashes with the U.S. Navy. But their failure to understand the "decisive" aspect of the six-month attrition battle around Guadalcanal, led them to fail to put the resources they needed to win what could have been a winnable battle. Instead they continued to hold back resources in the hopes a Decisive Battle could be possible.

Overall, the Fleet books were a really good informative analysis of where the IJN started and where they ended when things didn't go their way

Following his excellent analysis of Leyte Gulf, Stille turned his microscope to Midway in *Midway: The Pacific War's Most Famous Battle* (Osprey, 2024.) His basic theme for this book as he states, "the author contends that the battle was not a miraculous American Victory…Rather the author believes that once all the plans, personalities, doctrines, ships and weapons of the two sides are examined, a Japanese defeat was the more likely outcome."(pg 23) Then he sets out to prove it.

He starts with a discussion of Operation C, the Japanese carrier raid into the Indian Ocean in April 1942. He points out the similarities between C and Operation MI the Midway plan, which included the Japanese assumption of surprise, the sudden and unexpected appearance of the enemy, the poor search plans, and even the inadequate antiair capability of the Japanese ships. All of these mirror issues later occurring at Midway.

He then prefaces the "story" of the battle with a detailed discussion of Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku's plans for the operation and Admiral Chester Nimitz's response, pointing out the good and the bad of each, although he found little in Yamamoto's plan to praise. Stille is not a Yamamoto-ophilo. He calls the Pearl Harbor plan a strategic disaster and points out that both the Pearl Harbor plan and the Midway plan were sold – not by sound logic and strategy – but by him threatening to resign. Of the many faults he finds with the plan for Midway as a "decisive" battle were the diversion of forces for the Aleutians and the inability of Japanese to supply Midway even if they had taken it (something the Imperial Headquarters pointed out during the debate of the operation.)

For Nimitz, his plan was bold but had holes like requiring his forces to inflict maximum damage but ordered not to accept decisive action if likely to incur heavy losses. Given that the Japanese aircraft outranged U.S. carrier aircraft, the requirement was a contradiction - the only way the plan would work was if the U.S. carriers put themselves within the Japanese range of attack. He also faults Nimitz for sending forces to the Aleutians since he was sending cruisers against a Japanese force he knew contained carriers.

Stille then discusses both fleets, then delves into the battle itself. He notes the problem caused by both Navy's doctrines at the time. Nagumo held to the doctrine of a massed strike that kept all his attack aircraft on the carriers until all were ready. The U.S. Doctrine of "deferred Launch" to mass all aircraft after launching fell victim to what Stille called "shambolic" launch plans. The most surprising aspect of this discussion was his faulting of the U.S. carrier air staff, particularly Spruance's Chief of Staff Miles Browning on ENTERPRISE and Captain Marc Mitscher on HORNET for poor deck and those shambolic launch plans that fragmented the initial U.S strikes. He also notes that Mitscher falsified official records to cover his mistakes.

Overall, Stille had penned another excellent focused view on a well-known battle that has both original insight and thoughtful analysis. This book definitely belongs beside Parshall and Tully's classic *Shattered Sword*.

Finally, I must hang my head in embarrassment. If I had been asked about U.S. Navy actions in the Philippines, I would have either talked about the situation in December 1941 or Leyte Gulf. However, Mark Stille has educated me with his *Philippines Naval Campaign 1944-45: The Battles after Leyte Gulf* (Osprey Campaign 399, 2024.) As part of Osprey's Campaign series, the book follows the standard organization: strategic overlook, opposing commanders, plans and forces, followed by details of the campaign and an analysis.

Perhaps the reason that most readers don't focus on the "after Leyte" portion of the Philippines Campaign was the great disparity of the two combatant fleets. Both the 3rd and 7th Fleets were involved in the campaign and could count on a massive number of ships and aircraft – consider that their support train included 29 fleet oilers, seven ammunition ships covered by eight escort carriers and 39 destroyer/destroyer escorts. The Japanese still had four battleships, but very little fuel. The strongest IJN forces as the remnants of a Leyte diversionary force with two cruisers and seven destroyers. What the Japanese did have in the Philippines were 60+ airfields from which they launched their special attack (aka kamikaze) aircraft that expanded during the battle.

