



Written by on February 11, 2011

The Raid on Truk Lagoon

Having grown up during the years following World War II, it never fails to surprise me how little most people who haven't reached their mid-60s know of that epic conflict, especially the Pacific Theater. During the 1950s, we did not have to be formally taught about World War II — it was a topic in everyone's home. Every family had a veteran or two or had lost a son. War movies were regular fare at our local theater. The first series I watched on television was the incomparable *Victory at Sea*. The documentary footage, the music, and the narration — both the script and the delivery by Leonard Graves — penetrated into my heart and soul and have never left. It seemed that a new book on the war came out every week, and newspapers and magazines were full of articles about the war.



Because of all this, formal education contributed little to my knowledge of the war. Better to ask someone in the family who was there or read a book outside of school than ask a teacher. Most of the things that I had once assumed everyone knew about the war, though, have long ago been forgotten. One of the principal examples is what we called “payback for Pearl Harbor.” Today, people think of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That was not the case in WWII and certainly not the way we learned it growing up. Payback for Pearl Harbor was the U.S. Navy's famous air raid on Truk Lagoon during February 1944.

Truk Atoll lies seven degrees north of the equator in the southwestern Pacific, some 1,000 miles northeast of New Guinea and 3,300 miles southwest of Hawaii. Dozens of islands and a great barrier reef make up the atoll, although only seven of the islands are of any size or have any significant population. The larger islands are marked by volcanic peaks, the tallest nearly 1,500 feet above sea level. The barrier reef, roughly triangular in shape and 140 miles around, forms a vast deep-water lagoon of more than 800 square miles. Visibility in the water of the lagoon is 50 feet or more. Abundant rainfall and sunshine, and a year-round average temperature of 81 degrees, leave the islands green and lush. Truk is a Pacific paradise.

A Quick Take on Truk

Archaeological evidence suggests that the first people arrived at Truk some 2,000 years ago, sailing outrigger canoes. They found a lagoon teeming with marine life and the fertile larger islands covered with indigenous trees and plants, including breadfruit, coconut, mango, banana, and taro. Although the original inhabitants must have found Truk a paradise, life was not paradisiacal. Warfare among the inhabitants of different islands and between different factions on the same island was not unusual. War clubs crushed many a skull. Moreover, human sacrifice and cannibalism were common practices.



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Victims were not only enemy warriors captured in battle, but also young maidens offered up to a volcano god.

The first Europeans arrived when the Spanish explorer Alonso de Arellano sailed his ship, *San Lucas*, into the lagoon in January 1565. Although Spain laid claim to Truk, and the rest of the Caroline Islands — named for Charles II of Spain — she did not bother to take formal control for more than 300 years. In the meantime, explorers from Portugal, England, France, the United States, Russia, and Germany also visited the atoll. By the middle of the 19th century, European and American traders, whalers, and missionaries were visiting Truk. Japanese traders began arriving during the 1890s. One, Mori Koben, married a chief's daughter, became a successful planter and trader, and amassed a small fortune.

The Spanish-American War saw control of Micronesia, including the Caroline Islands and Truk, pass from Spain to the United States. The United States, however, focused American ambitions on the Philippines and sold Micronesia, except for Guam in the Marianas, to Germany for \$4.2 million. German rule was relaxed and benevolent, and short-lived. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Japan, in a secret pact with Great Britain, seized control of Micronesia. This was formally recognized in 1919 when the newly created League of Nations gave Japan a mandate over that vast stretch of ocean and islands.

Disregarding the restrictions of the mandate, which prohibited fortification or colonization of the islands, Japan wasted no time in settling thousands of Japanese throughout Micronesia. Truk was no exception. Japanese were settled on the principal islands of the lagoon, taking control of the best agricultural land and key ports, while the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific established its headquarters on Dublon (now called Tonoas). By the mid-1930s, Japanese colonists outnumbered the native people of Truk. This was true throughout Micronesia. By the end of 1941, there were nearly 100,000 Japanese in Micronesia and only some 50,000 Micronesians.

In further violation of the League of Nations mandate, Japan closed the Carolines to the outside world during the 1920s and began building airstrips and fortifying key islands, especially Truk's main islands. By the time the Japanese had finished, Truk had become the "Gibraltar of the Pacific" and would provide Japan with her greatest fleet anchorage outside of the home islands. Those who try to minimize Japan's culpability for the war in the Pacific have a difficult time explaining away Japanese actions in Micronesia during the 1920s and '30s.

