

Our next advance was toward the Philippines.

Carrier strikes on the Philippines in September 1944 showed the weakness of the Japs in southern Philippines, Mindanao and in the central Philippines, Leyte.

Instead of stepping from Balmahera, Morotai and Hollandia into Mindanao, Leyte was invaded in order to save time. Altogether there were 650 ships in this operation, including the Third Fleet under Admiral Halsey.

During October 1944, the fast carrier task force of the 3rd Fleet struck Formosa, Okinawa, Luzon and supported the landing on Leyte on the 20th. At Formosa, the carrier force tagged over 300 planes during its two day attack.

The Leyte landings were challenged by Japanese naval forces determined to drive us from the area and we had the Second Battle of the Philippine Sea.

Three enemy forces were involved which approached Leyte Gulf from three directions - (1) A strong central force of 5 battleships, 8 cruisers and 13 to 15 destroyers through the Sibuyan Sea. Its mission was to sweep through San Bernardino Strait and attack Admiral Kincaid's Seventh Fleet Forces of CVE's, old BB's and amphibious craft. (2) Simultaneously the Japs sought to increase their troubles by sending another force simultaneously from the south toward Surigao Strait consisting of 2 old BB's, 4 cruisers and 8 to 10 DD's. (3) The most powerful force came from the direction of Japan. It was composed of 4 carriers, 2 BB's with flight decks aft, 4 cruisers and 6 DD's.

On 23 October two subs - the BARTER and DACE - contacted and attacked the central force off Palawan, sinking 2 cruisers and damaging a third.

From the very start the Jap plan began to go wrong. The Japs evidently could not see past their nose and did not count on the Third Fleet Carrier force being in this operation.

On the 24th, carrier scouts discovered the central force in Sibuyan Sea and the southern force entering Sulu Sea. At once, Third Fleet carrier planes swarmed to the attack. Both BB's in the southern force were hit by bombs. In the central force 1 cruiser was sunk, 1 BB and 1 cruiser damaged severely, and three other heavy units hit.

During this engagement enemy shore based planes attacked our 3rd and 7th Fleets. Although 150 of them were shot down, one succeeded in bombing the PRINCETON and caused her to be abandoned. This was our first fast carrier loss since the HORNET, in 1942.

Among the enemy planes in the attack were Jap carrier planes, which was a tip-off of the approaching northern fleet. On the 25th our 3rd Fleet carrier planes completely surprised the northern force northeast of Luzon. Results - 3 Jap carriers, a cruiser, and a destroyer sunk; 2 BB's, a carrier and a destroyer badly damaged. The damaged carrier was later sunk by gunfire, and the cruiser by one of our subs.

On the night of 24-25, the southern force was attacked by our PT boats and destroyers and, except for one cruiser and one destroyer, was completely demolished by our old battleships and cruisers when Admiral Sprague executed the classical naval tactic of "crossing the T" at Surigao Strait. The cruiser, however, was sunk the following day by our carrier planes.

The central force of enemy battleships and cruisers slipped through San Bernardino Strait on the 25th and attacked the 6 CVE's along with 7 DD's and EE's of the 7th Fleet. This little force put up a gallant fight under Admiral Sprague. Two of our CVE's and 2 DD's were sunk and the other 4 CVE's were damaged. Halsey's 3rd Fleet carrier force ran to the south to join the CVE's and the planes from the two forces sank an enemy cruiser and destroyer. Another cruiser of the fleeing Japs was sunk the next day by our surface units.