The first thing that jumped out at me was the large number of landings that occurred in the Philippines after Leyte (34, map on page 4.) With that you start to get a feel for just how involved the U.S. Navy had to be in this campaign. The campaign included the key landings on Mindoro and Luzon, and the nine Japanese attempts to supply and reinforce their troops on Leyte. These nine TA convoys were mostly handled by U.S. aircraft, but there was a destroyer clash in Ormoc bay against TA 7 that saw the IJN *KUWA* and USS COOPER sunk – and the Japanese landing the cargo successfully.

Another aspect of the Campaign was the use of kamikazes. The invasions of Mindoro and Luzon invasion

forces came under heavy attack by these, seeing seven ships sunk and 8+ damaged. Given the size of the invasion and resupply forces, these were pinpricks, but a preview of what awaited later U.S. operations. The invasion convoys for Luzon saw two battleships and four cruisers hit by kamikazes, plus the loss of the escort carrier OMMANEY BAY, and a lot of other damaged ships.

The Japanese did throw an offensive attack during the campaign, sending two cruisers and six destroyers to attack the U.S landing on Mindoro. Patrol-Torpedo boats and assorted aircraft were all the U.S. could throw against the force, but the end results were minimal, again the story of the Japanese operations during the campaign.

The final aspect of the campaign was Nimitz releasing Halsey and the U.S. carriers to "rampage" (Stille's word) into the South China Sea where they hammered airfields on Formosa, Hong Kong and French Indochina.

Overall, this was for the most part a David-Goliath campaign, with increasingly desperate Japanese tactics doing little to stop what the U.S. wanted to do in the seas around the Philippines - something that the victims of Kamikazes might disagree with. Stille has crafted another excellent look at a little-known aspect of the battle for the Philippines.

The Flight Into Darkness: Well-Founded or Folly?

By Leonard R. Heinz

In the Battle of the Philippine Sea, Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher launched a late afternoon air strike that flew to the limits of its range and then returned in darkness. That strike cost the attackers heavy losses, but was it folly?

The basic story can be quickly told.[1] When the Americans launched their June 1944 invasion of the Marianas, the Imperial Japanese Navy responded with an operation aimed at smashing the invasion force. Vice Admiral Ozawa Jisaburo led the main striking force of the Japanese fleet--nine aircraft carriers, plus battleships, screening and supporting units--into the Philippine Sea on 15 June. Ozawa planned to strike first, strike hard, and use out-ranging tactics to stay beyond the reach of any American riposte. In this, he relied on the superior ranges of his carrier aircraft and on their ability to shuttle to Marianas airfields after striking the U.S Navy carriers. Once the American carriers were knocked out, the transports of the invading force would be destroyed. These plans went badly awry on 19 June, when the combat air patrols of the Task Force 58's fifteen fast carriers shredded the 326 striking aircraft of Ozawa's carrier air groups . The survivors faced massive antiaircraft fire from the American ships and found no refuge when they attempted to land at the Marianas air bases, as the American carriers were also keeping these under heavy air attack.

But the Japanese carriers went unsighted by American carrier aircraft until the afternoon of the 20th. Once they were found Admiral Mitscher, commanding TF 58, sent out a strike of his own. Launched late in the day and at a distant target, the
strike would return low on fuel and out of daylight. Most of the flyers returned to their carriers, but many had little or no experience with night carrier landings. The strike lost eleven aircraft and seventeen pilots and aircrew over their targets ships, while crashes and water landings claimed another eighty-two aircraft and another twenty-one pilots and aircrew.[2] In exchange
the Americans sank carrier *Hiyo* (a converted ocean liner), wrecked two fleet oilers so severely that the Japanese were forced to sink them, and damaged fleet carrier *Zuikaku* without, however, preventing her escape.

With hindsight, it would have been better if the strike were never launched. Japanese carrier airpower would never recover from its immolation over the Philippine Sea. Fuel shortages, lack of training, and over-hasty commitment to embattled land bases combined to assure that the Japanese carriers were empty husks when they next steamed to battle, four months later. But Mitscher could not know this on the afternoon of 20 June. Judged by what was known at the time, the flight into darkness was a worthwhile gamble. Reaching this conclusion requires the consideration of four questions, all without the benefit of hindsight:

- Were the targets worth striking?
- Was there a good prospect that the strike would destroy or cripple its targets?
- Were the additional risks posed by the night return of the strike worth running?
- Could Admiral Mitscher better have waited until 21 June to launch his strike?

Were the targets worth striking?

