The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 436
"Too Good to Be True"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

American military commanders were divided. MacArthur wanted to invade the Philippines. Nimitz wanted to invade Saipan. Hap Arnold wanted B-29s based in China to bomb Japan.

In the end, the Joint Chiefs went with "all of the above."

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 436. Too Good to Be True.

In the Belle Époque days of the podcast, we talked about modern technology and how it changed the way nations fight wars. One of the differences we discussed involved the lifespan of military equipment. I cited as an example, British warships of the 19th century. A typical ship of that time had a service life of about 30 years before it was considered too old, at which time it might be converted to a training ship, sold, or broken up.

In 1906, the Royal Navy launched its battleship HMS *Dreadnought*, a revolutionary ship that made virtually all older battleships obsolete. In 1920, *Dreadnought* was put up for sale as scrap. It was itself obsolete in just 14 years, even though it cost quite a few more quid than those older ships.

Similarly, artillery guns, tanks, and aircraft got increasingly sophisticated, increasingly expensive, and if anything, became obsolete sooner.

By the 1940s, it was common practice among the major arms manufacturing nations that by the time the newest generation of weapon was being produced in quantity, it was time to begin working on the design of the next generation.

One of the less-appreciated reasons why Germany was such a military juggernaut at the beginning of the Second World War involves procurement cycles. You'll recall that Hitler began German rearmament in secret; it took more than a year for France and Britain to learn about the buildup and begin their own.

Because of that developmental lead, the newest generation of German weapons was in production when the war broke out, while in France and Britain, theirs were still in development. This previous generation of fighter plane, for example the British Hurricane, was no match for the latest German warplanes, such as the Me-109.

By 1944, where we are now, the Germans no longer hold that lead, as the major Allied powers, and especially the United States, were now producing superior weapons, while Germany lacked the necessary resources to develop, test, and then mass produce the next generation of weapons it needed, particularly aircraft and tanks.

I point all this out as a way of introducing the latest American heavy bomber, the Boeing B-29 Superfortress. I've mentioned this aircraft before, but it plays an important role in today's narrative, so let's take a closer look.

Boeing began design work on a new long-range heavy bomber in 1938, a plane conceived as a successor to the B-17 Flying Fortress. In 1940, during America's military buildup, when the US Army Air Corps began soliciting designs for a new heavy bomber, Boeing already had one on the table, which would become the B-29.

The B-29 included a number of advances over the B-17. First and foremost, it had a pressurized cabin. We've seen that by the time of the Second World War, high-altitude bombers were routinely flying at altitudes in excess of 30,000 feet, which is six miles or ten kilometers. At this altitude, 90% of the Earth's atmosphere is underneath you. Air pressure is less than one-fifth what it is at sea level, and air temperature is typically below -40, in the range where it doesn't matter whether you're talking Celsius or Fahrenheit. You are practically in outer space.

Bombers of the period didn't have pressurized cabins. They did have heaters in the cabin that drew in heat from the engines, but this was often insufficient, so the aircrew wore electrically heated flying suits under heavy layers of insulated clothing. They also wore oxygen masks because, at that air pressure, a human being needs to be breathing pure oxygen to remain alive and conscious.

All this explains the image you carry in your mind of what a Second World War pilot looks like. You probably picture someone wearing a leather jacket lined with sheepskin and an oxygen mask, which was indeed the typical aircrew outfit of the period.

All this applies to fighter pilots as well, but there are important differences in the two roles. Bombers stay aloft for much longer periods of time than do fighters, and fighter pilots stay in their seats while aloft, while bomber crews need the freedom to move about the aircraft. For these reasons, a pressurized cabin was a welcome improvement. It would eliminate the need for a mask or bulky clothing or an electrically heated suit that literally had to be plugged into a nearby power source.

The B-29 was the first heavy bomber with a pressurized cabin. The British did design and build a medium bomber with a pressurized cabin, the Vickers Wellington, but the RAF found the Wellington unsuitable for bombing missions, for unrelated reasons, and used them mostly for anti-submarine warfare instead.

