

## **Allied Strategy in the First Phase of the Pacific War: Pearl Harbor and the U.S. Reaction**

Williamson Murray

### Introduction

The truism that surrounds the disaster of Pearl Harbor is that the destruction of the battleship fleet provided the U.S. Navy with a wake up call that put it on the path to victory in the Pacific. Like all such popular beliefs there is a grain of truth in it, but there is also considerable misunderstanding of the hard processes through which U.S. military, and especially the navy had to go before it was fully combat ready and prepared to handle the Imperial Japanese Navy on relatively equal terms. In fact, Pearl Harbor was only the opening round of a series of crisis that molded and shaped both American strategy and the nature of the conflict.

It is the purpose of this paper then to examine American naval and military strategy over the course of the first ten months of the conflict to winnow out what actually happened and how the services, particularly the navy, transformed themselves from a peacetime force with a peacetime bureaucratic culture into the awesome instrument that they were to become by summer 1943. The crucial point here on which this paper will focus will be the reciprocal influences of strategy and operations on American strategic leadership at the sharp end of combat against Japanese forces during the first eleven months of the Pacific War – a period that laid the basis for the eventual American triumphs of 1943 and 1944.

### The Impact of Pearl Harbor

Thirteen months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the senior military leaders of the United States had cast the overall direction of American strategy. Admiral Harold “Betty” Stark had signed off on a planning document known to historians as “Plan Dog,” in reference to its key paragraph. That paragraph argued that should the United States find itself at war with the Axis powers, it needed to focus the great bulk of its industrial and military power on defeating Nazi Germany, while remaining on the defensive in the Pacific. Stark’s argument rested on the realistic appraisal that, given its weak economic base, Japan could not win a war in the Pacific, while, on the other hand, the formidable power that the Third Reich had displayed in crushing France in a campaign that had lasted barely six weeks underlined that the Germans might be able

to win the war in Europe. Underlining Stark's argument was also a substantial underestimation of the military effectiveness of the Japanese services, an underestimation that was to plague U.S. commanders well into the conflict. It was also to plague the perceptions of the American people.<sup>1</sup>

Signed on November 12, 1940, Stark soon received the agreement of the army's chief of staff, General George C. Marshall to the strategic approach enunciated in the "Plan Dog" memorandum. Given the delicate political position in which he found himself, the American president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, did not formally agree after his military leaders had passed on their strategic assessment.<sup>2</sup> But the fact that he did not disagree with their assessment represented a tacit approval of their recommendations. But as the president and his senior military advisers would soon discover, the strategic path that one follows very much depends on the political context within which the conflict unfolds and the decisions the enemy makes, rather than on prewar planning.

As innumerable historians have pointed out, the attack on Pearl Harbor provided the glue that united a divided American people. But that factor, which was to contribute so mightily to American victory in the Second World War, also was to have a profound effect on American strategy. In effect, the outrage of the American people was such that the U.S. military in its strategic approach could not afford to ignore the Pacific theater. Moreover, the stunning series of Japanese victories over the course of the first six months of the conflict demanded an American response, not just for political reasons, but because the further outwards the Japanese tide of conquest was to reach, the more difficult the American counteroffensives would become.

One of the major contributions that the attack on Pearl Harbor made was to remove an immediate American counteroffensive from the list of possibilities. The sinking of the obsolete battleships at Pearl meant that the illusion of an American fleet driving across the Central Pacific to relieve hard pressed American forces in the Philippines was no longer in the cards. Had the attack on Pearl Harbor not occurred, it is probable that a combination of the Navy's inclinations, political pressure from the American people, and the desperate situation of U.S. forces in the Philippines would have resulted in such an offensive, which most probably would have resulted in a catastrophic military defeat.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This fact was to lead the marine corps to release the gruesome pictures of dead marines who had been killed in the fierce fighting at Tarawa.

