DECISION!

BY WILBUR CROSS

For Admiral Bull Halsey, it was the war' critical moment. Three Japanese fleets were heading for the Philippines. Ahead lay the greatest sea battle of all time.

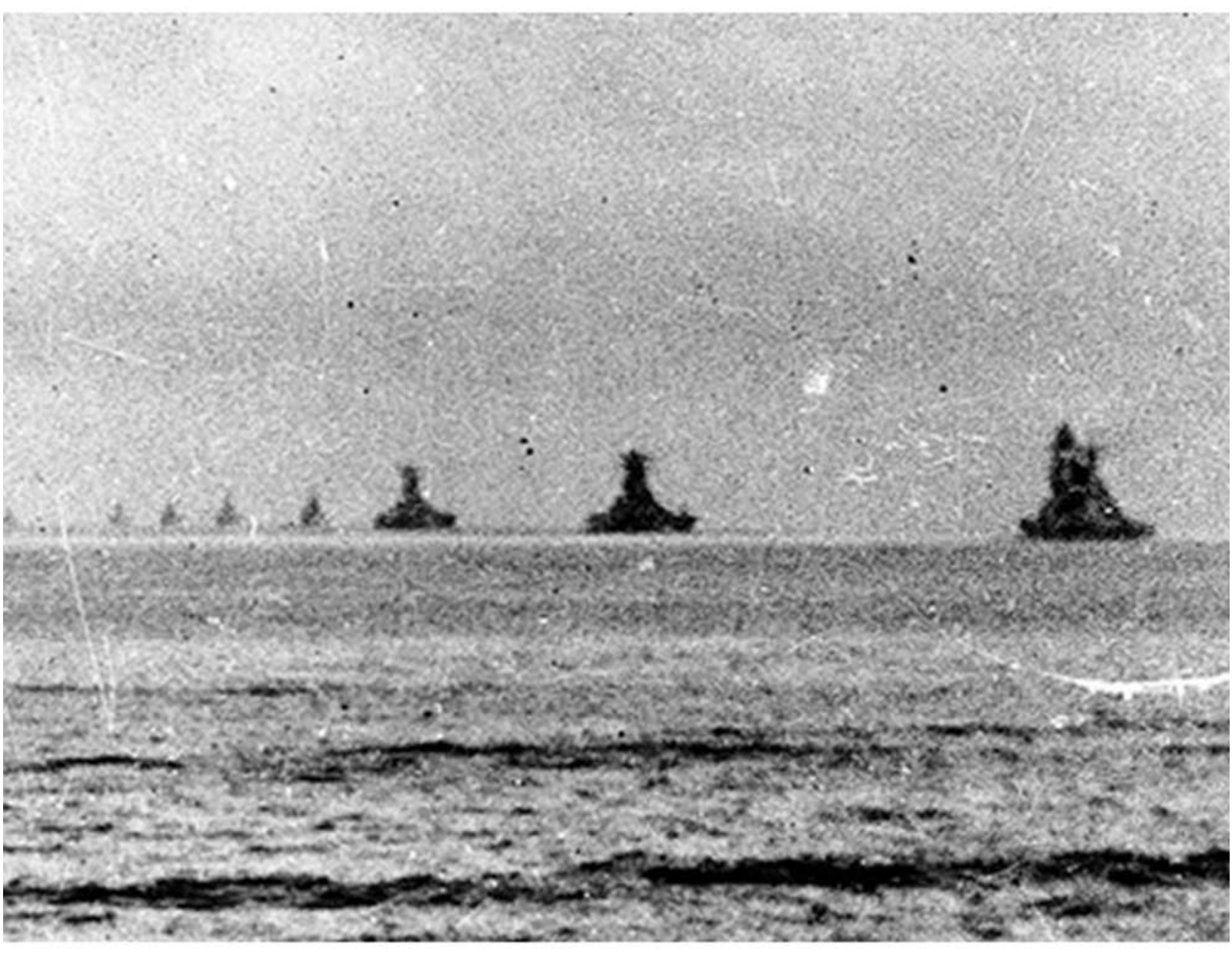
■ THE DISPATCH from the submarine *Harder*, lying off the southwestern tip of the Philippine Islands, was ominous that hot Monday, October 23, 1944. Several hundred miles to the northeast, 62-year-old Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey pondered the message and the brief information it gave:

MANY SHIPS INCLUDING 3 PROBABLE BATTLESHIPS 08-29N 116-30E COURSE 040 SPEED 18 CHASING

And thus it was that there began a battle whose size, scope and signifi-

cance were greater than anything that had ever occurred before in naval history—and whose match would never again be seen. It was called later the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

Just how large was the battle? It took place in an area of the Pacific as large as the states of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania combined. Within one ten-minute period, the Japanese lost more tonnage than existed in the entire Spanish Armada—more even than the Germans lost in the whole Battle of Jutland in World War I. As for ships involved, there were more (in terms of number, tonnage or any other standard) than had seen action at Trafalgar, Jutland, Pearl Harbor and the Battle of the Coral Sea combined.



To begin with, on October 20, three days before Halsey received the ominous message, some 650 American ships of all sizes and descriptions had moved shoreward in Leyte Gulf as General Douglas MacArthur began his famous "I have returned" invasion effort to retake the Philippines. The landing ships, plus an outlying defensive force of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, "jeep" carriers and other warships, comprised the U.S. Seventh Fleet, then dubbed "MacArthur's Navy."

While landing operations were going on, Admiral Halsey was ranging the waters to the east of the Philippines, looking for inevitable trouble, with his Third Fleet, which was far more powerful for battle purposes than the Seventh. There was no doubt in Halsey's mind that the Leyte landings represented the cru-

cial point in the Pacific war, and that their success or failure depended on the action of the U.S. Navy.

Looking back on it 15 years later, with the famous old sea dog barely gone to his final rest, one wonders how he would have reacted had he known that he was facing an action that was to represent, at the same time, the greatest achievement and the greatest controversy of his long and vigorous career.

Halsey, who died last August, was, as his nickname implied, a tough bulldog of a man. He had fought from one end of the Pacific to the other, often when defeat and death seemed to stare him in the face. He had under his command many another able officer—men like tight-lipped little Admiral Pete Mitscher, in charge of his fast big carriers. But he also had young, inexperienced officers fresh out of college NROTC training, and teen-aged seamen who a few months before had never even seen an ocean. How would they all react under fire when it came to an ultimate showdown?

Halsey had one of the most powerful fleets ever assembled in the U.S. Third, which was composed of four task groups, each with an average of two large carriers, two light carriers, two new battleships, three cruisers and about 14 destroyers. But he knew that the Japanese would be desperate in their attempts to hang onto the Philippines and to crush the U.S. Navy at a moment when it had conclusively committed itself to action and could not withdraw.

Halsey knew, too, that the Japanese had more than 500 planes stationed in the Philippines, ready to support naval operations from nearby landing strips. The message from the submarine *Harder* was his first indication that the fateful moment had arrived.

There had been several vital naval engagements already between the American and Japanese fleets in the course of the Pacific war. The first great encounter, fought largely between carrier-based planes, had been

the Battle of the Coral Sea, May 7 and 8, 1942. Although accomplishing one objective—forcing the Japanese to abandon their invasion of Port Moresby, New Guinea—the Navy had suffered heavily with the loss of the destroyer *Sims*, the tanker *Neosho* and the great new carrier *Lexington*.

One month later, at Midway, north of the Hawaiian Islands, the Navy lost the carrier *Yorktown* as well, along with other ships and many planes. But this time it was the Japs who limped away licking their wounds: four large carriers, two heavy cruisers, three destroyers and almost 300 planes—all destroyed in the first decisive defeat suffered by the Japanese in 350 years!

Then had begun the costly, interminable U.S. "march" across the Pacific, with few all-out naval battles, but with fleet units engaged in bombarding enemy islands, landing troops, and protecting the sea front as Marines and soldiers established meager footholds on disease-infested jungle-land.