Some have argued that Truk was the real objective of Amelia Earhart in her proposed around-the-world flight in 1937 in her Lockheed Electra. According to these theorists, Amelia Earhart and her copilot and navigator, Fred Noonan, were on a secret mission for President Franklin Roosevelt and the Department of War to photograph Truk but were shot down by the Japanese and captured. Others say this occurred at Saipan, which Japan had also stocked with Japanese settlers and heavily fortified. As much as the United States desired intelligence concerning Japanese activities in the Pacific, though, there has been no documented evidence unearthed suggesting that Earhart and Noonan were American spies. After taking off from Lae in New Guinea, they did fly in the general vicinity of Truk on their way to a refueling stop at Howland Island, but the best evidence indicates that, unable to sight Howland, a tiny speck of land, they ran out of gas and ditched in the sea. Whether they survived the landing and somehow made it to an uninhabited Pacific islet is another area of great speculation.

Gibraltar of the Pacific

By the time Japan launched her sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, she had four military airstrips operational, extensive fortifications, and major naval installations at Truk. In July 1942, Truk became headquarters for the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet, which included the First, Second, and



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Third Fleets, and the Sixth Submarine Fleet. On any given day, upwards of 50 or 60 Japanese vessels, both warships and merchant ships, would be anchored in Truk Lagoon. Some 365 military aircraft, mostly fighters and bombers, were parked on the airstrips. War materiel was stacked high in dozens of warehouses. Thousands of Japanese troops were stationed on the islands, which were so far inside the surrounding barrier reef that they could be attacked only by air.

Beginning late in August 1942, Japanese Admiral Isoroku *Yamamoto*, commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet, located his headquarters on board the battleship *Yamato* in Truk Lagoon. In February 1943, *Yamamoto* transferred his headquarters and the flag of the fleet to *Yamato*'s sister ship, *Musashi*, also anchored in the lagoon. When *Yamamoto* was killed in April 1943, his replacement, Admiral Mineichi Koga, continued to use *Musashi* as the flagship for the fleet. *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the two largest and most powerful battleships ever built, led an impressive array of Japanese warships — carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers — based at Truk.

Calling Truk the Gibraltar of the Pacific was no exaggeration. It seemed impregnable. American sailors spoke of it in awe-struck tones. Intelligent officers tried to get them to pronounce it “trook” (rhymes with spook), which was closer to the native pronunciation, but Navy pilots looked at the name on maps and called it “truck,” and truck it became. Whatever the pronunciation, Truk would be a tough nut to crack.

Assigned to crack that nut was Task Force 58, commanded by Adm. Marc Mitscher. The force included five fleet carriers — *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *Essex*, *Intrepid*, and *Bunker Hill* — and four light carriers. There were also enough battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines to push the total of ships involved to more than 60. However, it would be Navy pilots who would actually hit Truk. When they got the word of the proposed attack, scheduled for mid-February 1944 and aptly code named Operation Hailstone, they were eager but apprehensive. “For the previous two years of the war,” said one flyer, “the very thought of approaching Truk seemed fatal.” Another pilot, when informed of the operation, said his “first instinct was to jump overboard.” Nonetheless, Lt. Cmdr. Edward Owen, the commanding officer (CO) of *Yorktown*'s Air Group 5, remarked that “by D-day I think everyone was a tiger.”

The American pilots had no way of knowing that the Japanese were even more apprehensive. When Japan got word that Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands had fallen to American forces early in February, she feared that the U.S. Navy was in a position to launch a strike at Truk, a thousand miles to the west. With U.S. air superiority now a reality, Japan ordered the bulk of the Combined Fleet out of Truk Lagoon on 10 February. A dozen cruisers and destroyers remained behind but other cruisers and destroyers and, most importantly, the carriers and battleships, sailed for Palau. The lagoon was still packed with merchant and troop ships, all critical to Japan's war effort. The airfields and all other ground installations on the islands in the lagoon were put on high alert.

Admiral Mitscher's Task Force 58 reached the launch point, about 90 miles east of Truk, two hours before dawn on the morning of 17 February. A Navy flier said it was “clear, cool and beautiful as we launched.” First streaking into the sky were 72 Grumman F6F Hellcats, the Navy's new fighters, which had first seen action against the Japanese in September 1943 and were a vast improvement over the older Grumman F4F Wildcats. Leading the Hellcats was Lt. Cmdr. William “Killer” Kane of Air Group 10 from *Enterprise*. California-born and reared, Kane had graduated from Annapolis with the class of '33. He had a wife and two young children back home. Athletic and powerful, his nickname had come not from the war in the Pacific but from his football and wrestling days at the Naval Academy. He had been at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked and had survived getting shot down during the campaign



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for Guadalcanal. He was a thoroughly experienced combat pilot by the time of the Truk raid, and his men had complete confidence in him.

The Attack on Truk

As the first rays of the rising sun reached Truk, Killer Kane and his flight of Hellcats swept down on the islands of the atoll. Japanese planes already aloft were blown out of the sky by the twos and threes. Kane and his wingman shot down five Zeros in five minutes before turning their attention to strafing planes on the ground.