<sup>2</sup> During his re-election campaign, Roosevelt had promised not to send American servicemen abroad to fight. The fact that the Congress of the United States would renew the draft by a single vote in July 1941 when America's strategic situation was even more desperate suggests how divided the American people were right up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

<sup>3</sup> It would not have so much been the loss of the ships, but the loss of their crews which would have been disastrous. While American casualties resulting from the Pearl Harbor attack were heavy, most of the crews, petty officers, and officers

But the losses placed American strategists in a considerable quandary: how best to use what was left of the fleet to advantage. Here, the major changes in senior leadership that occurred in the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor were to play a key role. With America's entrance into the conflict, President Roosevelt made a number of major changes at the senior most leadership levels. First of all, he relieved the senior American leaders at Pearl Harbor, Admiral H.E. Kimmel and Major General W.C. Short. At the same time to all intents and purposes, he relieved Stark and packed the admiral off to exile in London. His replacement was one of the most ferocious and competent military leaders in American military history, Admiral Ernest J. King. King's harsh, but justified, comment on his predecessors as well as on the prewar navy was that:

The Navy cannot evade a share of responsibility for the Pearl Harbor incident. The disaster cannot be regarded as an 'Act of God' beyond human power to prevent or mitigate...

The derelictions on the part of Admiral Stark and Admiral Kimmel were faults of omission rather than faults of commission. In the case in question, they indicated [a] lack of the superior judgment necessary for command commensurate with their rank and their assigned duties, rather than culpable inefficiency... Appropriate administrative action would appear to be the regulation of these officers to positions in which lack of superior judgment may not result in future errors.<sup>4</sup>

King's comments reflected the harsh, thrusting nature of the man who was to provide the ruthless house cleaning that, as we shall see, the navy desperately needed. In an earlier conference here at the National Institute of Defense Studies, I quoted my colleague Allan Millett on King's personality. Let me do so again, because I believe it captures both the nature of the man as well as many of the qualities that are needed under the terrible pressures of war:

[King's] influence stemmed completely from his professional expertise and force of mind, not his character. The kindest thing one of his admirers and closest associates, Rear Admiral Charles M. 'Savvy' Cooke, Jr., could say was that King was 'a man of action,' while another intimate called King 'meaner than I can describe.' Twice passed over for chief of naval operations in peacetime, King returned to Washington from Command of the Atlantic Fleet to be chief of naval operations... He had one mission: crush Japan...

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survived to flesh out and train the swelling tide of new recruits who would man the massive production of U.S. shipyards.

<sup>4</sup> Admiral King was commenting was endorsing a report made by the U.S. Navy's court of inquiry. Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 3, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific, 1931 – April 1942* (Boston, 1948), p.142.

King was just the man to ruin the Japanese, since he had a lifetime of practice in crushing adversaries and embarrassing associates...

Becoming an admiral improved King's behavior not a wit. He raged at subordinates in public, ruled his bridge with fear, and railed at incompetents and officers he thought too charming. He made life miserable for everyone around him...<sup>5</sup>

But as Millett also points out: "his sheer mastery of every aspect of naval warfare and administration kept him moving from on challenging assignment to another."<sup>6</sup> After the war he was quoted as saying: "When the going gets tough, they send for the sons of bitches" – a statement which he denied saying, but then added that he wished he had said.

Undoubtedly, it was his character that had led Roosevelt to pass over King not once, but twice in the selection processes for the position of chief of naval operations. King's competence lay in a number of areas, but his three most important attributes were: 1) his thorough understanding of and grounding in naval matters from submarines and aircraft to logistics; 2) his ability to pick first class combat leaders; and 3) a ruthlessness that paid not the slightest heed to the niceties of the naval profession and its hallowed traditions.

The second crucial appointment that Roosevelt and his advisers made was to reach down in the ranks of admirals and select Admiral Chester Nimitz to replace Kimmel as CINCPAC – Commander in Chief Pacific. In many ways Nimitz was almost the exact opposite of King. He was a genuinely nice man, who treated his staff and those with whom he came in contact with considerable politeness and consideration. But like King, Nimitz was enormously competent and an excellent judge of human strengths and weaknesses.<sup>7</sup> He would make few mistakes in picking the leaders to wage America's war against Imperial Japan.

King was appointed Commander in Chief United States Fleet – which worked out to the terrible acronym, CINCUS ("sink us") Fleet – on December 20, 1941; he would soon assume the title of Chief of Naval Operations with greater powers. Admiral Nimitz received his appointment on December 17 and arrived in Pearl Harbor on Christmas day. Both men faced an enormous number of challenges. In strategic terms they had to find ways to prevent the Japanese from winning decisively in the Pacific before the overwhelming productive power of American industrial production could tell in the "correlation of forces."

