AMERICA'S GREATEST NAVAL BATTLE

QUENTIN REYNOLDS
with the Pacific Fleet
GEORGE E. JONES
with Admiral Mitscher
RALPH TEATSORTH
with Admiral Kinkaid
FRANK D. MORRIS
at Washington

In addition to four war correspondents who had been reporting the Second Battle of the Philippines for Collier's, Robert De Vore and Frank J. Taylor contribute to this final installment. Their material is based on interviews with the ship commanders who took an active part in the naval engagement

For two days, the three-ring Second Battle of the Philippines had been going well for our side. A Japanese southern force in Ring One, in trying to slip through Surigao Strait at night to halt General MacArthur's invasion of Leyte, had been caught in a trap and annihilated. In Ring Two, the enemy's central force was attacked on October 24th by our carrier planes and finally was seen turning back through the Sibuyan Sea. And the most important phase of the entire battle—Halsey's attack on a powerful Jap carrier force approaching from the north in Ring Three—was progressing on October 25th, when word came of grave developments in the Leyte beachhead area, to the south

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Leyte

Conclusion

THE Japs had pulled another fast one. Dawn of Wednesday, October 25th, revealed a threat of disaster for the entire fleet of small carriers, transports and supply ships supporting General MacArthur's invasion forces on Leyte Island.

During the night there had been no hint of the impending crisis. Standing morning general quarters had now become routine for the crews of the baby flat-tops.

Morris Reporting

Aboard the Kitkun Bay, for instance, it was the same old stuff: turning out of a comfortable bunk, woozy-eyed when the alarm sounded a half-hour before sunrise, slipping into shirt, trousers and shoes before joining the lines of shipmates climbing up steel ladders to man battle stations.

Topside, the carriers were completely blacked out and, below decks, only the dim, blue glow of battle lights relieved the darkness on these hurried journeys. Sleepy men bumped into one another in the dark, mumbled apologies or curses and hastened on. The ship was waking up. In a matter of moments the last report filtered to the Kitkun Bay's skipper, Captain John Perry Whitney: "All battle stations manned and ready."

The Kitkun Bay was one of six CVEs (escort carriers) about twenty-five miles east of Samar Island under command of Rear Admiral C. A. F. Sprague. Seven miles farther south was another group of CVEs under Rear Admiral Thomas L. Sprague, over-all commander of the escort carriers, and a third group, bossed by Rear Admiral Felix B. Stump, was spotted thirty miles to the southeast. Planes from all three groups were giving air cover to the Leyte beachhead.

It was the ending of a black, unfriendly night. Frequent, brief rain squalls cut down the visibility of the officers and men standing watch on the bridge. But before the sun rose, Hellcat fighters and Avenger torpedo planes roared up the flight deck and over the bow ramp on the daily "milk run" to bomb and strafe Jap positions on Leyte. Then, without warning, it happened!

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Leyte

At 6:50 A.M., a lookout on the Kitkun Bay sighted the foretops of big ships on the northern horizon. None of our ships was in that area. There was only one answer: They must be Japs. Captain Whitney grabbed his binoculars and verified the lookout's report. Immediately he sounded a second call to general quarters and the public-address system echoed: "Stand by to repel enemy surface ship attack."

Below decks in the wardroom where a group of "airdales" (pilots) not scheduled to fly that morning were finishing their coffee, a flier ran in and shouted, "The whole damned Jap fleet is out there—battleships, cruisers—everything!" As the coffee sippers ran toward the flight deck, a second announcement came over the P.A. system: "Pilots, man your planes!"

Reynolds Reporting

What had happened was that the enemy central force, which had tried to reach San Bernardino Strait the previous day but had been seen turning back after an all-day attack by our carrier planes, had again reversed course under cover of darkness and had slipped through the strait during the night in a strike toward our Leyte beachhead.

Here was a real crisis. At this moment the Leyte beachhead was stripped of all naval protection other than the CVEs and their screen. The heavy Jap force was approaching at high speed, and the baby flat-tops had virtually no protection against their big guns. They had no real armor, and their escort screen was pitifully small and weak—three destroyers and four destroyer escorts. None of these mounted a gun heavier than five-inches, and this was puny firepower against the 16- and 14-inch rifles of the enemy ships. The CVEs called urgently for help but they could expect no immediate aid from ships in our Third and Seventh Fleets, which were far to the north engaging the Japs' northern force, or from our ships which had just turned back the enemy southern force in Surigao Strait.