The admiral could not know that the Japanese carriers would become irrelevant. The size of the air strikes on the 19th revealed a significant carrier presence. That presence had been reduced by two large carriers thanks to submarine attacks, but Mitscher did not know that new carrier *Taiho* had been successfully attacked and thought that veteran carrier *Shokaku* might have been crippled rather than sunk.[3] The Pacific naval battles of 1942, which made clear the deadly power of aircraft carriers, confirmed the importance of striking these ships. Even if they were empty of aircraft now, they might well get more. The admiral's determination to strike these targets was not unreasoned or unreasonable. And beyond the carriers, Ozawa's battleships and cruisers offered attractive targets. Even the Japanese fleet oilers present were worthwhile prey, as carrier strikes and submarine attacks had been shrinking their numbers throughout the first half of 1944. Every fleet oiler sunk further cramped the mobility of the Japanese fleet.

What damage could the strike do?

Mitscher's carriers launched a deckload strike. As launched, it included 100 fighters (49 lugging 500-pound bombs), 78 dive-bombers, and 55 torpedo bombers (26 with torpedoes, 29 with bombs).[4] This was a potent force; in comparison, a strike of 25 dive bombers sank fleet carrier *Hiryu* in June 1942 and a combination of 29 dive bombers and 7 torpedo bombers had put down light carrier *Ryujo* in August. Mitscher's fliers were tired after days of combat, with no opportunity to practice hitting moving targets, but experience clearly showed that the strike unleashed in the afternoon of 20 June could maul Ozawa's forces.

Hornet's VB-2 attacks carrier *Zuikaku,* in the center of the photo. She was hit by one bomb and near-missed by six, but survived her damage. The photo was taken by Lieutenant Walter Laake of VF-50 from the *Bataan* (CVL-29). (80-G-238025)

What were the risks of a night return?

The strike seemed likely to inflict significant damage, but did that justify its cost? Had the strike been launched at a shorter range and returned in daylight, no one knowing what Admiral Mitscher knew at the time would have challenged his decision to send it. A night return risked increasing its cost. Compounding this, the strike aircraft would return with fuel gauges reading close to zero. The margin of error would be narrow; a wave-off when landing could well mean a plane in the water. Moreover, night landings would require ships and aircraft to burn lights when the enemy could be nearby. All this increased the risks to aircraft, men, and ships.

It was clear from the outset that the strike would return after sunset, which on that day arrived at 1919 local time.[5] Mitscher broadcast at 1610, just as the strike began to launch, that Ozawa's ships were in three groups ranging from 215 to 240 miles from Task Force 58.[6] Even if they obligingly stayed in that position, and even the winds had not forced the American carriers to steam away from them when launching their aircraft, the strike would take at least an hour and a half to reach its target. Add time for the strike to launch, find its target, attack, return, and land, and it would return with the sun well down, and likely after even twilight had dimmed, on a moonless night.

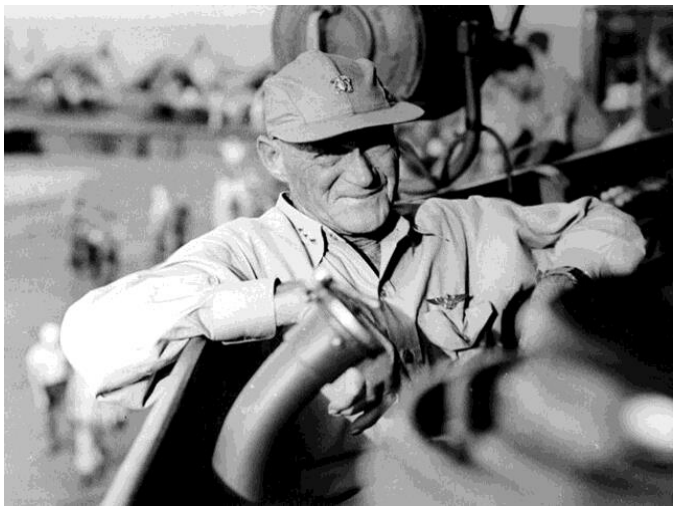
It was not immediately clear that the strike's mission would take it to its range limit. The initial report of Ozawa's ships, made by Lieutenant R.S. Nelson in a searching TBF, gave an incorrect position, and it was on this that Admiral Mitscher relied when calculating the 215 mile distance. Another pilot, Lieutenant (jg) R.R. Jones, quickly reported a more accurate position that put the Japanese ships 65 miles farther away, but with both Nelson and Jones continuously reporting their contacts on the same radio frequencies the reports became garbled.[7] The situation only slowly clarified after Nelson sent a corrected position.[8] Fifth Fleet flagship *Indianapolis* (CA-35) logged the correct location two minutes after Mitscher's 1610 transmission.[9] The admiral reported getting this information only after the strike had begun launching, at about 1624.[10] The new information caused Mitscher to cancel plans to launch a second deckload strike, but he neither halted the launching of the first deckload nor tried to recall the planes already aloft. With the courses and speeds of the opposing fleets factored in, the corrected position took the strikers to the practical limits of their combat ranges--and possibly beyond.