There had been the start of the campaign for the Solomon Islands in August of 1942, destined to run its course of death and discouragement over two years that seemed like 20.

There had been the miserable Aleutians campaign, starting in the same summer, in which, in violent contrast to the South Pacific war, sailors battled ice, arctic winds and cruel seas as well as the enemy.

There had been the bitter Gilbert Islands campaign, climaxed by the tragic invasion of Tarawa, in which 15,000 Marines suffered 20 per cent casualties in just three days on the bloody beaches. This had been followed by the Marshall Islands campaign a little over three months later, in February, 1944, and in June by the First Battle of the Philippine Sea.

In the latter engagement, fought almost entirely in the air as the Battle of the Coral Sea had been, the Japanese suffered brutally in what was later called "The Marianas Turkey Shoot." In a single day,

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American forces shot down 397 enemy planes, losing only 18 of their own. Now, four months later, the Japanese Navy would be seeking revenge, with the advantage of knowing exactly where the Americans had to concentrate naval protection: along the eastern shores of Leyte, where MacArthur's men were struggling to land.

At 8:20 A.M. on the 24th, Halsey received another message, this one giving him the information he needed to take action. A carrier search plane had spotted the Jap force sighted the day before by the *Harder*, and was able to describe its strength: five large battleships nine cruisers, 13 destroyers and escorts—all headed for Leyte.

"Bull" Halsey studied the new message as he stood on the bridge of his flagship *New Jersey* in wrinkled khakis, tieless and with a baseball-type cap yanked down over his bristling, steel-gray hair. For an instant his tight lips clamped even tighter, the wrinkles around his sharp eyes seemed to knot, and his bony face seemed frozen.

Then his wiry body was all action as he bellowed instructions to his staff—"Halsey's Hell Raisers." Within two minutes he had analyzed the situation and radioed orders to every aircraft carrier in his force.

STRIKE! REPEAT: STRIKE!
GOOD LUCK!

Halsey was not only the Navy's senior admiral at sea. He was a skilled flier who had won his wings at Pensacola ten years before. Where another commander might have cautiously waited to sound out the enemy before committing his pilots to battle, Halsey went by his own unique rules of combat. They could be summed up as threefold: "Hit hard, hit fast, hit often!" And in carrying out these precepts, he applied another formula: "Do the opposite of what they expect you to do."

At 9:43 that morning came word of more trouble. A second, smaller Japanese force was reported to be approaching Leyte from the south.

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Halsey let it ride, knowing that Admiral Kinkaid, commanding the Seventh Fleet off Leyte, could intercept these raiders—which he quickly and successfully did. But at 5 P.M. that afternoon, with his carrier planes already starting to engage the Japanese armada sighted by the *Harder*, Halsey's piercing eyes lit up like the lights on a pinball machine. A third Japanese force had been sighted, far to his north and some 225 miles from the northeast tip of the Philippines.

To Halsey's air-minded way of thinking, this was the most important enemy fleet of all, for it consisted of four aircraft carriers, two battleships with flight decks astern, three cruisers and about eight destroyers.

Halsey did not hesitate. He recalled his carriers from the south and a new series of orders echoed up and down the "Flag Plot," the section of the *New Jersey* reserved for the functioning of the admiral and his staff. Within a few minutes, the entire U.S. Third Fleet— its various task units strung out over 250 miles of ocean—was swinging north to converge on the area in which the latest Japanese force was reported.

All through the night of October 24-25, Halsey hustled his fleet north, eager to engage the enemy. What he did not—and could not—know was that he was doing exactly what the Japanese hoped.

The Japanese high command had deliberately dispatched the carrier force to the north to decoy the powerful Third Fleet from Leyte. With Halsey's fast battleships and carriers out of the area, the Japanese figured that they had a chance of knocking MacArthur's army right back into the sea again. At about 6:30 in the morning of October 25, Halsey dispatched his carrier planes north to search out the enemy, and by 8:50 his anxiety was relieved when the report came in that they had sunk one Japanese carrier and damaged two more and a cruiser.