Up on the bridge, Captain Whitney, his face shaded by a long-peaked baseball cap, watched the first Avenger move into launching position on the catapult. Beside him stood Rear Admiral Ralph A. Ofstie, commander of this jeep carrier division. The wind was from the northwest, which meant the ships had to head in that direction to "scramble" their planes. It also meant they were closing in rapidly toward the attacking Jap force.

Five minutes after the enemy ships were sighted, and while the Kitkun Bay was still launching planes, high-caliber shells began splashing into the water near her and the other jeep carriers in the northernmost group. These shells came from four Jap battleships in the van, which were followed by seven heavy cruisers and nine destroyers. The range was less than fourteen miles—duck soup for the enemy battleships. Everybody aboard the Kitkun Bay knew they were in for it then.

Jones Reporting

A young seaman, manning a telephone on the bridge, turned to the officer of the deck: "We're not out here alone, are we, sir?"

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The officer nodded grimly.

But, no, they weren't entirely alone. There were the three destroyers and the four DEs forming the screen. These little guys didn't falter an instant. Forming in column, they laid down a smoke screen. Then the seven, destroyers and DEs, charged through this curtain and made torpedo runs on the enemy—like a handful of Chihuahuas attacking a bunch of bulldogs. Miraculously, all came back through the smoke screen—alive.

Salvos were straddling the Kitkun Bay and they were coming even closer to the Gambier Bay just ahead of her. These and other CVEs in that group finished scrambling their planes and turned south, away from the Japs, at flank speed—around twenty knots. Sometimes the wind blew gaps in the smoke screen, exposing the jeep carriers, and from the 16-inch guns of the lead Jap battleship came angry orange flashes and, seconds later, geysers of foamy water rose around the CVEs.

"They're firing on the White Plains," someone shouted, and just off the port bow, Captain Whitney saw her steaming through a line of geysers. The Gambier Bay also was drawing a concentration of fire. Considering the range, the Japs wasted untold amounts of ammunition before scoring hits.

The Jap commanders now tried a new tactic. They detached two heavy cruisers from their force and sent them south at high speed on the escort carriers' port hand. As soon as the enemy cruisers—easily able to outrun our ships—were in position, their main batteries subjected the CVEs to heavy fire.

Teatsorth Reporting

The Gambier Bay was the first victim. At ten minutes after eight, a 16-inch shell holed her below the water line. Water flooded one of her engine rooms. This cut the Gambier Bay's speed down to ten knots, and she dropped behind, an easy target for the Japs. The two heavy cruisers ignored her and continued pounding the other carriers, but the Jap battleships astern scored more hits on the crippled Gambier Bay.

From the bridge of his own CVE, Captain Whitney looked back and wondered if Captain Walter Vieweg could bring the Gambier Bay through. He doubted it, for the ship was drifting at right angles to her normal course, moving toward the Jap force. Thus she presented a perfect broadside target, and the Japs sent two other heavy cruisers from their main body to finish her off.

Then out of a rain squall came one of our screen destroyers. The skipper saw a heavy Jap cruiser of the Tone class concentrating fire on the Gambier Bay and gave the command to open fire with the five-inch guns in his main battery. He was deliberately taking on a heavy cruiser, mounting eight-inch guns—practically double the destroyer's firepower—but after they had slugged it out for twenty minutes, the Jap cruiser caught fire and turned away.

The destroyer suffered a direct hit by an eight-inch shell, which flooded her forward compartments, and she was so far down by the head her anchors were awash. She was pulling away at reduced speed when three other Jap

Taylor Reporting

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cruisers appeared and opened fire. It looked like the end for the destroyer, but, after a short attack, the Jap ships inexplicably turned away.

The Gambier Bay, afire and riddled by shells, was rocked by successive explosions. At 8:50 A.M. Captain Vieweg gave the order to abandon ship, and her crew started sliding down long lines to rafts. Many wounded were helped from the dying carrier by their shipmates, who, at nine o'clock, saw the Gambier Bay take her final plunge.