Admiral Mitscher already had personal and ships.

Aircraft Type	Aircraft Launched for Strike	Aircraft Lost Over Target	Pilots and Crewmen Lost	Aircraft Lost in Crashes and Ditchings	Pilots and Crewmen Lost
F6F Hellcat	**100**	**5**	**3**	**11**	**2**
SB2C Helldiver	**53**	**3**	**6**	**40**	**14**
SBD Dauntless	**25**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**0**
TBF/TBM Avenger	**55**	**2**	**6**	**28**	**5**
Totals	**233**	**11**	**17**	**82**	**21**

experience with night carrier landings in similar conditions, when commanding carrier *Hornet* (CV-8) during the Battle of Midway in June 1942. On the second day of that battle, *Hornet* and *Enterprise* (CV-6) lofted late afternoon strikes in response to reports of a crippled Japanese carrier. When the aircraft returned after sunset and low on gas, Admiral Spruance, then a rear admiral commanding the carrier task force, ordered carrier deck lights and searchlights turned on to guide the aviators down. *Enterprise* successfully landed all thirty-one aircraft of her returning strike, fifteen from her own SBD squadrons and sixteen others, with nine of her pilots successfully making their first night carrier landings. All but one of *Hornet*'s thirty-four plane strike landed successfully, five of them on *Enterprise*, with the last aircraft running out of fuel and its crew being promptly rescued. As with *Enterprise*, many of *Hornet*'s pilots were making their first night landings.[11]

This experience was encouraging but the parallels were not exact. While night landings in the Battle of Midway involved sixty-five aircraft and two carriers, Mitscher's 20 June strike featured almost four times the number of aircraft trying to land on six times the number of carriers. The sheer scale of the strike heightened the risks. The returning flyers would face a situation ripe for confusion, with losses the likely result. Reflecting this, the admiral acknowledged in his report of the action that the return in darkness "was going to cost us a great deal in planes and pilots" while the lengthy process of night recovery would force TF 58 away from the Japanese fleet.[12] Nonetheless, the admiral accepted the risks to his flight crews, aircraft,



Vice Admiral Mitscher on the bridge of the USS *Lexington* (CV-16) during the Marianas campaign. (80-G-236831)

The Cost—Losses of the Flight Into Darkness

Bluntly put, Admiral Mitscher could accept high losses of aircraft. And it was well that he could, because losses were high. Of the 233 aircraft launched for the strike, 11 were shot down over the Japanese ships. Of the remainder, 82 succumbed to battle crashed on landing. This heavy toll must be placed in context. The aircraft losses amounted to ten percent of Mitscher's total air strength at the start of the Marianas campaign. One of his four carrier task groups did not participate in the strike at all, and those that did launched only a portion of their

aircraft. Moreover, aircraft were readily available to replace those that were lost. Escort carriers such as *Copahee* (CVE-12) provided replacements during the active combat operations, and carriers not replenishing aircraft in that way were able to do so at Eniwetok, where they went for a brief interlude at the end of June.[13] *Wasp* (CV-18), for example, received more aircraft than she lost.[14] Not all carriers were so fortunate, but many also reported receiving new aircraft that replaced a substantial portion of their losses.[15] Finally, Mitscher knew that Japanese air power in the Marianas was largely a spent force, minimizing the risk from a temporary depletion of his strength. Operationally, TF 58 was not seriously affected by the heavy aircraft losses from the flight into darkness.