But equally important was the fact that they were going to have to alter the navy's peacetime

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<sup>5</sup> Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won, Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> For an admirable study of Admiral Nimitz's career, personality, and leadership qualities see among others E.B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD, 1976).

culture which had contributed so mightily to the disaster at Pearl Harbor. And this meant they were going to have to weigh the performance of the combat admirals in the Pacific – some of whom were close friends and all of whom had been colleagues for decades – and replace those who did not come up to the mark, while promoting those who displayed initiative and drive.

Nothing underlined the latter problem more clearly than the fiasco of the efforts to relieve the hard-pressed garrison of marines and civilians on Wake Island. On December 11, 1941 a small Japanese task force attacked Wake and suffered a humiliating rebuff. It was about the only significant defeat the Japanese were to suffer in the first six months of the war. What was clear was that the Japanese would soon return. If the garrison at Wake, already extended to the utmost by the first Japanese assault, were to be reinforced then the authorities at Pearl were going to have to act quickly and decisively.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, they failed to act in any fashion. As one of the enlist battleship survivors recorded in his memoirs about his temporary duty at CINCPAC headquarters, there was nothing but confusion and chaos among the senior officers.<sup>9</sup> Admiral Kimmel made some half-hearted efforts to succor the garrison. Utilizing all three available carriers present in the Pacific, the admiral designed an overly complex plan that involved a diversionary raid on Jaluit to tie down Japanese forces in the Marshalls. Halsey's *Enterprise* group was to cover Oahu. The relief was to be under the command Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, despite the fact that the commander of the *Saratoga* task force had considerably greater experience in aviation matters.

Thus, the three carrier task groups were divided instead of concentrated, while the admiral in charge of the expedition was soon to prove himself not only inept, but overly cautious in carrier operations. Thus, Fletcher's group spent all too much time in refueling rather than in moving with dispatch to Wake. Moreover, even after the Japanese had made a successful landing on the island, Fletcher still had the opportunity to savage the transports and the covering force of cruisers and destroyers. As Admiral Morison notes in his history of the navy in the Pacific War, Admiral Sir John Jervis had commented after the Spanish fleet had appeared on the horizon in the late eighteenth century: "A victory is very essential to England at this moment." And then he had proceeded to wreck a fleet that was nearly twice his size.<sup>10</sup>

But it was not just Fletcher who had failed to seize the opportunity. Vice Admiral W. S. Pye, acting CINCPAC until Nimitz arrived on the scene, had proven no more willing to take risks. And in the end success in war is a matter of taking risks. Unlike that greatest of all American

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<sup>8</sup> For a short discussion of the ill-fated relief expedition to Wake see among others Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*, pp. 235-254.

<sup>9</sup> See Theodore C. Mason, *Battleship Sailor* (Annapolis, MD, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*, p. 249.

generals, Ulysses S. Grant, “Pye... could apprehend everything that the enemy might do, but was inclined to wait and see what developed before doing anything himself.”<sup>11</sup> The result was that the instructions that Pye sent Fletcher were anything, but clear, and that lack of clarity simply added to the latter’s unwillingness to take any serious risk in the attempt to relieve Wake.

#### Military Strategy and the First Six Months of the War

In their approach to U.S. military strategy in the Pacific, King and Nimitz developed a clear vision of how their forces needed to deal with the Japanese. First, the U.S. Navy had to maintain a limited initiative to keep the Japanese off balance and to damage and destroy their combat capabilities. Second, they had to protect the sea lines of communications to Australia and New Zealand. Third they had to protect the triangle of the Hawaiian Islands, Midway Island, and Johnston Island as the crucial jumping off point for the war against the Japanese. And fourth, they had to pursue a careful approach that insured the United States established sufficient base and logistical infrastructure to provide the support necessary to take advantage of the massive buildup of U.S. naval forces in the theater that would begin to arrive in the Pacific in summer 1943.<sup>12</sup> Finally, despite the squawks from General Douglas MacArthur about being abandoned with U.S. forces in the Philippines, there would be no aid to the hard pressed garrison, nor would the United States make any additional effort to bail out the hard pressed forces of its Allies in the battles for Malaya and the Dutch East Indies beyond the few ships that had formed a part of the small Asiatic fleet already deployed in the area.<sup>13</sup>

