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**On the Errors Committed by Admirals Spruance and Halsey in the Pacific Campaign**

In Eagle Against the Sun, Ronald Spector argues that both Raymond Spruance and William “Bull” Halsey erred in their handling of major naval engagements at the Battle of the Philippine Sea (Spruance) and the Battle of Leyte Gulf (Halsey). Based upon the incontrovertible preponderance of the evidence presented, it is unreasonable to claim that the men did not make errors. Rather, it is to be argued whether those errors stemmed from a lack of proper judgment or from a contingency of circumstances to which the men reacted the best they knew how to at the time. In the case of Spruance, it is reasonable to conclude that the errors made at the Battle of the Phillipine Sea were a result of unusual circumstances; in Halsey’s case, it is clear that the errors made were a result of poor judgment.

**I. The Battle of the Philippine Sea**

Following the landing on Saipan, Admiral Spruance moved Task Force 58 off the island in order to link with Mitscher’s carrier -based forces in the hopes of screening the marines’ continued efforts from a Japanese naval counteroffensive led by Admiral Ozawa. Despite the fact that the American forces had at the very least a twelve hour jump on Ozawa’s fleet, Spruance decided not to press his advantage and move into within striking distance of the Japanese fleet. Instead, he determined that it was better to wait for the enemy to come within range of his aircraft rather than to pursue the Japanese in order to obtain first-strike advantage and risk leaving the Saipan landing open to attack. The problem with this plan was that by surrendering the initiative, Spruance allowed the Japanese somewhere between 260 and 100 miles of airspace with which to work with more or less unopposed.

On the evening of the 18th, Mitscher asked Spruance for permission to move his units to attack the Japanese and was denied by Spruance who “ordered the fleet to double back toward Saipan to prevent any Japanese force from passing them in the dark,” instead (Spector, 308). This decision, at least is understandable, considering the degree to which the Japanese had refined their night-fighting techniques. Several primary advantages that the Americans held, chief among them radar, radar-controlled gunnery, and superior aerial technology, took on severe handicaps in a night-fighting situation. The playing field was more likely to be even or in the Japanese’s favor should the inevitable engagement occur during the night, so it is logical that Spruance should refrain from dividing his forces in order to press the attack in the morning.

Ozawa predicted correctly that Spruance would hug Saipan rather than moving out to meet the Japanese, and as soon a recon flight made contact with the American surface fleet on the next morning, Ozawa launched his planes to take full advantage of his superior range. American technical superiority and tactical preparedness (from a standpoint of knowing that they were on the defensive) effectively countered Ozawa’s air raid, and the Americans won the day. However, the Japanese retained the advantage into the next day because the Americans had been unable to locate the main fleet during the course of the engagement, due to the fact that the Japanese planes were operating at longer ranges than American reconnaissance could safely survey completely. The following day, American reconnaissance spotted Ozawa’s fleet for the first time and Mitscher gave the order to launch his planes. In the fading light of the day, over 200 planes were launched, only to find once in the air that the calculations of Ozawa’s location had been off by sixty miles, a fact which meant that the chances of the bombers having enough fuel to make it back to the carriers after making their runs was very unlikely.

After a moderately successful (although by no means decisive) attack mission during which a carrier and two oilers were sunk and two more carriers were damaged badly, Mitscher’s planes returned. The night was pitch black and the pilots had no way of finding their way back to their decks, so Mitscher decided to light up his ships to give the pilots something to aim for. Despite all of the best efforts of everyone involved, at the end of the evening something like eighty planes and fifty airmen were lost forever to the deep.

Had Spruance pulled Task Force 58 and pursued Ozawa at the first possible moment, it is likely that the end result of the Battle of the Philippines would have been more decisive than what was actually the case. It is unlikely that in a battle where the Americans took the initiative and bore down on the Japanese that the majority of the carriers in the Japanese fleet would have escaped as they did following the short-lived last minute bombing run. Confronting the Japanese would have cut their most obvious advantage, air superiority, to a massive degree. Instead of having a 200 mile buffer for reconnaissance that could be enlarged at a moment’s notice, the Japanese would have a buffer that kept shrinking the longer the Americans could remain undetected, and would be denied the weathergauge (that is to say the ability to choose whether or not to decline an action based on superior positioning). Had the Japanese force split and attacked the forces on Saipan, it is likely that the larger American fleet could have dealt with both smaller fleets separately and decisively, rather than letting the combined fleet escape relatively unscathed.

