The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 424
"From Z to A"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

"Wars begin when you will, but they do not end when you please."

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 424. From Z to A.

As the new year of 1944 dawned over the Land of the Rising Sun, Japan's military situation was grim. The Allies were overpowering Japan both on the Southwest Pacific front and now in the Central Pacific after the American capture of Tarawa.

This caused the Army and the Navy once again to clash over the allocation of resources between the two services. The admirals and the generals disagreed over many things, but there was one place where they were in complete agreement: experience had shown how vital was the role air power played in the Pacific War, so both services clamored for more warplanes.

In December 1943, the government estimated Japan could produce 45,000 aircraft in 1944 and proposed to divide aircraft production equally between the Army and the Navy. The leaders of both services agreed to this allocation, but barely a month later, in January 1944, the Navy persuaded Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki to increase their share to 26,000. One of Tōjō's old Army colleagues, Sato Kenryo, now an official in the War Ministry, objected. He pointed out to the prime minister that the Navy's strategy of luring the Americans into a decisive battle comparable to the Battle of the Tsushima Straits had clearly failed. With the Navy short on carriers, the islands between the Americans and Japan would have to replace them as "unsinkable carriers" guarding the Home Islands. This would be the Army's job, therefore the Army should get most of the planes.

Tōjō decided that was right and his earlier decision had been a mistake, so he rescinded it. This prompted a loud objection from the Navy.

Meanwhile, the Americans were arguing too. They had captured Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, following a bloody battle. The next stage of Admiral Nimitz's plan called for an advance into the Marshall Islands.

The Marshalls are a much larger island group than the Gilberts. They consist of five islands and 29 atolls, though more than half of those are uninhabited. Their combined land area is about equal to that of the District of Columbia, the capital district of the United States. The Marshall Islands had been a German protectorate until they were occupied by Japan during the last war. After the war, the League of Nations designated the Marshall Islands a mandatory territory to be governed by Japan, but barred the Japanese from building military installations in its mandatory territories.

Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in 1935, after that body denounced the Japanese invasion and occupation of Manchuria, but it did not relinquish control over its mandatory territories, which left their legal status unclear. In the case of the Marshall Islands, the Japanese administered the islands from Kwajalein, the largest island in the group, or I should say the largest atoll, comprised of 97 islands of various sizes, surrounding one of the largest lagoons in the world.

The Japanese military at first regarded the Marshall Islands as too small and distant to bother defending, but as improved aircraft technology led to longer-range bombers, the Japanese military's thinking changed. In 1939, Japan built three airfields in the islands, on Kwajalein, Maloelap, and Wotje atolls. After the Pacific War began, the Japanese built two more, on the atolls of Mili and Eniwetok.

Once the Gilbert Islands had been secured by the Americans, the next stage of Nimitz's campaign plan proposed seizing three airfields in the Marshalls with three amphibious invasions, conducted simultaneously, but after the heavy losses experienced at Tarawa, some American commanders, including Admiral Spruance, who would command the invasion forces, worried that three invasions at once would produce three more Tarawas. Maybe it would be better to start with one island?

Nimitz conceded the point, but when he came back with a plan to invade one island, his commanders were stunned by his choice: Kwajelein, the biggest island with the biggest garrison in the heart of the island group, which also served as the headquarters for Japanese military forces in the Marshall Islands. To make matters worse, any American invasion force headed for Kwajelein would have to pass right by two of the other Japanese airbases, the ones on Wotje and Maloelap, and be subject to Japanese air attacks from those islands.

Nevertheless, Nimitz persisted. He believed aircraft carriers in the US task force plus air cover from planes based in the Gilbert Islands would be sufficient to protect the ships from Japanese planes.

The plan began on January 31. US Marines landed on some of the small, outlying islands of the atoll, where they set up artillery pieces. The following day, February 1, the main island of Kwajelein was subjected to intense naval bombardment, plus air attacks and shelling from those artillery pieces. Then the Marines landed.