As she went down, the other CVEs were still trying to escape the Jap attack. The two detached enemy cruisers circled their prey, firing salvo after salvo at the thin sides of the Kitkun Bay, the White Plains, the St. Lô and the others steaming south with them. Rear Admiral Sprague used every tactic in the book to dodge the Jap shells.

Morris Reporting

"We made frequent changes of course," he said later, "to throw them off in their gunnery problem. Each ship captain 'chased' the splashes from the enemy salvos. It was miraculous that we emerged as we did. When the range between the two forces was reduced enough to bring the Jap ships within reach of our escort carriers' five-inch guns, we opened up and got hits, observable from our ships."

While the lone five-inch gun was firing from Sprague's flagship, one of his battery officers with a sardonic sense of humor said, "Just hold on a little longer, boys; we're getting into forty-millimeter range."

About eight-thirty the seven destroyers, under Commander William D. Thomas of San Francisco, and the DEs had been ordered to make a second torpedo attack on the Japs. They plowed back through the smoke screen at thirty-five knots. Four Jap cruisers, followed by four battleships, rushed toward the American ships at about twenty-five knots. Frequent rain squalls made visibility spotty as the two forces charged along on a collision course.

When they were within range, the destroyers fired their torpedoes. The Jap battleships turned out of column, then formed another column and drove straight for the destroyers, showering 14-inch shells on them. Two of our destroyers were heavily hit. The Ameri-

Firefighters race topside to battle flames as smoke pours from hole in flight deck and out side apertures of escort carrier hit by a Jap bomb

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cans made a hard left turn and swung sharply right to place the Japs on their beam so they could close to short range and fire broadsides. The rain came down hard—and so did the Jap shells.

The American five-inchers had little effect on the thick armor of the Jap battlewagons and, after a brief clash, the destroyers and DEs fired their remaining torpedoes. One of the three launched by a destroyer struck a battleship only 4,000 yards away and exploded under her Number Four turret. The Jap ship ceased firing and, shortly after, the entire column changed course and withdrew to the north.

Now the carrier crews watched anxiously as our ships came back through the smoke screen. First came a destroyer to rejoin the escort carriers. Three of the DEs followed. That was all. Only these four of the seven small ships which had gone in on that attack came out alive. Two destroyers, hit repeatedly by heavy Jap shells, had gone down and a destroyer escort suffered the same fate. But their torpedo runs had diverted much of the enemy's firepower from its original targets (the escort carriers) to themselves, and thus prevented immediate disaster.

Reynolds Reporting

The five surviving baby flat-tops, however, were battling against heavy odds, and their doom seemed to be only a matter of time. Two Jap heavy cruisers circled this force at high speed, like Indians in a war dance. Again and again the Jap shells found their mark. Several hits rocked Admiral Sprague's flagship, the Fanshaw Bay. Others smashed into the Kalinin Bay. A near miss lifted the stern of the White Plains out of the water while she was still launching planes, but there was no great damage and she continued launching.

Then, at last, came the first response to the American calls for help. Up from the south roared planes launched by sister carriers. Fighters and torpedo planes swooped down over the attacking enemy ships and got hits on several. Diving through thick bursts of ack-ack, the fighters desperately strafed the enemy decks hoping to knock out the crews manning the AA guns and clear the way for the torpedo planes to strike again.

Encouraged, the menaced carriers redoubled their fight to survive. More planes from the carriers under attack joined the air battle. Some of these had been on anti-submarine patrol when the Jap ships first appeared. Others were recalled from their regular mission of giving air cover to our troops on Leyte, and these pilots added a note of raw courage to the day's record. They had expended most of their ammunition on Jap positions ashore but they made daredevil "dry runs" (simulated attacks) on the enemy ships now. Some concentrated on the two Jap cruisers circling our carriers. Sweeping low, they penetrated the flak-studded air to simulate a real bombing and strafing attack. Time and again they returned to the "attack" without a single bomb or round of ammunition.

These dry runs caused the Jap ships to change course frequently and threw off their gunners' aim, and that's exactly what our pilots intended.

They weren't all dry runs that morning,

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though. Four young Avenger pilots from the Kitkun Bay, rookies in their squadron, made a torpedo attack without fighter-plane protection. Ensigns Marchant, Kummerlin, King and Fulton found a Jap battleship and, led by Marchant, they damaged it badly.