But along with those three strategic principles went a process of weeding out those senior officers who lacked the judgment and aggressiveness. Pearl Harbor may well have been a wake up call to Americans, but with the exception of the unfortunate Stark, Kimmel, and Short, there was no clear way to determine who among the senior officers would possess the necessary qualities to hold the higher combat commands except by observing them in action. Here, both King and Nimitz were tough enough to insure that those who did not measure up soon found themselves shuffled off to commands that were far away from the struggle and where they could do no damage to the conduct of the war.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>12</sup> At that point, nearly one *Essex*-class carrier would begin arriving in the Pacific every month, along with a full compliment of aircraft and protecting vessels every month.

<sup>13</sup> For the best account of the disastrous course of Allied operations in this theater see H.P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance, Japanese and allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (Annapolis, MD, 1982).

Nimitz was obviously more diplomatic about the weeding out process. In other words he was only ruthless in personnel choices when it mattered, whereas King seems to have reveled in opportunities to humiliate those for whom he had little respect. When Nimitz arrived in Pearl Harbor to assume his new command, he made clear to the staff that he was not there as a hatchet man, but would evaluate the staff on its merits. He even kept Admiral Pye in command of the remaining battleships – a gesture that carried little risk, because those obsolete dreadnoughts could not keep up with the carriers and were soon relegated to the west coast of the United States.

Nimitz and his command were also lucky in that after Pearl Harbor the Japanese high command focused its attention on the western Pacific, the Philippines, Malaya, Burma, and the Dutch East Indies. It was almost as if they had forgotten that the United States existed. Admittedly, the major factor in Japan's going to war had been the need to seize the oil rich Dutch East Indies after the United States and its allies had declared an embargo on petroleum exports to Japan.

What is indeed astonishing in terms of the Japanese underestimation of their extraordinary dangerous opponent gathering his strength in the east was the whole Indian Ocean expedition, which achieved virtually nothing in terms of its strategic impact with the sinking of a few merchant vessels and one light carrier in no position to pose a threat to the Japanese position in Southeast Asia. There were strategic possibilities in undermining the British position in that region, but a mere carrier raid was incapable of realizing them. Moreover, the raid cost the Japanese carriers a significant number of a valuable aircrews, which could have been far better used against the Americans.

One suspects that the relatively easy successes the Japanese had gained against U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines reinforced the picture that all too many senior Japanese officers held of Americans as being incapable of establishing a military that could measure up to their warrior standards. Moreover, given the origins of the Imperial Japanese Navy, the Royal Navy appeared to be a vibrant threat, one which in reality was largely imaginary in character, especially in comparison to what the Americans were preparing.<sup>14</sup>

This state of affairs allowed the U.S. Navy to pursue an aggressive strategy but within the constraints imposed by its limited resources. It also allowed the United States to rush reinforcements out to Samoa. In early January Rear Admiral "Bull" Halsey's *Enterprise* task force covered the movement of four transports and an ammunition ship carrying much of the 2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the Japanese attitude toward the Royal Navy see H.P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin, Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies, February to June 1942* (Annapolis, MD, 1983), p. 48.

Marine Division to that island.<sup>15</sup> At the same time a Japanese amphibious force was occupying Rabaul, thereby setting the stage for what would prove to be the long, drawn-out battle over the Solomons. Far more than the Japanese high command, King and Nimitz recognized the crucial importance of these islands to the future course of the war.

The beginning of February saw the Americans deliver their first major strike at the Marshalls. Halsey led the *Enterprise* deep into the Marshall Island chain; his forces were only 36 miles from Wotje and 155 miles from Kwajalein, while Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance led a task force of two heavy cruisers to bombard Wotje. Meanwhile Fletcher with the *Yorktown* struck three islands in the southern portion of the chain.<sup>16</sup> The damage achieved by these strikes was minimal: one transport and sub-chaser sunk, and an assorted number of other ships damaged.