“As we started to strafe airfields,” said Lt. Cmdr. Owen, “quite a melee developed as the Japs began getting into the air. Actually, there were so many Jap airplanes moving that it was almost confusing to select a target and stay with it until it was shot down, without being lured to another target just taking off, or apparently attempting to join up in some kind of formation. After a few minutes it was difficult to find uncluttered airspace. Jap aircraft were burning and falling from every quarter and many were crashing on takeoff as a result of strafing them on the ground. Ground installations were exploding and burning, and all this in the early golden glow of dawn. At times it all looked like it might have been staged for the movies.”

Watching the raid from the ground was Maj. Gregory “Pappy” Boyington. The leading Marine ace had been shot down and captured six weeks earlier while raiding Rabaul. Since he was a special prize for the Japanese, he was being transported to Japan for interrogation and torture. At the exact moment that the plane carrying Boyington touched down to refuel, Kane and his Hellcat pilots began their attack. Boyington and several other American prisoners were hustled off the plane. The first thing Boyington saw was a Hellcat, only a few dozen feet above the ground, screaming over the airfield, and “spraying .50-calibers all through the Nip aircraft standing there in front of us. The piece of transportation we had just crawled out of went up before our eyes in flame and smoke, and so did nearly every other plane we could see around there.”

Boyington and the others raced to a slit trench on the side of the runway and scrambled in, just in time to avoid being blown to bits by an American bomb. Meanwhile, Japanese planes up and down the airstrip were burning furiously, causing their own ammunition to explode. Lead and shrapnel filled the air. During a momentary lull in the attack, a Japanese pilot landed his Zero and began running for cover. He stopped suddenly upon seeing a half-dozen Americans in the slit trench. “He was wearing one of those fuzzy helmets with the ear flaps turned up,” said Boyington, “and he looked in at us, as surprised as we were, then composed himself and said in English: ‘I am a Japanese pilot.’ ”

The whole scene seemed like a surreal comedy to the Americans who could barely contain themselves. The Japanese then repeated himself: “I am a Japanese pilot. You bomb here, you die.” With dramatic flair he patted the gun on his hip. This was finally too much for Boyington, who jabbed Don Boyle, at his side in the trench, and the two of them burst out laughing. Boyington stopped long enough to look up at the Japanese and say: “With all the G** d*** trouble we got, ain’t you the cheerful son of a bitch, though.”

Before the Japanese could draw his sidearm to shoot Boyington, another flight of Hellcats arrived and the enemy pilot took off running. “The last we saw of him,” said Boyington, “his short legs were busy hopping over obstructions, the ear flaps of his fur helmet wobbling up and down so that he gave the appearance of a jack rabbit getting off the highway. His conversation and threats had been rudely interrupted by the death rattle caused by another Navy F6F’s .50 calibers, crackling down the runway as it came just a matter of a few feet from our pit.”



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Wave after wave of American planes — Hellcat fighters, TBF Avenger torpedo bombers, and SBD Dauntless dive bombers — continued to strike Truk throughout the day. The American fighter pilots, flying the Hellcat, proved more than a match for the Japanese fighter pilots and their vaunted Mitsubishi A6M5 Zero. Lt. j.g. Alex Vraciu, who had been the wingman for America's first ace of the war and Medal of Honor recipient Butch O'Hare, shot down four enemy planes. He called Truk "the wildest action I participated in, Turkey Shoot included." Also shooting down four Japanese planes were Lt. Robert Duncan, who had a baby back home in Illinois he had not yet seen, Lt. j.g. Walt Harman, who looked no older than a high-school kid, and Lt. William Bonneau, like Kane a California boy from the San Francisco Bay area. Lt. Hamilton McWhorter, who had earlier become the first Hellcat ace, Lt. j.g. Tom McCelland, Lt. Armistead "Chick" Smith, Lt. j.g. Cyrus Chambers, Ens. John "Tubby" Franks, and Lt. j.g. Eugene Valencia got three each. Valencia was especially effusive in his praise for the new Hellcat, saying, "I love this airplane so much that if it could cook I'd marry it."

By the end of the day, Hellcat fighter pilots had shot 124 Japanese planes out of the sky and destroyed that many again on the ground. Dauntless dive bomber and Avenger torpedo bomber pilots had put dozens of Japanese ships on the bottom. As yet the cruisers and battleships of Task Force 58 had not been in on the action. Then, flying home to *Enterprise*, aviation radioman 1st class Dave Cawley spotted the Japanese cruiser *Katori* to the north of Truk Lagoon. She had just been hit by another American bomber. "When I sighted the cruiser," said Cawley, the gunner in Lt. James Ramage's dive bomber, "she was low in the water and barely moving. Since we were without bombs and ammo, I opened up on guard channel, saying, 'Any strike leader from 51-Bobcat, there is a damaged Japanese cruiser just to the north of the lagoon. Come sink it.'"