The American leap straight into the heart of the Marshall Islands caught the Japanese entirely by surprise. There were 8,500 uniformed Japanese military on the island, but most of them were support personnel. Only about 2,000 were combat soldiers. The Americans numbered over 40,000.

The Japanese were unprepared, hopelessly outnumbered, and American tactics had incorporated the lessons of Tarawa. Nonetheless, as at Tarawa, virtually every one of the 8,500 Japanese fought on till their deaths. Only about 250 were captured alive. American losses numbered 373.

Nimitz was encouraged and ordered further landings in the Marshall Islands at a rapid pace. Ebeye Island on February 3. Engebi Island on February 18, Eniwetok Island on February 19, and Parry Island on February 22.

In Tokyo, this string of setbacks set off another round of arguments between the Army and the Navy. On February 10, during a meeting at the Imperial Palace, Navy Chief of Staff Admiral Nagano Osami insisted that the war against the enemy would be won or lost at sea and demanded more planes. Army Chief of Staff Sugiyama Tatsumaru angrily confronted Nagano, asking him, if the Navy got all the planes it was requesting, could it reverse the course of the war? An equally angry Nagano shot back the same question: if the Army got all the planes *it* wanted, could it turn everything around?

In the end, they settled on a compromise. The 1944 production target would be increased to 50,000 planes. This would be possible if fighter production was increased at the expense of bomber production. The 50,000 planes would be allocated equally, so both services would receive more planes than under the original plan.

As the Americans were advancing into the Marshall Islands, Japanese commanders at Truk grew worried. The atoll of Truk, in the Caroline Islands, became the Japanese Navy's main forward base in the Pacific. It was a major port, naval base, and air base, the center of Japanese military power in the Pacific.

And Japanese bombers based at Truk were capable of reaching Eniwetok, in the Marshalls. The Americans decided they had to neutralize the airfields on Truk to protect the forces attacking Eniwetok.

Five American fleet carriers, USS *Enterprise*, *Intrepid*, *Essex*, the new *Yorktown*, and *Bunker Hill*, along with four light carriers, collectively carrying more than 500 planes, were dispatched to attack Truk, escorted by seven battleships, plus cruisers and destroyers.

The Japanese on Truk had taken note of American B-24 reconnaissance flights appearing overhead in early February and pulled back their most important warships to safer ports farther west.

The American executed a surprise carrier attack on February 17. American pilots were flying the Navy's newest fighter, the Grumman F6F Hellcat; they shot down about 30 Japanese Zeros. Bombers destroyed 70 more planes on the ground

The American pilots thought of this surprise carrier attack as payback for Pearl Harbor. They were disappointed when they saw that the big capital ships were gone. They needn't have been. They sank several Japanese warships and thirty cargo ships, transports, and other support vessels, over 200,000 tons of shipping altogether, and destroyed 17,000 tons of precious naval and aviation fuel.

Those losses alone were a heavy blow, but the attack also destroyed Truk's value as a supply and support base for Japanese ships and aircraft and made Japanese shipping between the Home Islands and the Southwest Pacific even more vulnerable. The Navy blamed the base commander, Admiral Kobayashi Masami, and relieved him of duty.

The reverberations from these multiple defeats reached all the way to the Prime Minister. Three days later, Tōjō's old buddy, General Sato, visited him once again with some more unsolicited advice: Japanese forces should abandon the Carolines and the Marianas and fall back to the Philippines.

Tōjō could hardly believe what he was hearing. Just a few months ago, the top Army and Navy commanders meeting with the Emperor identified the Carolines and the Marianas as Japan's final defensive line, and here was Sato suggesting they be abandoned without a fight.

Japan had only seven airfields in the region, Sato pointed out, and the Americans had already proved they could bring in sufficient numbers of carrier aircraft to overwhelm them. The Philippines were a whole other story—an archipelago of hundreds of islands large enough to host a major air base or a sizeable military unit. Japan could fortify the Philippines and dare the Americans to come for them. There would be Japan's last line of defense. If the Philippines fell, the war would be over in any case.

