

Battle off Samar, October 25, 1944

Excerpt from Wikipedia article, “Battle of Leyte Gulf,” September 22, 2018

Prelude

Halsey’s decision to take all the available strength of 3rd Fleet northwards to attack the carriers of the Japanese Northern Force had left San Bernardino Strait completely unguarded.

Senior officers in 7th Fleet (including Kinkaid and his staff) generally assumed Halsey was taking his three available carrier groups northwards (McCain’s group, the strongest in 3rd Fleet, was still returning from the direction of Ulithi), but leaving the battleships of TF 34 covering the San Bernardino Strait against the Japanese Center Force. In fact, Halsey had not yet formed TF 34, and all six of Willis Lee’s battleships were on their way northwards with the carriers, as well as every available cruiser and destroyer of the Third Fleet.

Kurita’s Center Force therefore emerged unopposed from San Bernardino Strait at 03:00 on 25 October and steamed southward along the coast of the island of Samar. In its path stood only the 7th Fleet’s three escort carrier units (call signs ‘Taffy’ 1, 2, and 3), with a total of sixteen small, very slow, and unarmored escort carriers, protected by a screen of lightly armed and unarmored destroyers and smaller destroyer escorts (DEs). Despite the losses in the Palawan Passage and Sibuyan Sea actions, the Japanese Center Force was still very powerful, consisting of four battleships (including the giant *Yamato*), six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and eleven destroyers.

Battle

Kurita’s force caught Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague’s Task Unit 77.4.3 (‘Taffy 3’) by surprise. Sprague directed his carriers to launch their planes, then run for the cover of a rain squall to the east. He ordered the destroyers and DEs to make a smoke screen to conceal the retreating carriers.

Kurita, unaware that Ozawa’s decoy plan had succeeded, assumed he had found a carrier group from Halsey’s 3rd Fleet. Having just redeployed his ships into anti-aircraft formation, he further complicated matters by ordering a “General Attack,” which called for his fleet to split into divisions and attack independently.

The destroyer *USS Johnston* was the closest to the enemy. On his own initiative, Lieutenant Commander Ernest E. Evans steered his hopelessly outclassed ship into the Japanese fleet at flank speed. Johnston fired its torpedoes at the heavy cruiser Kumano, damaging her and forcing her out of line. Seeing this, Sprague gave the order “small boys attack”, sending the rest of Taffy 3’s screening ships into the fray. Taffy 3’s two other destroyers, *Hoel* and *Heermann*, and the destroyer escort *Samuel B. Roberts*, attacked with suicidal determination, drawing fire and disrupting the Japanese formation as ships turned to avoid their torpedoes. As the ships approached the enemy columns, Lt. Cdr. Copeland of *Samuel B. Roberts* told all hands via bull horn that this would be “a fight against overwhelming odds from which survival could not be expected.” As the Japanese fleet continued to approach, *Hoel* and *Roberts* were hit multiple times, and quickly sank. After expending all of its torpedoes, *Johnston* continued to fight with its 5-inch guns, until it was sunk by a group of Japanese destroyers.

As they were preparing their aircraft for attack, the escort carriers returned the Japanese fire with all the firepower they had – one 5 in. gun per carrier. The officer in tactical command had instructed the carriers to “open with pea shooters,” and each ship took an enemy vessel under fire as soon as it came within range. *Fanshaw Bay* fired on a cruiser, and is believed to have registered five hits, one amidst the superstructure that caused smoke. *Kalinin Bay* targeted a Myoko-class heavy cruiser, claiming a hit on the cruiser’s No. 2 turret, with a second just below the first. *Gambier Bay* sighted a cruiser, and

claimed at least three hits. *White Plains* reported hits on multiple targets, two between the superstructure and forward stack and another on the No. 1 turret of a heavy cruiser.

Meanwhile, Rear Admiral Thomas Sprague (no relation to Clifton) ordered the sixteen escort carriers in his three task units to immediately launch all their aircraft equipped with whatever weapons they had available, even if these were only machine guns or depth charges. Collectively, Sprague had a total of some 450 aircraft from the carriers at his disposal. Although most of these aircraft were older models, such as the FM-2 Wildcat and TBM Avenger torpedo bombers, the fact that the Japanese force had no air cover meant that American planes could attack unopposed. Consequently, the air counterattacks were almost unceasing, and some, especially several of the strikes launched from Felix Stump's Task Unit 77.4.2 (Taffy 2), were heavy.

The carriers of Taffy 3 turned south and retreated through the shellfire. *Gambier Bay*, at the rear of the American formation, became the focus of the battleship *Yamato* and sustained multiple hits before capsizing at 09:07. Several other carriers were damaged but were able to escape.

Admiral Kurita withdraws

The ferocity of the defense seemingly confirmed the Japanese assumption that they were engaging major fleet units rather than merely escort carriers and destroyers. The confusion of the "General Attack" order was compounded by the air and torpedo attacks, when Kurita's flagship *Yamato* turned north to evade torpedoes and lost contact with the battle. Kurita abruptly broke off the fight and gave the order 'all ships, my course north, speed 20', apparently to regroup his disorganized fleet. Turning again towards Leyte Gulf, Kurita's battle report stated he had received a message indicating a group of American carriers was steaming north of him. Preferring to expend his fleet against capital ships rather than transports, Kurita set out in pursuit and thereby lost his opportunity to destroy the shipping in Leyte Gulf.

After failing to intercept the non-existent carriers, Kurita finally retreated towards San Bernardino Strait. Three of his heavy cruisers had been sunk, and the determined resistance had convinced him that persisting with his attack would only cause further Japanese losses. In addition, Kurita's decision was no doubt influenced by the fact that he did not know that Ozawa had lured Halsey's entire fleet away from Leyte Gulf. Poor communication between the separate Japanese forces and a lack of air reconnaissance meant that Kurita was never informed that the deception had been successful, and that only a small and outgunned force stood between his battleships and the vulnerable transports of the invasion fleet. Thus, Kurita remained convinced that he had been engaging elements of the 3rd Fleet, and it would only be a matter of time before Halsey surrounded and annihilated him. Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague wrote to his colleague Aubrey Fitch after the war, "I ... stated [to Admiral Nimitz] that the main reason they turned north was that they were receiving too much damage to continue and I am still of that opinion and cold analysis will eventually confirm it."

Almost all of Kurita's surviving force escaped. Halsey and the 3rd Fleet battleships returned too late to cut him off. *Nagato* and *Kongō* had been moderately damaged by air attack from Taffy 3's escort carriers. Kurita had begun the battle with five battleships. On their return to their bases, only *Yamato* and *Haruna* remained battle-worthy.

As the desperate surface action was coming to an end, Vice Admiral Takijirō Ōnishi put his 'Special Attack Force' into operation, launching kamikaze attacks against the Allied ships in Leyte Gulf and the escort carrier units off Samar. The escort carrier *St. Lo* of Taffy 3 was hit by a kamikaze aircraft and sank after a series of internal explosions.