It seemed to pilot Ramage that a reply came on the guard channel almost as soon as Cawley had finished his transmission. "Bobcat leader, this is Bald Eagle [Adm. Mitscher]. Cancel your last. Do not, repeat, do not, sink that ship. Acknowledge." Ramage and Cawley were stunned. They reckoned that the crippled cruiser would be easy pickings. As they soon learned, though, Mitscher thought so too but wanted *Katori* saved for one of his cruisers or battleships to sink.

During the night, Mitscher sent radar-equipped Avengers to pound Truk. At the same time, eight of Mitscher's warships circled the atoll to intercept enemy ships attempting to escape the carnage in the lagoon. With daylight the next morning came more American fighter and bomber sweeps. By noon there were few targets left to hit. Sitting on the bottom of the lagoon were 13 Japanese warships and 32 merchant ships. Another two Japanese warships, a cruiser and a destroyer, were on the ocean floor just outside the entrance to the lagoon. Some 275 Japanese planes had been destroyed. Every Japanese facility on every island in the atoll had been destroyed or heavily damaged. Thousands of Japanese had been killed by American bullets or bombs, or had been swallowed by the sea.

The United States suffered the loss of only 40 men and 25 planes. Eleven of the men killed were not pilots but crewmen on *Intrepid*, which was hit by a Japanese torpedo bomber during the night. The arrival of the torpedo bomber was a surprise and remains something of a mystery. It seems that the plane flew not from Truk but from either Saipan or Rabaul, six or seven hundred miles to the west.

The air raid on Truk rendered the Gibraltar of the Pacific impotent, allowing the United States to safely bypass the once putatively impregnable base on the way to Tokyo. As Hellcat pilot Ed Owen later said, "Up 'til that time the Truk raid was 'the greatest show in town,' and I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Wrecking the Place



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However, the U.S. Navy wasn't quite done with Truk. When reconnaissance flights during late April 1944 discovered that the Japanese were not only busy rebuilding air and naval installations on the islands in the lagoon but had also moved 100 planes from Rabaul to Truk, a second strike was planned. The second strike began with a fighter sweep early in the morning of 29 April. It went much like the sweep on 17 February, but the Japanese were not able to get near the number of their aircraft into the air this second time. Then came the Dauntless dive bombers. There were few ships in the lagoon to attack, but plenty of installations on land, including tank farms with their precious supplies of oil and gas. The raids were renewed the next day and continued until the early afternoon when Mitscher decided that there were no longer enough targets left to put pilots at risk in another strike. All the objectives of the mission had been achieved — or, as Lt. James Ramage put it, “We wrecked the place!”

Wrecking Truk did come at a price, though. Intense Japanese anti-aircraft fire brought down 26 of our planes. At the same time, Navy pilots knocked 59 Japanese planes out of the sky and destroyed another 34 on the ground. Navy submarines and destroyers did their best to rescue our downed pilots and crew members. Lieutenant Commander Richard O’Kane, the skipper of the submarine *Tang*, was one of those who had “lifeguard duty” during the second raid on Truk Lagoon. He was already a legend in the Navy for his courage, derring-do, and leadership. For his gallantry in battle during the war, he would be awarded the Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross (three times), and the Silver Star (three times). If you were a downed pilot, fearing capture and fiendish torture at the hands of the Japanese, knowing that O’Kane was looking for you offered far more than only the normal glimmer of hope.

O’Kane took *Tang* through narrow passages, perilously close to reefs and Japanese gun emplacements, and across shallow water to effect the rescue of Navy pilots and airmen. Some were in life rafts, others clinging to wreckage, and a few standing on a sandbar or coral islet. O’Kane picked them up by the ones, the twos, and the threes until he had crammed 22 effusively thankful sailors on board *Tang*. During World War II, no other Navy vessel came close to O’Kane’s 22 rescues. When *Tang* reached Pearl Harbor, a reception committee, including Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz and Admiral Charles Lockwood, CO of the Pacific submarine fleet, was there to greet O’Kane, his crew, and the rescued pilots. Headlines on the front pages of newspapers and a full page in *Life* magazine would follow.

Nearly all military installations on Truk were now rubble, and it could be ignored on the final push to Japan. Once a name that sent chills up and down the backs of American sailors and Marines, it again became a remote Pacific atoll of no relevance — except for bombing practice. During the fall of 1944 when Brig. Gen. Emmett “Rosie” O’Donnell, commander of the 73rd Bombardment Wing, was preparing his pilots for B-29 raids from the Marianas on Japan, he led them on practice runs to Truk. On 2 September 1945 the Japanese commander and his staff officers at Truk were escorted aboard the heavy cruiser *Portland* at anchor in the lagoon. With much of the crew watching, the Japanese formally surrendered.



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