But the importance of this raid was two-fold. It provided a clear indication to those back home that the United States was striking back at the nation's detested Japanese opponent and provided much needed combat experience to the aircrew that participated in the attacks on the Japanese held islands. Other raids in succeeding months were even less successful. In early February an attempt to strike Rabaul was called off, because the Japanese had picked up the approach of the raiders. At the end of the month Halsey struck the newly ensconced Japanese garrison on Wake Island, but the results were minimal: three flying boats destroyed and undoubtedly a few of the garrison killed and wounded.

Perhaps the most successful strike came in the South Pacific, when a task force under Rear Admiral Wilson Brown responded to the Japanese landings at Salamaua on the northeast coast of New Guinea. Brown had recommended to Nimitz that single carrier task forces were simply too small to defend themselves and strike the enemy a significant blow. Nimitz then provided Brown the *Lexington* and the *Yorktown* to strike the Japanese landings. Flying over the Owen Stanley Mountains, the attackers lost only one aircraft in sinking one light cruiser, one minesweeper, and one transport. Nevertheless, none of these raids achieved any significant results: tactically, operationally, or strategically. Admiral Morison quotes one senior officer about their impact on the Japanese high command: "the Japs didn't mind them any more than a dog minds a flea."<sup>17</sup>

But the most important aspect of American strategy lay in the rapid buildup of bases and defense forces on the islands that were to prove crucial to defending the sea lines of communications with New Zealand and Australia. At the end of January a major convoy

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<sup>15</sup> Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*, p. 259

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 268.

transited the Panama Canal on the way with the men and equipment to construct the refueling base at Bora Bora. A second, and even larger convoy, carried 20,000 troops to garrison Christmas Island, Canton Island, Noumea, and New Caledonia. In effect, the Americans were building up a base structure and logistical infrastructure that would prove crucial in the coming battle for the Solomons. And all of this was occurring with minimal interference from Japanese forces, with the exception of a few, isolated submarine attacks.

In mid-April the Americans launched the famous Doolittle Raid on Tokyo. While the B-25s achieved only minimal military success in damaging their targets, their strike represented a slap in the face of the Japanese high command. The details of the raid need not delay us here, since this audience knows all too well what happened. The damage inflicted on Japan's military and industrial capacity by the raiders was minimal. However, the indirect, second-order effects would prove significant. Four Japanese Army fighter groups immediately redeployed to the Home Islands, where they were to provide no support to ongoing operations over the rest of 1942. Even more important was the fact that the naval high command set in motion the planning for an immediate attack on Midway to capture that important bastion on the way to the Hawaiian Islands with the aim of destroying the U.S. fleet.

Nevertheless, the Americans did take considerable risks in mounting the Doolittle raid. Only the fact that Japanese plans slipped allowed the Americans to get the *Lexington* and the *Yorktown* to the Coral Sea in time to meet the Japanese thrust at Port Moresby.<sup>18</sup> The resulting inconclusive battle represented a Japanese tactical victory, but a strategic defeat. While they succeeded in sinking the *Lexington*, they lost the use of the *Shokaku* and the *Zuikaku* for the upcoming Midway expedition, the former due to bomb damage, the latter due to losses in its aircraft complement. Moreover, the American attacks succeeded in stopping the assault on Port Moresby.

Hard on the Coral Sea came the Battle of Midway. Up to this point, every chance of war had gone in favor of the Japanese. But at Midway, the gods of war rolled the iron dice, and everything that could go wrong, went wrong for the attacking forces. The defeat at Midway represented a catastrophe for the Japanese, with the destruction of four carriers, but more important with the loss and of their valuable air crew. From this point on, Japanese superiority in air operations steadily sank.

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<sup>18</sup> H.P. Willmott in an otherwise first-class work minimizes the strategic and political impact of the Doolittle Raid, while emphasizing the risks that the Americans took. Nevertheless, war is about morale and political will as anything else and in the end, the Americans were able to get to the Coral Sea in time to thwart Japanese efforts to capture Port Moresby by an amphibious landing. For Willmott's criticism see *The Barrier and the Javelin*, p.

