

The Round Tablette

Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)

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Welcome to the second March meeting of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Nathan Prefer, author of *Leyte, 1944: A Soldiers' Battle*. He is joined by combat veterans of the Leyte Campaign.

In the history of World War II, "Leyte" usually means the Battle of Leyte Gulf where the American and Japanese navies squared off in a decisive naval battle. Enormous numbers of books cover this battle from every conceivable angle, but very few historical works examine the invasion of the island of Leyte and the nine month land battle that ensued.

Though an American colony since the Spanish-American War (1898), with a strong American military presence, there were, strangely, few maps available of the islands. Perhaps the fighting of the "Philippine Insurrection" (1899-1902), an intensive guerrilla/counter-insurgency war all through the island chain's jungles that involved both regular and national guard units bred a certain feeling that mapping was not essential. In any event, US Army and Navy knowledge of the Islands was amazingly deficient.

The Philippine Archipelago, consisting of over 7,000 islands, was the "Achilles Heel" in American strategic thinking before and during World War II. The islands were 7,000 miles from the United States west coast, 5,300 miles from Hawaii and 3,700 from Australia. To put some perspective on these numbers, it is 3,350 miles from Bangor, Maine to San Diego, California.

The Japanese conquered the Philippines in 1942; the fleeing American commander, General Douglas MacArthur, vowed "I Shall Return." Many Americans and natives refused to surrender and fled into the jungle hills of Leyte, Mindanao, and other islands, eventually forming guerrilla bands. The Japanese failed to either

persuade these guerrillas to surrender or to wipe them out, and more resources had to be used to bring the situation under control.

The Americans faced a strategic choice between taking Taiwan (Formosa to the Japanese) and re-taking the Philippines. Both threatened Japanese sea lanes between the Home Islands and the outlying resource colonies. Moving on the Philippines would additionally threatened the internal lines of movement between Japanese forces in the Philippines. Taiwan, ideal for operations against Japanese forces in China was sandwiched between the Japanese forces in both the Home and Philippine Islands, leading to the choice of the Philippines. The political connotations of returning to the Philippines - our former colony - were considerable, and MacArthur and others argued persuasively that we also had a moral obligation to the people of the Islands.

In 1944, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered Nimitz and MacArthur to plan for landings in Mindanao and then on Leyte, with landings on Luzon to follow later. Scarcity of landing craft, amphibious and fleet train shipping, and naval gunfire platforms led the JCS to cancel Mindanao and focus planning on Leyte, with landings ordered for December 1944. After aerial operations degraded Japanese capabilities on Mindanao, Okinawa, Taiwan, and in the Philippine Sea, the invasion was moved forward to October. ULTRA intercepts allowed US planners to assess Japanese intentions as well as identify force locations, etc.

The Japanese Navy's (IJN) perception that they had destroyed US Navy carriers and air power at Leyte Gulf led the Imperial General Staff to favor pouring resources into the defense of Leyte. Like the navy, the Japanese Army (IJA) sought a decisive battle with the Americans. They chose to fight that battle on Leyte. They transferred troops from Manchuria, Korea, and the home islands to gain sufficient power. As the Japanese did this, the United States, thanks to ULTRA, was also

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

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forced to commit more troops to the Leyte operation.

On October 20, 1944, Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's US Sixth Army, stormed ashore on the beaches of Leyte. Within hours the American forces had secured the beaches and moved far enough to the interior that General MacArthur and his staff could come ashore at Palo Beach. The Supreme Commander, SWPA, declared, "People of the Philippines, I have returned! By the Grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil." As they moved inland, the troops found the going got tough – the jungle terrain was as treacherous as the Japanese fire was.

General Tomoyuki Yamashita, with over 400,000 soldiers in the Philippines, coordinated a series of land, air, and sea battles against the Americans. The Americans responded by increased naval and air operations in support of ground action. Thus, the Battle of Leyte became a multi-dimensional joint operation, and would remain that way throughout the campaign.

Too soon, MacArthur declared that the troops on Leyte were in the process of "mopping up" operations. Forces operating in the jungles, be they guerrillas or conventional forces, are very tough to root out and defeat. Major combat lasted from October to December 1944, and "mopping up" took until May 1945, as small groups of Japanese continued fighting, planting booby traps, disguising themselves as American soldiers, and sniping. In the end approximately 3,500 US troops were killed and 12,000 wounded during the Leyte campaign. Their fight deserve to be remembered as more than a footnote to a naval battle.

Investing heavily in the defense of Leyte, the IJA lost 4 divisions and other combat units, while the IJN lost 26 warships, 46 large transports, and over half their land-based aircraft. Despite ULTRA, MacArthur's intelligence staff failed to realize the Japanese had decided to fight "the decisive land battle" on Leyte and provided insufficient air and naval support. They planned on a much shorter operation that used fewer troops. They did not realize that the terrain would hinder the development of Leyte as a military base for further operations. When the invasion was moved forward to October, it created supply problems from the start. The impact of terrain and tenacious Japanese resistance forced the logisticians to use an *ad hoc*, manpower/animal power intensive supply chain based in landing craft that further reduced the speed of forward advance. Still, many regard the seizing of Leyte

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as the "most decisive operation in the American reconquest of the Philippines."

Further Readings:

Nathan Prefer, *Leyte, 1944: A Soldiers' Battle* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2012).
Milan N. Vejo, *The Battle for Leyte, 1944: Allied and Japanese Plans, Preparations, and Execution*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014).
Kevin Holzimmer, *General Walter Krueger: Unsung Hero of the Pacific War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007)
Walter Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon: The 6th Army in World War II* (Washington D.C.: Combat Forces Press, 1953)
M. Hamlin Cannon, *Leyte: The Return to the Philippines* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, USGPO, 1970).
Clayton Chun, *Leyte 1944: Return to the Philippines* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2015)
Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945* (1992).

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table -
May 19, 2015 – Women in the Civil War -
www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Mar. 23,
2015 – Publishing *M&CIW* - 715-386-1268 –
rossandhaines@comcast.net
Fort Snelling Civil War Symposium - Apr. 11, 2015
- info@tccwrt.com
Rochester WWII History Round Table –
507-280-9970; www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000
Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050,
<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser -
crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717
CAF - Commemorative Air Force -
www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942
Minnesota Air Guard Museum -
www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523
Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org
Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN,
320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.
World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621, <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>
Airshow - Eden Prairie - 11/12 July 2015
www.wotn.org 952-746-6100

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2015

9 Apr. Air War in the Mediterranean
14 May Retrospective: Goals of WW2 Leaders