"Nice work, son!" Admiral Ofstie said to Marchant when he had returned aboard.

"I'd have given a million dollars to see that thing blow up, sir," the young flier blurted out.

"Nice work, son!" repeated the admiral.

Hits were also scored on a Jap cruiser by bombs which started a series of explosions. Another Jap cruiser was attacked by four topedo planes and left dead in the water.

The battle was at its height when, at 9:25 A.M., word was passed on the Kitkun Bay that the enemy cruisers were withdrawing.

"That can't be," Captain Whitney was thinking out loud.

It didn't seem possible that the Jap cruisers would pull out when they had definitely trapped the surviving five carriers and probably could have sunk every one of them in a short time. Yet there they were, reversing course and heading back toward San Bernardino Strait.

Over on the crippled destroyer, her skipper couldn't understand it, either.

"I'll never know why they're leaving instead of going right on into Leyte Gulf," he said. "They have the ships and the power to do it."

A signalman on the bridge of the Kitkun Bay was disgusted. "Dammit!" he said. "They're getting away!"

The Jap cruisers were not the only ships retreating. One by one, their battleships turned and laid a course for the strait, accompanied by the other cruisers and destroyers. Aboard the baby flat-tops, an unnatural silence settled down. Nobody could understand what had happened. Then the tension broke, and men laughed until they cried. By some incredible miracle they were still alive. The fight had lasted two and a half hours, but, during it, some of them seemed to have aged twenty years. Nor was their ordeal ended.

After the Japs had ceased firing, and the Kitkun Bay and other carriers in her group had landed their planes, the general alarm sounded, followed by: "Stand by to repel air attack!"

Eight Jap dive bombers came in at an altitude of five thousand feet and peeled off for an attack. Three of them were shot down before they could drop their loads. Each of the five remaining enemy bombers picked a carrier as its target and roared down.

The Kitkun Bay and the Kalinin Bay were the victims of direct hits, but neither was seriously damaged. The St. Lô was not so fortunate. Lieutenant Commander Richard L. Centner, the St. Lô's air officer, saw a Jap plane start its dive. It was a single-engined Zeke. He watched it pull out of the dive into almost level flight when it was about a thousand yards astern of the St. Lô and head for the carrier's "landing groove."

Centner stared at the Zeke until it was about fifty yards from the ship, when the island structure obscured his vision. Men

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farther aft could see a bomb under each wing—they looked like 500-pounders—and it seemed to them that the Jap nosed over as he cleared the after edge of the flight deck. No one could be certain when the Jap released his bombs, and it was thought that only his left bomb exploded. In any event, one bomb hit, and there was a big explosion and the bomb penetrated the deck.

Steering control was lost but quickly regained. A little to the port of the center line was a two-foot hole in the flight deck, and on the starboard side the deck was blackened, and black smoke was rising a few inches from it, like vapor from a pond on a cold day.

In the hangar deck, men had been rearming and servicing two Wildcat fighters and three Avenger torpedo bombers. In all, eight planes were down there, and at least six of them had 100-octane in their tanks. Four torpedoes were ready for plane installation, while four more torpedoes were in the same area with no less than six depth bombs, fifteen 500-pound bombs and forty 100-pounders. In boxes were 1,400 rounds of .50-caliber machine-gun bullets. There was enough explosive on the premises to level a fair-sized town.

One man said the Jap bomb looked like a ball of fire smashing down from the overhead. A plane on the starboard side caught fire and disintegrated, spilling burning gas. The gas collected in a large pool, and gas from other planes fed it until, very soon, fire stood two feet high on about a quarter of the hangar deck. Shrapnel from the bomb got a few men, and many other men were set on fire. Some were completely covered by flames. Fire hose was broken out, but machine-gun ammunition began to explode a barrage of lead and tracers that chased one fire party out through the starboard door to the fantail.

From then until the ship sank—just thirty-two minutes after the bomb hit—men measured time by explosions. Whatever happened to them they remembered as happening just before or after the second explosion, or the third, or the fifth, and so forth. A plane blew up on the port side. That was the second explosion, mild compared with its successors, and more like a puff than a blast which, nonetheless, knocked men down and rolled them along the deck. A hose party was seen to crumble, and some of its members never got up.