Sato's advice spurred Tōjō to rethink the war effort, but not in the way he'd intended. That evening, Tōjō summoned General Sugiyama, the Army chief of staff, and asked for his resignation. Given the critical situation, Tōjō explained, he thought it best that he himself assume the position of Army chief of staff, in addition to serving as war minister and prime minister.

Sugiyama protested. This violated the Japanese tradition of separate political and military leadership. He cited Hitler's assuming the role of commander of the German military and the defeat at Stalingrad as evidence of what can happen if one person assumes too much control.

"Hitler was an enlisted man," Tojo told him. "I am a general."

The following day, Tōjō replaced Navy Chief of Staff Nagano with his Naval Minister, Shimada Shigetarō. The five most important wartime positions in Japan—prime minister, war minister, naval minister, and Army and Navy chiefs of staff—were now in the hands of two men: Tōjō and his handpicked naval minister.

He contacted Sato, who was drawing up his plan for a last stand in the Philippines and told him Japan would make its stand at the Carolines and the Marianas.

Sato did not approve of that decision, but he supported Tōjō's consolidation of power. Not everyone did. The former prime minister, Prince Konoye, believed Tōjō's leadership was what had gotten Japan into this predicament in the first place and tried to recruit a potential replacement, someone prepared to talk peace with the Allies. Someone the Emperor might be persuaded to support.

The Emperor's next younger brother, Prince Chichibu, also had concerns. He wrote to Tōjō to ask, "What will you do when the General Staff and the War Ministry do not agree on the conduct of the war?" Tōjō sent a testy reply, in which he wrote, "The most important thing before us at this stage is to achieve victory…I'll thank you to discuss personal affairs after the war is over…"

[music: "分列行進曲" ("Review March.")

In 1937, a 44-year-old Navy captain named Takagi Sōkichi was made Chief of the Navy Ministry's Research Section. In that position, he developed many contacts among the civilian politicians serving in various Japanese governments.

Takagi had advised against the decision to declare war on the United States, and for this reason, he was reassigned in 1942. In 1943, he was promoted to rear admiral and navy minister Shimada assigned him a special task: the new admiral was to prepare a report analyzing the Japanese defeats of the previous year and make recommendations on how to improve the Navy's performance.

Takagi spent much of his report analyzing Japanese merchant shipping losses, which he regarded as disastrous to the Japanese war effort, and noted that despite the alarming losses, most of which were due to American submarines, the Navy was doing little to combat the problem.

I touched on the subject of the Navy's aversion to using its own submarines against Allied shipping back in episode 397. To the Japanese, that kind of warfare was cowardly and

dishonorable, hence the Japanese preference for using submarines to support their surface ships in engagements with enemy warships.

The trouble was, the Americans had no such reservations. For three years now, the Americans had been involved with the German U-boat campaign in the Atlantic, first in support of the Royal Navy, then as combatants themselves. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the Americans must have sincerely admired Admiral Dönitz; having learned his tactics in the Atlantic, they proceeded to apply them in the Pacific against Japan, and sought to choke off shipments of vital war materiel, especially liquid fuels, from Southeast Asia to the Home Islands.

The Japanese aversion to attacking civilian ships was one thing, but officers in the Imperial Navy had little enthusiasm for anti-submarine warfare, either. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the Navy had only two staff officers assigned to what the Navy called "rear-line defense," a category that included mine-laying, minesweeping, antiaircraft defenses, and anti-submarine warfare. Naval officers did whatever they could to avoid these assignments, which they regarded as both dull and detrimental to one's career.

At the beginning of the war against the Americans, the Navy had had no plans for organizing merchant shipping into convoys, and the captains of the merchant ships weren't interested in forming convoys either. Much like American merchant ship captains, when the U-boats began hunting their ships in 1942, their Japanese counterparts believed individual ships were safer going it alone, instead of forming large convoys that couldn't sail any faster than their slowest ship and presented enemy submarines with a big, juicy target.