One can be coldly rationale when considering losses of aircraft, but what of the men in them? While
no such losses can or should be easily dismissed, the story here is surprisingly good. Seventeen pilots and crewmen died over the Japanese fleet, two in deck crashes, and another nineteen in the water. U.S. Navy flight crews trained for water landings. They had life jackets, life rafts, and lights and flares for signaling.[16] They expected to be rescued after ditching, and in the main they were. Far more were saved than lost. With the admiral's backing, the carrier task groups took all possible measures to bring the aircrews home. Searchlight beams lanced skyward, guns lofted starshells, carriers turned on their truck and deck lights; cruisers and destroyers burned navigation lights to avoid collisions while racing to scoop ditched aircrews from the water.[17] The landings were still chaotic, with carrier decks closed by frequent crashes and bedlam in the crowded landing circles. Flying through a heavy weather front on the way back to the carriers had disrupted formations. The many lights, while helping to guide the strikers back, played havoc with the ability of pilots inexperienced in night operations to find their own carriers or, indeed, any carrier, once they arrived.[18] Sixty-two aircraft ditched; of the 141 pilots and aircrew in them, 122 were rescued. The small number of men lost to the sea is a testament to the skill and dedication of the cruiser and destroyer crews who shouldered the work of recovering downed pilots and aircrew.

Eleven carriers launched aircraft in the strike. Of the eleven, six lost no aircrew due to ditchings or crashes. Losses were spread unevenly among the remaining five. In one tragedy among many, *Belleau Wood* (CVL-24) lost Lieutenant (jg) G.P. Brown after his TBF took heavy damage over the Japanese fleet. Other pilots sighted his aircraft as he struggled to return to his carrier, but he never arrived. His two crewmen, who had been forced to bail out over the target when the TBF was set alight, were rescued later.[19] Other squadron reports noted battle damage to many of their aircraft, which likely resulted in some losses during the return trip.[20] *Hornet* (CV-12) lost both pilot and gunner in an SB2C that apparently ditched out of sight of the carriers, in addition to an aircrewman killed by a crashing aircraft.[21] *Yorktown* (CV-10) lost a pilot when a landing aircraft vaulted the crash barrier and smashed into his F6F.[22] A radio operator from *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) drowned after his TBF ditched close to the carriers; that ship also lost the pilots and crews of an F6F, an SB2C, and a TBF that were not seen to return to the task force.[23] *Wasp* was hardest hit, losing nine pilots and crew from VB-14, her SB2C squadron. This was one of the squadrons that recorded fierce resistance and many aircraft damaged over the target. Of the twelve SB2Cs *Wasp* committed to the strike, only one returned to a carrier deck. Four ditched without being seen, and their crews were not recovered.[24] In total, all but two of the pilots and aircrew lost in water were in aircraft last seen far from the carriers, but even some floating as distant as the scene of the attack were rescued. The great majority who managed to return to the carriers before going into the water were hauled aboard screening cruisers and destroyers.

Admiral Mitscher had seen flight crews survive water landings and crack-ups into crash barriers. He had seen inexperienced crews make successful night landings. He had given his crews a rugged mission, but had good reason to believe that the losses of pilots and crew would be far lower than aircraft losses. Mitscher can be (and has been) criticized for exposing his flight crews to hazardous night landings, but the

prize he sought merited the risks they had to shoulder.

Lieutenant Roland Gift having a smoke and a drink in the ready room of *Monterey* (CVL-26), Gift has just returned from leading a flight of four TBMs on a 300-mile flight to the Japanese fleet, attacking the light carrier *Ryuho* through heavy anti-aircraft fire, fighting off the Japanese combat air patrol, and returning to land in the dark. (80-G474791)

Another criticism can be leveled at Mitscher's decision, and that relates to the lights needed for night landings. Japanese submarines made American carriers a priority target, and shore-based Japanese aircraft had increasing adopted night attacks as a favored tactic. Turning on the lights created a signpost for any undersea or flying marauders. Worse, with the destroyers and cruiser of the carrier task groups occupied in recovering aircrews, the carriers lacked many of their screening vessels.[25] Submarines could have slipped in undetected; bombers would not have been engaged by an outer ring of antiaircraft guns. However, there were factors weighing in favor of the risk that Mitscher was running. American carrier aircraft had hammered Japanese air bases in the Marianas and as far away as the Bonins, leaving the Japanese little with which to counterpunch.[26] The U.S. Navy had savaged the Japanese submarine arm in the months leading up to the Marianas campaign.[27] Nonetheless, a single submarine in the wrong place at the wrong time could have claimed an American carrier--perhaps more than one. Japanese submarines had already taken a toll on U.S. Navy carriers, finishing off the original *Yorktown* (CV-5) after the Battle of Midway and sinking the original *Wasp* (CV-7) in 1942 and escort carrier *Liscome Bay* (CVE-56) in 1943. Mitscher's decision made sense in the circumstances, but Task Force 58 was lucky not to suffer from it.