The third explosion was a thing of incredible ferocity. No survivors from the hangar deck were able to recall exactly the manner in which it mangled their part of the ship. Lieutenant William P. Tyler of Minneapolis was caught in the blast and shot out the eight-by-six-foot sponson door and into the sea.

On the fantail, Lieutenant (jg) Cecil E. Betts of Seattle, Washington, and two enlisted men, Thomas J. Petrillo of Boston, and John Lesinski, Jr., of Detroit, managed somehow to bandage from twenty-five to thirty seriously wounded men and help them over the side.

It was the third explosion that blew another hangar door off its hinges and sent a 100-foot section of the flight deck sailing into the air. That was on the port side. A section

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of about the same size on the starboard side was folded and rolled back like a hall carpet. Entire fire parties were wiped out, burned or killed outright or blown overboard. One man was thrown off the forward edge of the flight deck but landed on the forecastle deck, on his feet and uninjured.

By megaphone and from man to man and over what telephones were now in service, the word was passed: "Prepare to abandon ship!"

The gasoline pump room, with its thousands of gallons of gasoline, was the station of Dwane D. Slack, aviation machinist's mate, second class. Probably no officer or man of the ship did more than he to stem the awful spread of death and wounds.

The gasoline systems in our carriers are built to withstand fire, if properly attended. Gassing of planes on the hangar deck was stopped just a few minutes before the St. Lô was hit. What Slack did after that to prevent the spread of fire cannot be told here. But the process takes a certain amount of time, and you must take one step in the procedure before you take another. You can't rush things, and there are no short cuts. If you don't stick to your job, as did Slack, with contempt for the prospect of your own excruciating death, fire may spread throughout your ship.

The series of explosions had run to three before Slack could "dog down" the pump-room hatch and still he wasn't through. There had been a fourth explosion, and now there was a fifth. But Dwane Slack finished his job before he walked across the forward end of the hangar deck and abandoned ship off the Number Two sponson.

The fifth large explosion came as Lieutenant (jg) Leonard E. Waldrop of Liberty, Texas, ducked through a great hole beneath the flight deck and put a fresh cigar in his mouth. He wrapped his hands in rags to keep from burning them and slid down a rope into the water. Near him was a man without a life belt. Waldrop found one for him. He saw a man who wanted a cigar and he broke his fresh one in two and gave him half. Then the three men, floating with their stomachs as far out of the water as possible to lessen underwater concussion, looked back at the ship.

Morris Reporting

About a quarter of her had blown into the water, sides and all. She was ripping apart in 50- and 100-foot chunks, and some of the pieces were flung 1,000 feet into the air. Involuntarily, she was bombarding the crew in the water. Her end was near.

Captain McKenna left the ship after the seventh explosion. Everyone knew he would be the last man alive to leave. He always performed the way you wanted the skipper to perform—with the composure of a man who is never surprised, even when he is scared as hell.

The eighth explosion blasted out parts of the St. Lô below the water line. Before this explosion she had been listing to port. Now she rolled over to starboard very fast and went down with her bow pointing straight at the sky. As night fell, destroyers and destroyer escorts were still picking up survivors. One destroyer retrieved 453 of the crew and Captain McKenna.

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Leyte

With the sinking of the St. Lô, we had lost two escort carriers, but the other four in Tommy Sprague's group were still intact. Two destroyers, the Johnston and the Hoel, had sacrificed themselves in defending the CVEs, and so had the little DE, Samuel B. Roberts. All considered, it was a small price to pay for saving the bulk of the escort-carrier force and the transports and supply ships in Leyte Gulf.

By early afternoon the tide of battle had turned definitely in our favor. Planes from the three escort-carrier groups were countering successfully the attacks staged by the Japs' land-based planes. And finally, help was coming from carriers in Mitscher's task force. Some of these big flat-tops, which had been refueling far to the east of Luzon, had been dispatched at full speed. Shortly after 2 P.M., these planes started making strikes on the fleeing enemy ships. They kept the enemy in retreat and foretold what punishment they could expect the next day when Halsey's battleships and carriers would arrive in force from the north.