Yet, the American success at Midway represented more the influence of the skillful use of intelligence and the utilization of chance than of American superiority. Admittedly, informed by intelligence about Japanese plans, strengths and intentions, Admiral Spruance held a strong hand, which he played with extraordinary skill. He commanded because Halsey was sick, but he was selected by Nimitz and Halsey because he possessed a brilliant mind and the heart of a great commander.<sup>19</sup> He was not an aviator, but he understood war and combat best of all the senior naval leaders the U.S. Navy produced in the war. He was undoubtedly a superior operational commander.<sup>20</sup>

The victory at Midway only provided a short breathing space, because the Japanese still retained a substantial superiority, particularly in surface ships. And should they use that superiority in an aggressive fashion, they were in a position to break the American sea lines of communications to Australia. One might think that after the devastating defeat at Midway that the Japanese would have striven to redress the balance by striking south where the Americans were weak. They did nothing of the sort, other than continuing the construction of Rabaul as a major sea and air base.

Thus, it would be the Americans who would mount an offensive, one that was in every respect on a show-string. After the seizure of a sea plane base at Tulagi, the Japanese had begun construction of an airfield on Guadalcanal, from which upon completion they would be able to dominate the Solomons and place themselves in a position to pose a major threat to the whole Allied position in the Southeast Pacific. But the Japanese effort on Guadalcanal was lackadaisical: construction engineers to build the airfield guarded by a few third line troops. It was a terrible tactical mistake and an even worse strategic one.

King determined that the Americans would parry the Japanese effort to build a base at Guadalcanal. The only available landing force was the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, which had recently arrived in New Zealand; its commanders had been informed that the division would not be committed to combat for six months. It did not even get six weeks. Luckily the Japanese on Guadalcanal were not prepared to offer serious resistance. Thus, the amphibious landings on August 8, 1942 were a complete success, while the marines were able to quickly seize the airfield the next day. Moreover, not only was the airfield almost completed, but the Japanese defenders left their construction equipment intact as they retreated into the jungle, so that American engineers could complete the landing strip in slightly more than a week.

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<sup>19</sup> He commanded Halsey's cruiser squadron in the raid on the Marshalls.

<sup>20</sup> Significantly when the war was over and he could have received any major command, he asked to return to the Naval War College at Newport, where he had served not one but two tours on the faculty.

Henderson Field provided the Americans with an almost completed base from which they could dominate the Solomons during daylight hours over the course of the battles that would occur over the remainder of the year. Thus, its possession would maximize American military power and minimize that of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

But what followed at sea was a disaster. Admiral Fletcher, commander of the covering force of carriers, which was supposed to remain in the area for three days, immediately pulled out. The landing commander, Admiral Richmond Kelly “Terrible” Turner, took the courageous decision to remain in the area and continue the landing of the supplies, weapons, and equipment the Marines would need to hold the island. But that correct decision was followed by general muddle among those charged in the immediate covering force with protecting the merchant shipping unloading supplies and weapons for the marines.

That night a Japanese task force of heavy cruisers sliced down the “slot” and wrecked Turner’s immediate covering forces of heavy cruisers, sinking no less than four heavy cruisers in what became known as the battle of Savo Island. Despite the fact that the Allies possessed radar picket ships, the Americans and the Australians were caught completely by surprise. It was the most disgraceful and avoidable defeat the Americans were to suffer during the course of the Pacific war.

What made the defeat at Savo Island even worse was the fact that had Fletcher remained in the area with his carriers, American aircraft would have been well positioned to gain a substantial measure of revenge by attacking the Japanese cruisers as they retired up the slot. But Fletcher had run away, his native caution reinforced by the fact that task forces under his command had already lost the *Lexington* and the *Yorktown*. The crucial point is that admirals who are afraid to put their ships in “harm’s way” are of no use in wartime. King, by now highly suspicious of Fletcher’s character and decisiveness in command, would relieve him three months later after the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands and send him off into retirement.