By mid-1942 though, six months into the Pacific War and even before the Americans had worked out all the problems with their torpedoes, the sinkings of merchant ships had become serious enough to spur the Navy to form the First Convoy Escort Fleet, based on Formosa and assigned the task of escorting convoys along the Asian coast operating between Japan and Singapore and the East Indies. It was a good beginning, but the fleet commanders were mostly older naval reservists, and the Navy allocated a mere eight destroyers to patrol a vast stretch of sea. The admirals were reluctant to assign any more destroyers, as their captains hated the monotonous job of shepherding slow civilian ships up and down the coast and regarded getting assigned to such work insulting.

By 1943, merchant ship losses had become too serious to ignore or gloss over. Factory managers in Japan and Manchukuo were clamoring for more aluminum, more copper, more gasoline, more tungsten. Army commanders on the front lines in the Solomons and New Guinea were begging for more ammunition, food, and reinforcements, but there simply weren't enough cargo ships to deliver everything everyone needed.

In March 1943, the Navy organized the Second Convoy Escort Fleet, based on Saipan, in the Mariana Islands. That was an improvement, although this formation also received only eight destroyers and a couple of torpedo boats, while the Americans' submarine campaign was

becoming exponentially more effective. The Americans were building newer and better submarines, assigning to them experienced crews, and arming them with vastly more effective torpedoes.

In September 1943, American submarines sank 31 Japanese merchant ships totaling 172,000 tons, a new monthly record. Even then, it took until mid-November for the Navy to create a new Grand Escort Command and assign it four light carriers. This looks like a big step forward, but the carriers were in poor condition and needed maintenance work and their pilots had no experience in antisubmarine warfare. That same month, the Americans sank 46 Japanese merchant ships totaling 265,000 tons.

Japanese "convoys" rarely included more than five ships. The Admiralty ordered bigger convoys, but "bigger" meant perhaps twenty ships. In the Atlantic, Allied convoys typically included seventy ships plus their escorts. The new convoy system went into effect in March 1944, and that month's losses were substantially lower: just 29 sinkings, down from 53 in February. The new convoy system was working.

Oh, but no. The Americans had merely reduced their submarine patrols in March, so their sub crews could undergo training for new tactics, based on the German "wolfpack" system, in which submarines attacked enemy convoys in groups rather than individually.

As for Admiral Takagi's report, he had certainly come up with conclusions and recommendations, but they were far too dangerous to commit to paper. They went something like this:

Conclusion No. 1: Nothing further can be done to win the war. Japan will certainly be defeated. No available strategy can change this outcome.

Recommendation No. 1: Japan should attempt to open peace talks with its enemies immediately; the goal should be to reach a peace treaty that would allow Japan to retain some shred of its national honor.

Conclusion No. 2: The prime minister will in no circumstance agree to begin peace talks and cannot be removed from his post through lawful means.

Recommendation No. 2: The prime minister should therefore be removed from office by unlawful means, i.e., assassination and replaced with someone willing to discuss peace with the Americans.

Takagi would have been risking his life to put all that in his report, but he was sufficiently convinced he was right to reach out to a couple of fellow admirals he knew to be equally unhappy with the course of the war. He shared his findings with them and encouraged them to spread the word among their fellow admirals.

After weeks passed and nothing changed, Takagi grew impatient and began talking with a few lower-ranking officers—captains and commanders—and explained to them that Tōjō had to die for the good of the nation. The ever-diligent Takagi had researched other assassinations of political figures in Japan and studied Tōjō's schedule. He concluded that the plan most likely to succeed would begin by crashing a car into Tōjō's motorcade while he was traveling through the streets of Tokyo. Once Tōjō's car was forced to stop, two other cars full of Navy officers would pull up and begin shooting. Afterward, the killers would escape by air to Formosa. Takagi offered to remain in Tokyo and assume responsibility for the attack.

The conspirators never attempted to execute their plan, as Tōjō was forced to resign just a few weeks later. I'll come back to that in a future episode.