The B-29, like the B-17, had multiple machine gun turrets, but unlike the B-17, it had a sophisticated fire control system using analog computers that allowed one lone gunner to aim and fire multiple guns in different turrets at the same target.

All this new technology made for a complex and expensive aircraft. The US government spent more money on developing, testing, and building its fleet of nearly 4,000 B-29 bombers than it did on any other weapon of the war, and that includes the atomic bomb.

And the B-29 was not only expensive, but it also took longer than expected to work out the bugs and turn the B-29 into a safe and reliable aircraft.

So how was this extra-long-range Superfortress to be used? In 1942 and 1943, the Army Air Forces envisioned using B-29s to bomb Germany from bases in Egypt. Basing the planes there rather than England would have made it possible to reach targets in the south and east of Germany that were difficult to attack from Britain. Attacking from Egypt would also reduce the demand for airfields in Britain.

Production delays led to a change of plan. The first B-29s didn't come into service until spring of 1944. By that time, British and American bombers were already hitting German cities pretty hard, and it became difficult to see the advantage of adding B-29s into the mix of bombers already attacking Germany.

Japan was a different story. Japan had yet to feel the wrath of an Allied bombing campaign, apart from the Doolittle Raid, which had taken place two years earlier and was more a propaganda coup than part of a concerted strategy. The Americans, and particularly General Hap Arnold, commander of the US Army Air Forces, were eager to unleash their bombers on Japan.

But in the spring of 1944, that still wasn't possible. Japan's initial offensive, in which it seized control of islands across the Western Pacific, had always been intended as a means to set up a defensive perimeter in the Pacific and keep Japan's enemies at a safe distance from the Home Islands. By 1944, Japan's defenses were beginning to crumble, but Japan itself remained out of reach, even for the new, longer-range B-29.

Except for China.

By the beginning of 1944, China's ruler, Chiang Kai-shek, was beginning to feel marginalized. Did his Western allies even care about his country anymore? The British and Americans had cancelled their promised amphibious invasion of Burma. The transports and landing craft were needed for Operation Overlord, they told him.

Most of what remained of Western interest in China involved the B-29. Bombers based around the inland Chinese city of Chengdu, still controlled by the NRA, the National Revolutionary Army, would be capable of reaching targets in Japan. Barely. When I say "reaching targets in Japan," I mean targets along the southwest coast of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's main islands. That would be sufficient to reach the cities of Kagoshima, Yawata, and Nagasaki, the latter being a major center of manufacturing and shipbuilding. B-29s based at Chengdu might also reach targets in occupied China, western Korea, southern Manchuria, and Taiwan.

That wasn't a lot, but it wasn't nothing, either.

Chiang had other worries. In late 1943, the Chinese were detecting signs that the Japanese were preparing to start a new offensive in China in 1944. If the Americans started bombing Japan from bases in China, that would only give the Japanese incentive to strengthen their planned offensive. After six years of struggle against an enemy that occupied much of their country, the NRA was on its last legs. Without Western aid, Japan's next offensive in China might shatter it.

Chiang communicated these concerns to Franklin Roosevelt in January 1944 as part of a request for additional American military aid to help strengthen his armed forces. Unfortunately for Chiang, the Americans and the British doubted that Japan was willing, or even able, to carry out an offensive on that scale while it was under so much pressure in the Pacific. To the contrary, they expected Japan to draw down its forces in China in 1944 to reinforce its positions in Burma, the East Indies, and the Philippines.

Unfortunately for the Allies, events would prove the Americans and the British wrong and Chiang right.

The US Army Air Forces created a new formation, the Twentieth Air Force, to carry out the B-29 bombing attacks on Japan. Hap Arnold appointed himself commander of the Twentieth Air Force, which gives you some idea of the priority he placed on this operation. Arnold was also concerned that theater commanders might be tempted to use the B-29s against Japanese military units in China, and he wanted nothing of the sort. These bombers were meant to be used against targets in Japan, and to insure this, they would be commanded directly from Washington.