What had been happening up in that northern area while the escort carriers were under attack was encouraging. After our planes had started their bombing, torpedo and strafing runs, the Jap carrier force split up. One group, composed of damaged and sinking ships, was dead in the water with one Ise-class battleship and a few smaller vessels circling them. The other group, including one battleship, one light carrier, one large Shokaku-class carrier and a few other undamaged ships, was retreating to the north.

At 10:07 A.M., Halsey messaged the carriers: "Instruct all pilots to strike at undamaged ships. Leave cripples until later."

The second and subsequent waves of aircraft, therefore, swept down on the ships fleeing northward. Blond, slender Lieutenant Al Seckel of Chicago was one of several Hellcat fighters who stabbed at the Shokaku-class flat-top with armor-piercing bombs.

Seckel, one of the crack fighter pilots of the Third Fleet—he recently shot down four planes in one hop—reported that the Shokaku (or she may have been a sister ship, the Zuikaku) twisted this way and that, at first seeming to ignore the torpedoes and bombs raining into her hull. Then she stopped dead in the water and large columns of smoke poured from her vitals. Yet two hours passed before she rolled over and sank, belly up and stern first.

Commander Hugh Winters of Annapolis, Maryland, saw Rising Sun destroyers boldly come up and remove survivors from the carrier. The other flat-top, too, clung doggedly to life—for five hours after the first hit had been recorded on her.

Says Winters, "Then I turned away for a moment and, when I looked again, there was nothing but a huge oil slick and the tip of her stern going under. Hundreds of guys were swimming around or clinging to pieces of wood until a destroyer came up and began taking them aboard."

Those survivor-packed Jap destroyers, and the two Ise-class battleships received their share of trouble in the fourth and final aerial attack that day. One destroyer was sunk, and the others were strafed and

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Reynolds Reporting

bombed, while one of the battleships sustained torpedo and bomb hits.

Thirty-one Knot Burke, piqued yesterday because this task force was on the defensive, remarked cheerfully, "Well, as I always say, you've got to kill Japs."

As the afternoon sun approached the western horizon, only one Jap carrier remained afloat. United States cruisers and destroyers ranged ahead of our carriers. Coming across the gutted carrier just before dusk, they sank it with a few well-placed salvos. To the north, the two crippled battleships, two cruisers and several destroyers were making their escape. One destroyer or light cruiser was left behind and it, too, was sunk by surface gunfire. Later that night of October 25th, eager American submarines attacked the escaping ships with a spread of torpedoes, sinking a heavy cruiser.

The Second Battle of the Philippines was now almost over. Our ships were picking up hundreds of survivors from the water—Japs and our own men. Despite the heavy punishment the St. Lô had taken, 784 of her crew were rescued, half of them wounded. Of the entire ship's company 114 were listed as dead or missing.

Captain Vieweg and more than 750 of his men from the Gambier Bay also were rescued after they had drifted on rafts for forty-two hours, fighting off sharks.

The Jap casualties were, of course, much greater. They lost thousands of men, and dozens of their ships had been sunk or damaged. Jap shipyards and drydocks would be busy for months repairing the damage.

Secretary of the Navy Forrestal summed up the results as "One of the great naval victories of the war that will go down, along with the Midway and Guadalcanal sea battles as one of the great, shattering blows struck against Japanese seapower. The Japanese fleet was indeed beaten, routed and broken.

The battle also provided a tasty morsel for naval experts, authentic and armchair, to chew over for years to come. Had Admiral Halsey made the right decision in taking his Third Fleet north to engage the Jap carrier force, thus leaving the Leyte beachhead and the escort carriers covering it vulnerable to an enemy surface-ship attack?

The answer probably can never be given, even by the Japanese high naval command which missed a grand opportunity to mess up our invasion of the Philippines. But one part of that answer is definite and convincing: the box score of the battle, listed below.

(continued)

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Leyte

	Battleships	Carriers	Light Carriers	CVEs	Heavy Cruisers	Light Cruisers	Destroyers	Destroyer Escorts	Planes downed
United States sunk Note: At this writing the complete report on our losses and damage had not been released officially.			1	2			2	1	
Japanese sunk	2	1	3		6	3	9		350 (estimated)
Probably sunk	1				4	2	7		
Damaged	6				4	1	10		

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