

This Day in History... October 23, 1944

Battle of Leyte Gulf

On October 23, 1944, the Japanese Navy launched a massive counterattack against the Allied invasion of the Philippines, beginning the Battle of Leyte Gulf—the largest naval battle in world history and a turning point in the Pacific War. The four-day struggle shattered Japan's fleet and ended its ability to fight a large-scale naval war.

By late 1944, Japan's empire was collapsing. Allied victories across the Pacific had pushed its defenses steadily westward, and the Philippines stood as the key link between Japan and its vital resources in Southeast Asia. The Allies invaded the island of Leyte on October 20, determined to cut those supply lines and open the path to Japan itself. The landings caught Japan by surprise, but their response was immediate and all or nothing.



Gen. MacArthur's long-promised return to the Philippines triggered the Japanese counteroffensive that became the Battle of Leyte Gulf.



Philippines stamps were overprinted "Victory" in the months following the liberation.



Stamp from the 1994 WWII: Road to Victory Sheet

The Japanese high command launched Operation Shō-Gō 1, an ambitious plan to destroy the invasion force and deliver a decisive blow to the US Navy. Their fleet, though greatly diminished after years of war, was divided into four groups that would converge on Leyte Gulf from different directions. The idea was to lure the powerful US Third Fleet, under Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, away from the beaches, while other Japanese forces slipped in to attack the vulnerable troop transports and supply ships supporting the landings.

The first major clash came on October 23 in the Sibuyan Sea, when American aircraft from Halsey's carriers spotted and attacked the Japanese Center Force under Admiral Takeo Kurita. In one of the heaviest air assaults of the war, US planes bombed and torpedoed the massive battleship *Musashi*, one of the largest ever built. After taking approximately three dozen hits, the *Musashi* sank, and Kurita temporarily withdrew, though he would soon return.

That same night, another Japanese group—the Southern Force—tried to break into Leyte Gulf through the Surigao Strait. Waiting for them was a line of US battleships, cruisers, and destroyers commanded by Admiral Jesse Oldendorf. Using radar-directed gunfire and superior positioning, Oldendorf's ships crossed the Japanese "T," a classic naval tactic that allowed the Americans to fire full broadsides while the enemy could respond with only their forward guns. The result was devastating; the Southern Force was virtually annihilated. It was the last battleship-to-battleship duel in history.

Meanwhile, Halsey took the bait and pursued a decoy Northern Force made up mostly of aircraft carriers with few planes left aboard. His departure left the invasion beaches temporarily unguarded. Seeing an opportunity, Kurita's Center Force reemerged and steamed toward the landing zone through the island of Samar.

On the morning of October 25, Kurita's powerful fleet encountered a small American task group known as "Taffy 3." These escort carriers and destroyers were built for air support, not heavy combat. Outgunned and outnumbered, they fought with astonishing bravery. The destroyers *Johnston*, *Hoel*, and *Heermann* charged directly at Japanese battleships, launching torpedoes and laying down smoke screens to protect the carriers. Aircraft from the escort carriers struck again and again. Believing they had stumbled into the main American fleet, Kurita lost confidence and ordered a retreat. The courage of Taffy 3's crews became one of the most celebrated acts of heroism in naval history.



While MacArthur led the land invasion, Admiral Nimitz's Pacific Fleet strategy set the stage for the decisive naval victory at Leyte Gulf.

By October 26, the battle was over. Japan had lost four aircraft carriers, three battleships, ten cruisers, and eleven destroyers—twenty-seven major ships in all—and more than 10,000 sailors. The US lost several ships and about 1,500 men, but the outcome was a decisive Allied victory. The Imperial Japanese Navy was broken and would never again threaten Allied control of the seas.

Leyte Gulf also saw the first organized use of kamikaze attacks—suicidal pilots who deliberately crashed their planes into Allied ships. The escort carrier USS *St. Lo* became the first major vessel sunk by a kamikaze. These attacks, though terrifying, could not reverse Japan's defeat.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf, beginning on October 23, 1944, ensured the success of the Philippines campaign and destroyed Japan's remaining naval strength. It was the final, desperate gamble of the Japanese fleet—and the battle that guaranteed ultimate Allied victory in the Pacific.

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