There is one known case of Tōjō himself inquiring about peace. In 1942, on the prompting of the Emperor, who instructed him to seize any opportunity to end the war, Tōjō consulted with Kurusu Saburō, the diplomat who had attempted to negotiate a peace agreement with the United States in late 1941, and inquired about the prospects of making peace with the Americans. I don't know if Kurusu was acquainted with the famous declaration by Niccolò Machiavelli, which I read to you at the top of the episode, but his reply could have been a paraphrase. He said, "It is easier to start a war than to end one."

[music: A *suikinkutsu,* or Japanese water harp.]

I told you the story of Plan Vengeance, when American fighters intercepted and shot down the aircraft carrying Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku on April 18, 1943. Yamamoto had been commander of the Japanese Combined Fleet, the main battle fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

His successor as commander of the Combined Fleet was the 57-year-old Admiral Koga Mineichi. Koga, like his predecessor, dreamed of pulling off a repeat of the Battle of the Tsushima Strait by luring the American fleet into a decisive battle that would end the war.

Koga understood the odds of success were not good, but it was Japan's best chance of pulling out a victory from what was increasingly looking like a bitter defeat. In March 1944, following the American victories in the Marshall Islands and the devastating attack on Truk, Koga developed a battle plan, designated Plan Z. After Nimitz's island-hopping campaign advanced either to the Mariana Islands or Palau, the next step would inevitably involve a naval advance into the Philippine Sea, that broad expanse of open sea bounded by the Home Islands, Formosa, and the Philippines to the west and the Marianas and Palau to the east.

Here there were no islands to hop. The American fleet would have to cross 1,500 miles, or 2,500 kilometers, of empty ocean and land their soldiers either in the Philippines or on Formosa. If it were not Nimitz but MacArthur advancing, the result would be the same. From the Japanese point of view, the most dangerous move MacArthur could make after securing New Guinea would be directly west into the East Indies, that vital source of fuel for Japan's ships and

airplanes. But MacArthur's burning desire to make good on his pledge to return to the Philippines was well known. He would not advance toward Borneo or Java; he would set his sights on the former American possession to the north.

So in any scenario, the Americans will certainly send their fleet to, or at least past, the Philippines. Plan Z called for Japan to concentrate its naval air units, totaling approximately one thousand planes, plus the full Combined Fleet in the Philippines, ready to strike as the Americans approached.

Koga's headquarters at the time were on Palau, and as a first step, he and his staff would relocate to the Philippines. On March 31, Admiral Koga and his chief of staff, Admiral Fukudome Shigeru, boarded two separate airplanes and left Palau for the three-hour flight to Mindanao.

Just before reaching the Philippines, the two airplanes flew into a storm. Admiral Fukudome's pilot changed course for Manila, but it was too late. The plane made an emergency landing just off the coast of Cebu. The admiral survived the crash, but he and nine other Japanese officers and his briefcase containing copies of Plan Z were captured by Filipinos working for the resistance. They took him to their leader, an American engineer, Colonel James Cushing, who radioed MacArthur to report that the resistance had captured a high-ranking Japanese naval officer and a briefcase full of what seemed to be important documents.

The US Navy diverted a submarine to the area to pick up the prisoners and the documents, but the local Japanese garrison commander threatened to begin murdering Filipino civilians unless the prisoners were released. Cushing violated a direct order from MacArthur and freed his prisoners, although the briefcase was delivered to the submarine, which carried it back to Darwin, Australia, and from there its contents went to MacArthur.

MacArthur retaliated by busting Cushing down to private. But colonel or private, he was still in command of the Filipino resistance on Cebu.

As for Admiral Koga, in the other airplane, his plane disappeared and his fate remains a mystery to our day.

The Combined Fleet lost its second commander in a year, which further damaged morale in the Fleet at a time when there were already plenty of reasons for a Japanese sailor to feel demoralized. The new new commander, 58-year-old Admiral Toyoda Soemu, had his work cut out for him. Toyoda was an intelligent man with little patience, one who had opposed war with the United States. He had served for a few months on the Japanese Supreme War Council, but was removed because of his strong advocacy for increasing military resources for the Navy at the Army's expense. You may remember his name. I mentioned him before, when I told you that Toyoda referred to the Army "horse dung," and said that he'd rather his daughter marry a beggar than an Army officer.