Could Mitscher have delayed by a day in striking?

This leaves one final matter to be considered. Admiral Mitscher acknowledged that his carriers were "firing their bolt" with the afternoon strike.[28] Not only would air groups scattered by landing on any available carrier require time to reassemble, but the prevailing winds would force his carriers to steam eastward, away from the Japanese ships, to recover aircraft during the lengthy process of night landings. And while he was steaming eastward, the Japanese would be making best speed away. By the 21st Ozawa's ships were beyond striking range and the admiral had no hope of catching them.

What if Mitscher had waited until the morning of the 21 June to launch his strike? Ideally, he would have closed with his enemy during the night, or at least kept the distance from opening. Strikes on the 21st might have been better coordinated and stronger. There are problems with this scenario, however. There was limit as to how far west Mitscher could go. Some of his destroyers were running low on fuel, forcing him either to send them eastwards to fleet oilers or to slow some larger ships to refuel them.[29] And he was still charged with supporting the ongoing invasion of Saipan. Then there is the "bird in the hand" issue. The carrier air search that located the Japanese ships in the afternoon of the 20th had succeeded only after two prior attempts that day had failed. There was no guarantee that the Japanese would be found any sooner on the 21st, or even found at all. And if they were spotted, weather would play an important role in whether a strike could attack effectively. While Mitscher's strike aircraft carried effective surface search radar, bad weather over the target would still hamper attacks. Weather over the Japanese ships was good on the 20th; it might not be

as good a day later and four hundred to five hundred miles further away. Nor was there any guarantee that Mitscher could close the Japanese ships in a night of cruising. The searchers reported that the Japanese had been refueling during the day.[30] If so, they could have made good headway throughout the night. If Mitscher steamed to their last position, he would only keep the distance from growing. If he guessed wrong about Ozawa's night course, he could find himself farther away. As has been seen, the admiral first thought that the enemy was only 215 miles away when he ordered his strike.[31] Just before it launched, corrected reports made clear that the targets actually ranged from 275 miles to 300 miles distant.[32] This only made it more pressing for the Americans to shoot their bolt now, rather than risk allowing the Japanese to slip away.

In sum, the admiral's determination to strike was not unreasoned or unreasonable. To paraphrase General George S. Patton, Jr., a good plan, violently executed now, is better than an excellent plan tomorrow. Mitscher's strike was a good plan violently executed. It accepted considerable risks to hit a target that Admiral Mitscher reasonably believed was of great value.

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1. For accounts of the battle, see: Evan Mawdsley, *Supremacy at Sea: Task Force 58 and the Central Pacific Victory* (London: Yale University Press, 2024), 167-223, 241-52; Samuel Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 8, *New Guinea and the Marianas, March 1944-August 1944* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), 213-321; William Y'Blood, *Red Sun Setting: The Battle of the Philippine Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003).

2. Commander Task Force FIFTY-EIGHT, "Operations in Support of the Capture of the MARIANAS - Action Report of, 11 September 1944," 17 ("Mitscher Report"); aircraft losses compiled from the action reports of the carriers participating in the strike and do not include aircraft written off after 20 June.

3. Mawdsley, 200.

4. Compiled from the action reports of the participating carriers and their squadrons.

5. U.S.S. Yorktown, "Operations in Support of the Occupation of SAIPAN and Against Major Units of the Enemy Fleet, from 11 June 1944 to 24 June 1944," 29 June 1944, 14.

6. U.S.S. Indianapolis, "Special Action Report of the MARIANAS ISLANDS' Operations, U.S.S. Indianapolis (CA35)," 10 August 1944, 20-21.

7. Commander Task Group 58.3 (ComCarDiv FOUR), "Action Report for Task Group 58.3 in [blanked out] Operation including Air Engagement against the Japanese Fleet," 16 July 1944, Enclosure (B), Extracts from TBS Log, 14; VT-10, "Saipan, D plus 5 Day, Special Search # 5 (Contact)," Report No. 62-44, "Narrative by Lt. Nelson of Initial Contact and Report of Enemy Fleet at 1540(K), June 20, 1944, by Scouting Flight 47V24," "Narrative of Lt(jg) Jones," U.S.S. Enterprise Radio Log Sheet.