To be perfectly fair, as Spector observes, “Spruance might have acted differently had he known how much the situation on Saipan had turned in the Americans’ favor since…the sixteenth,” (Spector, 312). This is probably so. It is hard to imagine an otherwise rational commander of men throwing all measure of tactical foresight to the winds and declining a decisive fleet action in favor of a few transports and a beachhead that did not really need his support to maintain. Since this is so, it is not unreasonable to believe that Spruance’s actions were in keeping with what he believed to be the best course of action available to him at the time based upon the bulk of available evidence. In his eyes, throwing his fleet at the Japanese not only risked the fleet, but also the transports, Saipan, and possibly the whole shooting match as well. While in hindsight it is apparent that, as Spruance’s biographer Thomas Buell puts it, “he chose to risk his carriers rather than the forces off Saipan…a poor choice, since the loss of the carriers would ultimately have been far more disastrous…than the loss of some transports,” (Spector, 312), it is at least conceivable that within the context of the situation, the choice did not come across so clearly.

**II. The Battle of Leyte Gulf**

At the Battle of Leyte Gulf, Admiral William “Bull” Halsey was the man in charge. Determined not to miss out on another major fleet action such as those which had transpired at the Battle of the Coral Sea and Midway in his absence, at the battle of Leyte Gulf, “[c]arriers, not the Leyte beachhead, occupied his mind,” (Bradford, 352). The problems began shortly after the opening of the battle, when Halsey received word that the Japanese carrier group was coming into the battle from the north. Instead of pursuing the carriers with a reasonable number of ships and leaving a force behind to defend the highly vulnerable San Bernardino Strait against Kurita’s main force, Halsey decided that the best course of action was to throw caution to the winds and send everything he had north in order to try the issue in decisive battle. So great was Halsey’s lust for a shot at glory that he completely ignored the fact that intelligence had been developed pointing towards a decoy attack *specifically designed* to pull him away from the center and give Kurita’s fleet an opportunity to punch through the San Bernandino Strait, complete the encirclement of the Leyte beachhead, and cut off MacArthur from support by sea.

The crux of the matter arose in the time immediately following Halsey’s decision to blitz Ozawa. Nobody was sure whether or not Task Force 34, an emergency formation designed for use in a situation where Halsey’s main force needed to move from the center in order to pursue a significant Japanese force, had been formed. Despite repeated suggestions from every quarter that Task Force 34 should be detached in order to protect Leyte Gulf from being overrun while the remainder of the Third Fleet attacked the northern Japanese force, “Halsey never hesitated. He swung north with the entire Third Fleet,” (Bradford, 354). In this case, Halsey was so blinded by his desire to conduct a major carrier battle that he put his primary mission aside entirely, defied orders, spurned council, and in doing so played right into the hands of the enemy. It took the combined efforts of Chester Nimitz along with what seems like half the Pacific command structure, *and* the famous transcription error “Where is RPT where is Task Force Thirty Four RR the world wonders,” (Bradford, 356) to sufficiently curb Halsey’s enthusiasm for an engagement with Ozawa’s diversionary force.

Left on their own without any heavy support, which they had had every reason to believe was present, Clifton Sprague and the Taffy 3 escort cruiser squadron had to fight a running battle with the vastly superior Japanese force under Kurita, during the course of which four ships and many lives were lost. Such damage and death was needless. Had Halsey not withdrawn his entire force in pursuit of what turned out to be carriers without air capabilities, or if he had at the very least left Task Force 34 behind, the whole affair would have probably gone off more or less without a hitch. Kurita’s forces would have run into a wall of gunfire on exiting the San Bernadino Strait, Halsey would have had and won his carrier action because he would not have had to withdraw at the critical juncture before engaging the enemy carriers in order to attempt to salvage the already botched situation at Leyte Gulf, and the shore forces would have been at no point exposed to the possibility of complete and total ruin through the negligence of the man in charge of supporting them.

**III. Conclusion**

It is clear upon the examination of the evidence that while Spruance committed a serious blunder in not being aggressive enough off Saipan, he at least committed said blunder for a logically understandable reason and with the intention of following his orders to support the Saipan landing. Halsey, on the other hand, disregarded the council of countless subordinates, ignored the basic precepts of military theory, put his own goals above the lives of his men, and flagrantly ignored his orders. Halsey’s lapses in judgment cost hundreds of lives and put a major part of the Pacific campaign in jeopardy; Spruance’s mistake cost around a hundred lives, most if not all of which can be chalked up to the error in calculating Ozawa’s position. Spruance made a poor tactical decision in hindsight at the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Halsey had a “lapse in judgment” at Leyte Gulf that was apparent to everyone involved, including Halsey.