Four new airfields had to be constructed in the Chengdu region. This work was done by nearly 400,000 Chinese laborers, most of them conscripted. They had no bulldozers or other powered machinery except a few trucks. The work was all done by hand. Dirt was dug with shovels and hoes and carried away in wheelbarrows or wicker baskets. This work was completed by May 1944.

The bombers themselves flew from Salina, Kansas, where final modifications were made, to India along a route that took them first to Newfoundland, then Morocco, then Cairo, then Karachi, and finally to Calcutta.

The bombers' final destination was to be Chengdu, but getting the bombers themselves to their bases was only a small part of the challenge. Chengdu was within range of Japanese fighter planes based in China, so two fighter groups also had to be stationed in China to provide air defense. As for fuel, bombs, and other supplies, the only way to deliver these to Chengdu was via air. The Americans used transport aircraft and some of the B-29s, which were modified to carry loads of fuel. Each one of these modified B-29s could carry enough to fuel one B-29 on a bombing mission.

These supply flights had to go "over the Hump," as they said, the "Hump" being the Himalayas, the highest mountain range in the world, a flight made dangerous by unpredictable weather and the lack of good maps or radio navigation aids.

Even before the airfields in China were built and the necessary supplies delivered, the Twentieth Air Force conducted its first bomber attack on June 5, 1944, the day before D-Day. B-29s based in India attacked the rail yard in Bangkok, Thailand. This would be the longest-range bomber mission ever conducted, and the first using B-29s.

The results were disappointing. Of the 98 B-29s that participated, 21 had to turn back because of mechanical problems, and as usual, most of the bombs dropped landed nowhere near the target. But you have to start somewhere, I suppose.

There was another new model of American aircraft that entered the Pacific Theater in late 1943: the US Navy's newest carrier-based fighter plane, designed to replace the F4F Wildcat. The new fighter, the F6F, sometimes called the Wildcat's big brother, was dubbed the "Hellcat."

The Hellcat was designed to be easy to manufacture and maintain, and durable. The design also considered pilot safety, providing an armored cockpit and a bullet resistant windshield. Like the Wildcat, the Hellcat had self-sealing fuel tanks. And the plane was designed with one eye on the Japanese Zero. The Hellcat at least matched the performance of a Zero, though it did not markedly exceed it, but unlike the fragile Zero, the Hellcat was a tough and powerful plane with heavier armament and capable of carrying nearly a ton of bomb weight, several times the capacity of the Zero.

Early results were promising. During the invasion of Tarawa, Hellcats shot down 30 Zeroes while losing only one of their own. By spring of 1944, Hellcats accounted for most of the fighter planes aboard American carriers.

Chester Nimitz was well aware of the results the Navy was getting with its new fighter, part of what encouraged him to make the bold move of advancing directly into the middle of the Marshall Islands.

A look at the map might persuade you that after the Marshall Islands, the next logical step for the Americans would be into the Caroline Islands and Japan's main naval base at Truk. American air

attacks had made Truk no longer safe for Japanese warships and it was now within American reach.

But Nimitz proposed an even bolder move. Forget the Caroline Islands; he wanted to advance directly to the Mariana Islands. These islands had one big attraction that no place in the Carolines could match: B-29s based in the Mariana Islands would be capable of reaching targets in Japan. Air bases in the Marianas could be supplied by ship directly from the United States, a much faster, easier, and much less expensive method than laboriously carrying fuel and supplies a few tons at a time via aircraft over the Hump. And while B-29s based in China could just barely reach a couple of Japanese cities on Kyushu Island, the same planes based in the Marianas could reach any target on Kyushu or Shikoku or the southern half of Honshu, the largest of the Japanese Home Islands. That meant most of Japan's cities and industry would be vulnerable to American bombs, including, crucially, Tokyo, the capital.

