Welcome to the May meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight is the final session of our 25th year, we close with John Wukovits, author of American Commando and Pacific Alamo, discussing the Battle of Leyte Gulf. He will be joined by veterans of the battle.

On two previous occasions this year (February and March 22) we have discussed the conflict over the Philippines. We learned about the demise of the 27th Bombardment Group and the defeat of the American forces in May of 1942, and the strategic problems the Japanese faced when instigating the Pacific War. The Japanese had hoped to fight a war of attrition with the United States, to make victory so painful that the Americans would eventually give up and negotiate a peace settlement. The war of attrition would also manifest itself at the tactical level for the Japanese; first, on land with the cave fighting on Peleliu, and second, the kamikaze tactics at sea.

Since the final surrender of the Philippines by American forces in May 1942 there was a determined strategy to fulfill General Douglas MacArthur’s promise to return. The Battle of Leyte Gulf would mark the beginning of that return. Instead of attacking Luzon or the Bataan Peninsula directly, planners decided to invade one of the smaller islands.

This invasion marked the confluence of two Pacific drives. MacArthur would control the ground fighting, and his air commander, General George Kenney, would be responsible for the land-based air operations. Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid’s Seventh Fleet would provide landing support while Admiral William “Bull” Halsey’s Third Fleet carried and launched a series of attacks. The Japanese battle fleet had to be scuttled.

Halsey’s aircraft found the Japanese battle fleet west of the San Bernadino Strait and sank the battleship Musashi and Admiral Kurita Takeo turned back. Satisfied that Kurita’s forces were taken care of, Halsey moved north and took with him all the carriers and fast battleships leaving nothing behind to guard the San Bernadino Strait and did not inform other naval commanders.

As Halsey did this, the Japanese High Command communicated their displeasure to Kurita about his retreat and he headed back through the San Bernadino Strait that were not guarded. The first contact between the Surface fleets in the Battle of Leyte Gulf was on the night of October 24th and 25th in the Surigao Strait. Two Japanese task forces entered the strait separately, but the US Seventh Fleets battleships sank all of them except one destroyer. Then shortly after dawn on the 25th, American escort carriers supporting the landing off Leyte spotted Kurita’s force of heavy cruisers and battleships. Kurita passed through the San Bernadino Strait and turned south and only a few American destroyers and escort carriers stood in his way. The weaker...
American forces attacked the Japanese fleet and even sank three heavy cruisers. If the Japanese had been able to keep moving the Americans would not have been able to stop them, but under continuous attack from the air, and crippled from the pounding of the previous days, Kurita turned back. Halsey’s failure to communicate clearly with Kincad and Nimitz (in Hawaii), and his failure to use Task Force 34 effectively to assist 7th Fleet later caused considerable damage to Halsey’s reputation.

The first kamikaze attacks occurred during the naval battle of Leyte Gulf. Novice Japanese pilots did not need to master air-to-air tactics or even how to do carrier landings since their sole purpose was to crash into US Navy ships. The suicidal pilots managed to damage some American ships and did sink the escort carrier St. Lô. Japanese leadership hoped that this last gasp of the attrition strategy could turn the war to their advantage. The effect of the kamikaze pilots, at first, surprised American commanders but did not alter the outcome.

The battle of Leyte Gulf marked the end of the Imperial Japanese Navy as a fighting force. Its remaining assets would be reserved for defense of the Home Islands. Their naval and air losses, combined with the loss of 5 infantry divisions doomed their hold on the Philippines.

Further Reading:
John Wukovits, American Commando: Evans Carlson, His World War II Marine Raiders and America’s First Special Forces Mission (New York: NAL Trade, 2010).

Announcements:
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - May 21, 2012 “Civil War on the Great Lakes”- Steve Anderson - 715-386-1268
Rochester WWII History Round Table – May 14, 2012 Pacific Submarine War, 507-280-9970; www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org
Fort Snelling Civil War Symposium April 2013, http://www.tccwrt.com/symposium.html or tccwrt@yahoo.com
Friends of Fort Snelling: www.fortsnelling.com

This is our 25th Year!

Comparative Strength and Losses, Battle of Leyte Gulf

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<tr>
<th>Initial Strength</th>
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<th>IJN</th>
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<td>Lost:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dest. Escort</td>
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</tr>
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Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazvjer45@hotmail - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org or Bill at 952-201-8400
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mngarmuseum.org 612-713-2523
Friends of Ft. Snelling: www.fortsnelling.com

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If you liked tonight’s program, view our prior programs: Return to the Philippines (Feb., 2011); Battle of Leyte Gulf (Jan., 2001); or Battle of the Philippine Sea (Feb., 2000). You may order these tonight for delivery next month by seeing Rob at the desk, or online at: www.barros.us/store or contact Rob at (763) 639-3399
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