IT IS ALMOST inconceivable to grasp the problems in an engage-

ment of this size. The name "Battle of Leyte Gulf" itself was a misnomer, for the fighting took place, not in a single concentrated area, but over the vast reaches of the entire Philippine Sea. (For this reason it has often been termed "The Second Battle of the Philippine Sea.")

Just where, to begin with, was the enemy's exact position in the north? Where, Halsey had to know, were each and every one of some 100 major fighting ships in his own command? At what points should carrier planes be launched for attacks in order to reach the enemy and still have plenty of fuel for return? What would the situation be, back to the south, while all of the new carriers and fast battleships were committed to the north?

No man could be expected to have all the right answers. But for every error the U.S. Navy might have committed in the overall battle picture, the Japanese committed two. A good example of this was the valiant action of Rear Admiral Clifton (Ziggy) Sprague near Leyte. As soon as the Japanese commanders figured that the U.S. Third Fleet had been lured far enough north, their strongest force (the one originally sighted by the submarine *Harder*) steamed in with the intention of throwing the heavy battleships and cruisers against the Leyte defenders.

Suddenly, blocking their path and caught there unintentionally, was Admiral Sprague—leading a lonely element of the Seventh Fleet with a force of slow, 17-knot "jeep" carriers and some destroyers and tiny destroyer escorts. Then commenced one of the most lopsided battles of the entire war in the Pacific. Sprague barely had time to recover from his surprise and launch planes when he found himself pasted by heavy shellfire at 30,000 yards.

Then, in an incredible display of courage, Sprague's *Hoel* and *Johnston* (destroyers) and the *Roberts* (destroyer escort) advanced directly into the enemy fire. Unprotected, they daringly launched torpedoes at

ranges as close as 4,000 yards. There could be only one outcome: all three went down. But they scored heavily on a battleship and two cruisers, one of which reportedly sank.

Shortly afterward, Sprague's escort carrier *Gambier Bay,* riddled with eight-inch shells at a point-blank range of 2,000 yards, blew up; the *Kalinin Bay* was severely damaged; the *Kitkin Bay* was all but put out of action; and finally the *St. Lo* was hit and sunk.

And in this action, a new enemy terror appeared out of the sky: *kamikazes.* Though pilots fighting damaged planes (even some Americans) had in the past deliberately tried to hit enemy ships rather than plunge into the sea, the Battle of Leyte Gulf marked the first time that organized groups of Japanese suicide planes appeared as a major weapon.

His force decimated and his remaining ships out of ammunition, Sprague could have put up no more fight. The mighty Japanese fleet was free to plow through his scattered remnants and blast the vessels of the U.S. Seventh Fleet defending Leyte.

But suddenly, at about 9:30 that fateful morning of October 25, an astonishing thing happened. The Japanese, with partial victory in their grasp, turned northwest and began to retreat. So furiously had Sprague's little fleet battled that the Japanese commander was convinced he was facing not a weak secondary unit, but a large portion of the American fleet. By the time the Japanese realized their error, Halsey had reassigned squadrons of planes from his southernmost carriers to make things too hot for the enemy anyway.

So ended the greatest naval action

in history. No one knows what would have happened to our invasion of Leyte if the Japanese had pressed their advantage after wiping out Sprague's force. But one fact remains indisputable. Against an American loss of six ships sunk and 11 damaged, the Japanese suffered 26 sinkings and 25 vessels seriously damaged. One of the Japanese ships sunk was the mammoth 63,000-ton battleship *Musashi*, the largest vessel ever to go down in battle.

On October 23, 1944, the Japanese had gone into the Philippine waters as the world's third greatest naval power. By October 26, that same power had been decisively reduced to what one historian later called a "fishpond fleet."

Leyte proved to be the final great fleet action in history, too. For in this atomic, missile age, great, pitched sea warfare must be a thing of the past. Never again will huge fleets engage each other—ship for ship, task force against task force—in a battle of wits, fire power and maneuver. Leyte was the climactic naval victory of World War II—and all time. It can never be duplicated. ■ ■

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