Senior US Army and Navy commanders met at Pearl Harbor in January 1944 to discuss strategy for the coming year. Here Nimitz first floated this idea. Most Army commanders opposed it. For Douglas MacArthur and his subordinates, it looked as if the Navy was again trying to prioritize its campaign at the expense of MacArthur's command. One of MacArthur's staff dismissed the idea of bombing Tokyo as a "stunt." Even some Navy commanders opposed the idea as a great risk for a doubtful benefit.

And so Nimitz's idea fell by the wayside, but when the minutes of the meeting reached the desk of Admiral King in Washington, he picked it up again. He sent a message to Nimitz dismissing MacArthur's roundabout strategy to defeat Japan as "absurd." At a February meeting of the Joint Chiefs, MacArthur's representative dismissed Nimitz's approach as "weak and slow," and promised that if MacArthur got the resources he wanted, US troops could be on the Philippine island of Mindanao by the end of the year.

The Joint Chiefs punted the decision to a committee for study. The committee came back with a recommendation that fully supported Nimitz. Army chief George Marshall, though, was not willing to give up on MacArthur, and so the Joint Chiefs struck a compromise. Nimitz was ordered to invade the Marianas no later than June 15; MacArthur's command would then receive the landing ships and amphibious support for an invasion of Mindanao by November 15.

[music: Offenbach, "Marines' Hymn."]

Despite the timetable set by the Joint Chiefs, the next major Allied advance in the Pacific was made by MacArthur and his command and it was on New Guinea. With the western part of New Guinea now firmly under Allied control, the Japanese Army set up its frontline defense at the town of Wewak on the north coast of New Guinea. But a hundred miles farther west sat the port of Hollandia. It was the only port facility in the region and decrypts of Japanese military communications showed it was only lightly defended.

In March, MacArthur sent the Joint Chiefs a bold proposal. Allied forces would bypass the main Japanese defenses and seize Hollandia, which would then serve as a port and airbase to support further Allied advances westward. The Joint Chiefs approved the plan and ordered Nimitz to provide naval support for what was dubbed Operation Reckless. Hm.

Operation Reckless began on April 22, 1944, with a landing of 52,000 American soldiers, with heavy air and naval support. The Japanese were caught completely by surprise; the garrison at Hollandia was even smaller than MacArthur had believed: just 11,000 soldiers, most of whom were support personnel. It became an easy victory for the Allies, who lost just 152 soldiers, while the Japanese lost thousands.

And just like that, the Allies seized control of the best port and airfields in the region, to be used as bases for the next advance.

Now it was Nimitz's turn to take Saipan.

Japan had controlled the Mariana Islands, apart from US-controlled Guam, since the last war. The Japanese developed sugarcane plantations and large numbers of Japanese civilians moved to the islands, until the Chamorros, the native people of the islands, became a small minority in their own lands.

The Americans attacked Saipan with carrier aircraft in February, which baffled Japanese civilians on the island. Japan had been using Saipan as a stopover point for aircraft traveling between the Home Islands and Japanese-controlled islands farther south. The inhabitants had grown so accustomed to the roar of planes taking off and landing all day every day. Where were all those planes now?

Not that Saipan didn't have air units stationed there. The Americans destroyed over a hundred Japanese planes on the ground. Of the 74 Japanese planes that managed to take off, 67 were shot down. The Americans lost six.

Japanese transport ships ferrying reinforcements to the Marianas were frequently attacked and sunk by American submarines. The surviving soldiers arrived in the Marianas wounded, traumatized, and with most of their equipment at the bottom of the Pacific. General Obata Hideyoshi, commander of ground forces in the Marianas, sent a message to Tokyo begging for cement, steel, barbed wire, and lumber with which to build fortifications. He noted that without these materials, which were unavailable in the islands, all his soldiers could do was to sit around and wait for the arrival of the Americans, a situation he called "unbearable." In fact, American subs had sent thousands of tons of these very materials to the bottom of the sea.

In early June, a huge American naval force numbering over 500 ships was on its way to Saipan, carrying over 120,000 soldiers and Marines. While at sea on June 7, they received the news of the Allied landings at Normandy.