Toyoda had inherited Koga's "Plan Z." He and his staff revised and adjusted it, though the amended plan, dubbed "Plan A" was not all that different.

What Japanese commanders did not know was that Admiral Fukudome's briefcase and the documents inside, which detailed Plan Z, were now in Australia. The plans were not in code and all the Allies needed was a team of translators, which incidentally, included two Japanese-Americans. The translated documents were forwarded to Douglas MacArthur, who in turn sent copies to Chester Nimitz.

The Combined Fleet's main force was stationed at Singapore, because Singapore was not far from Borneo, the source of the Navy's fuel. The tanker run from Borneo to Singapore was shorter and safer. Plan A was to take effect when the Americans attempted an invasion of the Marianas, Palau, or the Philippines. As soon as the Japanese had confirmation that an American invasion force was headed toward one of these objectives, the fleet would move to the Philippines, top off their fuel, and then intercept the Americans en route to the Philippines or Palau.

Defending the Marianas would be a little trickier. The fleet would not have enough fuel to strike that far from the Philippines. In that instance, a smaller Japanese naval force would engage the Americans and lure them south.

Toyoda and his staff had some concerns about the Marianas, specifically the island of Saipan. The Mariana Islands formerly belonged to Spain, then Germany, and then became a Japanese Mandate following the First World War, with the exception of the largest island in the archipelago, Guam, which the United States seized during the Spanish-American war.

Excluding Guam, the largest island in the chain is Saipan. Saipan had a Japanese garrison of more than 30,000 and was the site of a crucial airbase, crucial because it was a stopover point where airplanes traveling between the Home Islands and Rabaul or New Guinea could land and refuel. The Navy regarded it as a possible objective for the next American advance and pestered the Army about insuring its security. Their concerns became loud enough to provoke a reply from Tōjō himself, who offered his personal guarantee of the defense of the island.

The Army colonel who delivered Tōjō's pledge to the Navy told the admirals that the Army *wanted* the Americans to attack Saipan. They would be destroyed.

Plan A was in place. Once the Americans made their move, the Combined Fleet, augmented with 500 land-based aircraft, would attack and devastate the American ships. Yes, the Americans had more and better carriers and better airplanes, but Japanese pilots had the bushidō code. Every single Japanese pilot was defending the Home Islands and was prepared to die for the Emperor, while it was well known that Americans were cowards, who were frightened of death. Japanese moral superiority would be more than enough to compensate for their material shortcomings.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Kerry for his kind donation, and thank you to Daniel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kerry and Daniel help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we conclude our look at American popular music of the period with a discussion of boogie-woogie. Eight to the Bar, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1971, famed French oceanographer Jacques Cousteau and his team filmed a TV documentary about Truk Lagoon and the large number of Japanese shipwrecks that lie in its waters, all sunk during the American attack of February 17, 1944. The lagoon is shallow and calm and its waters exceptionally clear, which means the sunken ships can in many cases be seen from the surface.

It also makes it easy for scuba divers to examine the wrecks. Besides sunken ships, divers can easily examine aircraft, tanks, motorcycles, crates of munitions and thousands of other artifacts from 1944. In our time Truk, or as I believe it is known today, Chuuk, part of the Federated States of Micronesia, has a population of about 36,000 and is a popular tourist attraction, particularly for recreational scuba divers. Tourism accounts for a substantial part of the local economy.

In recent years, concerns have been raised about the possible release of large quantities of fuel from the decaying shipwrecks, which include three oil tankers. On the other hand, the Japanese position in 1944 suggests those ships likely carried much less than their full capacity of fuel. Scientists from Japan and other countries are studying the wrecks to assess the environmental risk.

[music: Closing War Theme]