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Summary Article: **LEYTE GULF, BATTLE OF (1944)**

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The last major naval battle of World War II. The Battle of Leyte Gulf also qualifies as the largest naval battle ever fought, although it can be broken into several independent engagements of the campaign to seize the island of Leyte as the first step in the recapture of the Philippines from the Japanese. This epic battle engaged some 200,000 men and 282 American, Japanese, and Australian ships over more than 100,000 square miles of sea.

Technically, the Battle of Leyte Gulf comprises four separate naval actions apart from the amphibious assault, which was relatively uneventful. The naval actions included the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea (October 24), the Battle of Surigao Strait (October 24–25), the Battle off Samar (October 25), and the Battle off Cape Engaño (October 25–26). Only when taken as a whole does the Leyte Gulf campaign exceed the Battle of Jutland (1916) as the greatest naval battle in history.

The Japanese detected the U.S. amphibious force approaching the island of Leyte in the Philippines on October 17. The Japanese responded by initiating Operation Sho-1, an all-out counterattack by all available fleet units. Four separate Japanese naval forces approached Leyte, one from the north and three from the west. The northern force—containing the only four Japanese aircraft carriers remaining in action, but now almost devoid of aircraft—approached the island of Luzon in order to draw the attention of the overwhelmingly superior U.S. carrier forces. The other three Japanese forces, which contained the last surface warships of the imperial navy, steamed toward Leyte, intending to arrive at Leyte Gulf through the San Bernardino and Surigao straits on October 25, with superior numbers to defeat the U.S. amphibious force.

United States air reconnaissance, however, detected all the Japanese groups with sufficient time to effect an all-day series of air strikes on the Japanese main force of battleships and cruisers crossing the Sibuyan Sea. The largest and most modern Japanese battleship was sunk, and several ships were damaged before the Japanese turned back to their base. However, after dark, this main force resumed course for the Leyte rendezvous.

Meanwhile, the two other Japanese surface forces approached the Surigao Strait and ran into a large and well-prepared Allied force of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and torpedo boats, which destroyed the Japanese in successive actions. As a result, no Japanese ship would enter Leyte Gulf from the south.

After striking the Japanese main force in the Sibuyan Sea, U.S. admiral William F. Halsey took his Third Fleet north to strike the Japanese carriers force, leaving no units guarding San Bernardino Strait. The result was a curious and generally unsatisfactory end to an otherwise lopsided Allied victory. Halsey's fleet sank the Japanese carriers and closed in with surface ships for a final assault in the Battle off Cape Engaño.

At the same time, however, urgent messages filled the communications channels from three groups of U.S. small escort carriers stationed off the eastern coast of Samar Island to support the landings. The Japanese main force had reached this northern approach to Leyte Gulf with four battleships, six heavy cruisers, and a flotilla of destroyers, only a few hours from the clustered transport groups still unloading

across the beaches of Leyte.

Halsey broke contact with the Japanese and rushed south, but the small carriers and their escorting destroyers saved the day, with a heroic fighting withdrawal that badly damaged the Japanese. The demoralized Japanese withdrew, losing only a single destroyer to Halsey as he rushed to the San Bernardino Strait too late to intercept. Ultimate victory was thus tinged with failure in this last battle. Nevertheless, it left the Japanese navy a mere shell of its prewar strength, its surviving ships fleeing to home ports or distant parts of the empire.

See also

Amphibious Warfare; U.S. Army; U.S. Marine Corps; U.S. Navy; World War II

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