Japan's military commanders weren't thinking much about Normandy, or the Marianas, for that matter. Their attention was fixed on the island of Biak, off the coast of western New Guinea, where the Japanese had built several airfields. After the fall of Hollandia, Japanese intelligence had correctly concluded that MacArthur's next move would be to seize Biak.

A couple of attempts to send reinforcements to the island were forced to turn back under Allied air attacks. Admiral Ozawa Jisaburō, commander of the First Mobile Fleet, asked for naval reinforcements, pointing out that the American assault on Biak just might be the opportunity to execute Plan A, the decisive battle against the American fleet that the Japanese yearned for. Admiral Toyoda, the author of Plan A, agreed and sent naval reinforcements, including Japan's best battleships, *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the largest battleships in the world.

The Americans landed on Biak, but on June 11, an American carrier air strike hit Saipan. Another hundred Japanese airplanes were destroyed on the ground. The Japanese naval command did a quick about-face—clearly the main American fleet was headed for Saipan.

On June 13 and 14, a total of 14 American battleships bombarded Saipan, landing tens of thousands of shells on the island and doing a lot of damage, but unfortunately for the Americans, they scored few hits on military targets. Admiral Nagumo Chuichi, who had commanded the naval air units that attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, studied the American fleet from an observation tower on Saipan. The number of ships surprised and worried him. Even more worrisome, he noted that four of the American battleships he had sunk at Pearl Harbor were participating in the bombardment.

The night of the 14th, Tokyo Rose played some of the latest American records for the troops, taunting them by advising they listen to the music now, while they were still alive.

The invasion began on the morning of June 15. One American unit's medical officer briefed soldiers on the other dangers they would face: sharks, sea snakes, and sharp coral in the water, and on land, more snakes, giant lizards, leprosy, typhus, and dysentery. One of the soldiers proposed they let the Japanese keep the island.

The Americans landed 8,000 soldiers and a hundred amphibious tanks in the first twenty minutes of the operation, but by the end of the first day's fighting, the American beachhead was still dangerously thin. The Japanese counterattacked over the next two nights, hoping to push the Americans back into the sea, but the Japanese attacks were poorly coordinated and broken up by American artillery, while American bazookas easily disabled the light Japanese tanks.

But the stiffness of the Japanese resistance concerned Marine commander Holland Smith so much, that he cancelled planned landings on Guam and sent those Marines to Saipan instead, as reinforcements.

As soon as he received word of the many American battleships bombarding Saipan, Admiral Toyoda at once reached the inescapable conclusion: the Americans had come in large numbers, as expected, and Saipan was their chosen target. Even before the amphibious landings began, Toyoda radioed a message to Admiral Ozawa, ordering him to attack and destroy the American fleet at the Mariana Islands, per his Plan A.

Five minutes later, Toyoda sent a second message. This one was a word-for-word repeat of Admiral Togo's famous words before the Battle of the Tsushima Strait in 1905: "The rise and fall of Imperial Japan depends on this one battle. Every man shall do his utmost." That message was in turn inspired by Lord Nelson's famous message signaled just before the Battle of Trafalgar a century earlier, in 1805: "England expects that every man will do his duty."

The First Mobile Fleet immediately left from Borneo and headed north to engage the Americans. Aboard the *Taihō*, Japan's newest and most advanced aircraft carrier, commissioned barely three months ago, Admiral Ozawa and his staff planned the attack.

Ozawa didn't have complete information about the composition of the American fleet, but he knew he would be outnumbered. In fact, the Americans had 67 destroyers to his 33, 21 cruisers to his 13, and 7 battleships to his five, although two of his were *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the biggest battleships ever built, so call that one a tie.

Japanese courage and spirit could make up for those numbers, perhaps, but his most worrisome shortfall was in carrier aircraft. He had five fleet carriers and four light carriers, about 450 aircraft in all. The Americans had seven fleet carriers and eight light carriers, with about 900 aircraft in all, double the Japanese number.