8. Nelson Narrative, 1.

9. Carrier Air Group EIGHT, "Attack on Japanese Battle Fleet," 20 June 1944, 1; *Indianapolis* Report, 20; U.S.S. Cabot, "Action report - First Phase of [blanked out] Operation and Action Against Japanese Surface Force During the Period 6 June to 24 June 1944," 29 July 1944, 6; U.S.S. Wasp, "Action Report - Operations against IWO JIMA and Japanese shipping, 30 June to 5 July 1944, East Longitude Dates," 9 July 1844, Chronology and Track Charts, 22.

10. Mitscher Report, Enclosure (B), "Narrative Report," 28 ("Mitscher Narrative").

11. Bombing Squadron Six, "Report of Action, June 4-6, 1942," 10 June 1942, 6; Commander Task Force SIXTEEN, "Battle of Midway; forwarding of reports," 5; Scouting Squadron SIX, "Report of Action, June 4-6, 1942," 5-6; U.S.S. Enterprise (CV-6), "Battle of Midway Island, June 4 - 6, 1942 - Report of.", 8 June 1942, 4; U.S.S. Hornet, "Report of Action - 4-6 June 1942," 13 June 1942, 5. Sources vary as to the number of aircraft in *Hornet*'s strike. The number given here is from John Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral: Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 286.

12. Mitscher Narrative, 27.

13. U.S.S. Hornet, "Action Report for Period 3 July - 5 August 1944," 9 August 1944, 2. *Breton* (CVE-23) also provided replacement aircraft. Morison, 8:230.

14. *Wasp* Report, Enclosure (E), Air Operations, 2

15. Compare, for example, the action reports of *Lexington*, *Enterprise*, and *Bunker Hill* for June and July 1944.

16. For example, see the account of Lieutenant (jg) Warren McLellan in AG-16 Aircraft Action Report No. VT-42.

17. U.S.S. Bradford (DD545), War Diary, June 1944, 10; *Hornet* Report, 13; *Indianapolis* Report, 21; U.S.S. Monterey, Action Report, 26 June 1944, 2-3.

18. Air Group EIGHT Report, 4-10; U.S.S. Monterey, "Action Report," 26 June 1944, 2-3; VB-2, Aircraft Action Report No. 50-44; VF-14, Aircraft Action Report No. 37; VT-1, Aircraft Action Report No. 15; VT-10, Aircraft Action Report "Saipan D plus 5 Day, Strike Jap Fleet," No. 63-44.

19. U.S.S. Belleau Wood, "Action against GUAM, ROTA, HAHA JIMA, CHICHI JIMA, IWO JIMA and PAGAN ISLANDS and the Japanese Fleet, 11 June through 24 June 1944, (East Longitude Dates), report of," 26 June 1944, Enclosure (C).

20. See, for example: AG-16, Aircraft Action Report Nos. 46 (VB), 53 (VF), 42 (VT), 20 June 1944; Carrier Air Group EIGHT Report, 3, 4-6, 4-8, 4-9, ; VB-14, Aircraft Action Report No. 24, "Action Narrative Carrier Air Group Fourteen Strike vs. Japanese Fleet, 20 June 1944," 2-3.

21. VB-2, Aircraft Action Report No. 50-44.

22. *Yorktown* Report, 15.

23. Carrier Air Group EIGHT Report, 3, 4-11, 4-15, 4-16.

24. VB-14, Aircraft Action Report No. 24.

25. See, for example, Commander Task Group 58.3 Report, 13; "U.S.S. Oakland (CL95), "War Diary, From June 1, 1944 to June 30, 1944," 13; U.S.S. Baltimore, "War Diary of June 1944," 5.

26. Mitscher Narrative, 10-15.

27. Morison, 8:222-31.

[28.] Mitscher Narrative, 27.
[29.] Mitscher Narrative, 26, 29.
[30.] Nelson Narrative, 1.
[31.] *Indianapolis* Report, 20.
[32.] *Indianapolis* Report, 20; U.S.S. Lexington, "Attacks on the Marianas Islands for June 11 through June 19, 1944 (East Longitude dates) in support of the occupation of Saipan and the engagement of the Japanese Fleet in June 19 and 20, 1944 (East Longitude dates) - Action report of," 30 June 1944, Track for D+5, 20 July 1944; Nelson Narrative, attached *Enterprise* radio log.