We do not have time here to cover the naval battles that soon gave the area around Savo Island, its well justified name of “Iron Bottom Sound.” But there are two crucial points to be made. The first was that the overall commander of the Solomons at the beginning of the campaign – commander Southern Pacific and South Pacific Force (ComSoPac) – Admiral Robert Ghormley, displayed neither leadership nor moral courage in providing guidance to the naval units and marines defending Guadalcanal. In fact, he did not even manage to find the toughness to force the Vichy French governor of Noumea to provide a headquarters on land. Instead he confined himself on board the sweltering confines of his headquarters ship, which did not possess air conditioning.

From that wretched position, Ghormley refused even to visit Guadalcanal to gain a first hand view of what was happening. Instead he passed out pessimistic reports by the bucket full, reports verging on defeatism. In mid-October, Nimitz had had enough and replaced Ghormley with Halsey.<sup>21</sup> The results were instantaneous. The latter immediately found headquarters available on Noumea and damn the French. Moreover, he immediately flew to Guadalcanal to evaluate the situation on the ground and promise the marines all the help it was in his power to give. He told Vandergrift that he would receive all the support the theater could provide. Within a matter of weeks Japanese forces approached from the north in what was to be the battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. Halsey's instructions to his sea forces stood in stark contrast to those of his predecessor: "Attack – Repeat – Attack."<sup>22</sup> The rest of the story simply put is history. Tutored in the harsh school of war, American commanders at every level reached a superb level of competence.

## Conclusion

What we see in the near year that took place between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the nasty little battle at Tassafronga on 30 November 1942 was a learning process in the U.S. Navy that took place in both the tactical and operational spheres. Intimately intertwined in those learning processes was a willingness to replace senior leaders, who failed in combat leadership and in the conduct of major operations and battles. In other words, the Americans were able to shed the cocoon of peacetime leadership and replace those who could not measure up with those who proved on the sharp end that they were capable of providing a strong hand on the till. Above all, with considerable help from Japanese leaders, the Americans were able to maximize their strategic approach, maintain their hold on what mattered, and significantly attrit the strength of Japanese air and naval power.

The process began at the start of America's entrance into the conflict with the replacement of Stark and Kimmel by King and Nimitz. Those two admirals then turned a ruthless hand to measuring the admirals under their command. The result was the replacement of the Ghormleys, Fletchers, and assorted others, by the Halseys and Spruances who would lead the U.S. Navy to its great victories of the last two years of the war. Moreover, the combination of a weeding out process of flawed senior commanders along with a careful, but aggressive strategic approach allowed the Americans to attrit Japanese naval forces, first at the great sea battles of the Coral Sea

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<sup>21</sup> At the same time Nimitz relieved Admiral Pye and sent him off to retirement as President of the Naval War College.

<sup>22</sup> Potter, *Nimitz*, p. 200.

and Midway and then in the vicious small unit actions that took place in the Solomons both in the air and at sea.

By November 1942 most of the prewar carriers and their pilots had been lost on both sides, but only the United States could look forward with optimism to the battles to come, given the massive production of its shipyards, aircraft factories, and training establishments. In many ways, the Americans had also been lucky. Midway was nothing less than a gift from the Gods. The stinging defeats in the Solomons that had lasted well in October 1942 had hurt, but they were never sufficient to threaten the vital operational positions that would prove crucial to the great counter offensives that started in 1943. Moreover, those defeats only served to stiffen the willingness of the American people to see the war through to a successful conclusion.

Had the Japanese high command taken greater risks, it might well have broken the limited the U.S. naval power available in the South Pacific. Moreover, it might also have destroyed the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division on Guadalcanal, which would have rebounded to the detriment of American morale. But they did not because of a combination of peacetime leadership and “victory disease” that led them to underestimate disastrously the threat they confronted. As the *Yamato* and *Musashi* rode at anchor in the Truk lagoon, the initiative steadily slipped from their hands.

In contrast to the Americans, it is worth noting that Admiral Nagumo was still leading the carrier task force of the Imperial Navy in late August 1942 in the Battle the Eastern Solomons as well as at the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands in late October despite his egregious failures at Pearl Harbor and Midway. In neither of these battles had he distinguished himself. Yet, in 1944 one finds him in charge of the defense of the crucial island of Saipan. King and Nimitz would not have stood for such incompetence. But the Japanese had the bad luck to have been astonishingly successful against ill-prepared and badly led opponents. Thus, there was no turn over of the commanders with a peace-time mentality.