If you recall episode 424, when I described Plan A, you know that the Japanese figured on making up for the deficit in carrier planes with 500 or so land-based aircraft in the Marianas, which would bring Ozawa's force to near parity with the Americans. Also, his carriers' Zeroes had a longer range than the American Hellcats, which would allow him to launch a strike against the American fleet while his own fleet was beyond their reach. The Army still held Guam, so he even had the option of a sending his planes there to refuel and rearm after their first strike and hit the Americans a second time as they returned to the carriers. And of course Ozawa took it as a given that his pilots had superior skill and dedication. They were defending their homeland and their Emperor. They would not give up easily.

Ozawa did not know that most of those land-based planes he was counting on had already been destroyed by American air attacks. And Japanese pride notwithstanding, the American aviators had had two years' training and at least 300 hours in the air, while their Japanese counterparts had been rushed through a hasty training program with little flying time, as Japan desperately needed pilots to replace those lost in the defeats of 1942 and 1943.

On the afternoon of June 18, with bloody battle raging on Saipan and as Ozawa's fleet approached the islands, a Japanese search plane reported spotting a large enemy force including an unknown number of carriers. This was the main American task force overseeing the assault on Saipan, commanded by Admiral Marc Mitscher. We've met him before, by the way. He was skipper of USS *Hornet* during the Doolittle Raid, episode 361.

One of Ozawa's subordinates began launching a strike force at once. Experience had shown the sooner you hit your enemy, the better. But Ozawa wanted his task force to have the night to prepare and make a full-scale attack at dawn tomorrow. The planes already launched were ordered to return, though their commander wondered if Ozawa had let a golden opportunity slip away.

Mitscher had no idea the Japanese were near until midnight, when the fleet began to detect Japanese radio signals. He requested permission to turn his own task force toward the enemy and launch an air strike at dawn. His superior, Admiral Spruance, told him no. Their orders gave first priority to providing air cover over Saipan. Spruance warned him the Japanese could be laying a trap.

Just before 5:00 AM on the 19th, Ozawa launched search planes. Japanese squadron commanders reported to the admiral and gave him their word that today they would avenge the losses at Midway.

But the weather was overcast and rainy and the search planes had difficulty finding the target again. At 5:15, the carriers launched their strike planes. One Japanese pilot who had just taken off from *Taihō* in a torpedo bomber looked to his right and spotted the unmistakable wake of an American torpedo headed straight for the carrier. He pushed his stick forward and to the right as far as it would go, and his plane dropped and rolled in a graceful arc before it struck the torpedo, just a hundred meters from the big ship.

The explosion drew the attention of Admiral Ozawa on the bridge. He saw what his pilot had done, but he also saw the wake of a second torpedo. He ordered *Taihō* to turn, but it was too late. The torpedo hit, but the damage appeared minor. *Taihō* had been designed with heavier armor than previous Japanese carriers; it had been built to take a few hits like this one.

American radar picked up the incoming Japanese planes when they were still 70 miles away. Mitscher personally gave the order to launch the Hellcats and intercept. The first group of Hellcats shot down 25 of the approaching Japanese planes, losing only one of their own. The surviving Japanese flew on. A second wave of Hellcats took down 16 more. Only 27 of the Japanese planes reached the American fleet and only one did any significant damage. It managed to land a bomb on the deck of the battleship USS *South Dakota*, killing a number of sailors.

A second wave of over 100 Japanese aircraft came. The Hellcats shot down 70 of them. The survivors did little damage. A third wave was no more successful. The fourth wave couldn't find

the Americans, so it flew to Guam to refuel, only to be intercepted by Hellcats as they attempted to land. The Hellcats shot down 30 planes and disabled the rest. Overall, the Japanese lost some 346 of their 450 planes on the first day. The Americans lost about 30.

American scout planes were unable to find the Japanese fleet, but two American submarines did. The first was USS *Albacore*, which had fired the torpedo that struck *Taihō*. Japanese destroyers pursued *Albacore*, but the Americans escaped.

At noontime, the second sub, USS *Cavalla*, raised its periscope. Its commander peered through and saw a sight he later described as "too good to be true." It was the broad side of *Shōkaku*, one of the carriers that had participated in the Pearl Harbor attack, and was now recovering planes. The American sub moved into minimum range and fired a full spread of six torpedoes. Three hit. The carrier exploded into flames. A hole in the bow allowed water to flood the hangar. Three hours later, *Shōkaku* disappeared beneath the waves. *Cavalla* escaped unscathed.

As for *Taihō*, the torpedo that struck it had ruptured an aviation fuel tank, filling the ship with gasoline fumes. The damage control officer ordered full ventilation, apparently hoping to clear the fumes with fresh air. Instead, it turned *Taihō* into a floating bomb. A half hour after *Shōkaku* sank, a massive explosion on *Taihō*'s hangar deck blew a hole through the ship's hull from the inside. Admiral Ozawa contemplated going down with the ship, but his staff persuaded him to evacuate, telling him there was still a battle for him to command. He transferred to the carrier *Zuikaku*.

Ozawa ordered the rest of his fleet to head northwest. Mitscher pursued, with Spruance's approval, but he guessed the Japanese would head southwest. The following day, it took American search planes until nearly 4:00 in the afternoon to find the withdrawing Japanese fleet. They were 275 miles away, at the edge of the Americans' range, and night was coming. Mitscher took a risk and ordered an air strike.

The Japanese fleet managed to get a few dozen fighters into the air, and they were able to shoot down 20 American planes. The American strike damaged the Japanese fleet carriers *Zuikaku* and *Junyō*, and sank *Hiyō*.

The Americans flew back to their fleet as darkness encroached and fuel ran low. Dozens of American pilots were forced to ditch their planes in the ocean; most of them were rescued. Having taken one gamble, Mitscher now took another. He ordered all his carriers to turn on their lights and aim searchlights into the air. Destroyers fired star shells to provide more illumination. Pilots were told to land on any available carrier rather than look for their own.

One pilot described the sight as resembling a Hollywood premiere, but Mitscher had taken a big risk. Had there been Japanese submarines nearby, those lights would have led them straight to the carriers. Fortunately for him and his fleet, there were none.

History knows this fleet engagement as the Battle of the Philippine Sea. The American pilots who fought it had their own name for it: “The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.”

The Japanese lost three carriers and over 500 land- and carrier-based aircraft. The Americans lost about 50 planes to enemy action and an additional 80 that had had to ditch after the counterstrike.

The Japanese had spent a year rebuilding their carrier air force after the losses at Midway and in the Solomons in 1942 and 1943, and lost 90% of it in one battle. For those of you keeping score at home, this is the fifth carrier versus carrier engagement of the Pacific War and the biggest of the five, and cumulative losses amount to nine carriers for Japan and three for the United States.

Over five battles and two-and-a-half years, Japanese naval commanders pursued their obsessive dream of becoming the next Admiral Togo and annihilating the US Pacific Fleet in one dramatic and decisive battle. But the dream proved elusive. The Imperial Navy was losing ships faster than Japanese shipyards could replace them, while the American fleet just kept growing. The fearsome Zero had been outclassed by the latest American planes, and Japan’s naval air pilots, the best in the world in 1941, were dead and gone, replaced by a new generation that had the same zeal, but not the same skill.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d like to thank Kevin and Jay for their kind donations, and thank you to Will for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kevin, Jay, and Will 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*; now that the Japanese Navy has been defeated, the Americans can turn their full attention back to the invasion of Saipan. That’s next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I will have more to say about the B-29 bombers in China in a few weeks, but for now I want to note that Hap Arnold arranged that the first bombing raid on a Japanese city from those B-29s based in China would take place on June 15, the same day as the Saipan landing, as a one-two punch aimed at the Japanese. The raid did little damage, but it was a warning of things to come.

[music: Closing War Theme]