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Author(s): David C. Fuqua

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Task Force One: The Wasted Assets of the United States Pacific Battleship Fleet, 1942



David C. Fuquea

ON 7 December 1941, the United States Navy suffered the greatest defeat, certainly in psychological if not physical terms, in its history. The Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the pride of the United States Navy, the battleships of the Pacific Fleet, at their moorings at Pearl Harbor. The Japanese aircraft swarmed over and around the great men-of-war dropping death from the sky in the form of armor-piercing bombs and shallow-running torpedoes. The attack was successful beyond any expectation. As the Japanese winged their way back to their waiting carriers, the damage they had inflicted seemed to have given them the breathing room they so desperately wanted. The dreadnoughts of the United States Pacific Fleet were now incapable of challenging the Japanese during their conquest of the Central and South Pacific.

Yet, the perception of an impotent United States battleship fleet was far more fiction than fact. Within the short space of three months, like the mythical phoenix, the Pacific battleships rose from the ash of Pearl Harbor ready to avenge the deaths of their brethren. Well before the first of many naval actions, Admiral Nimitz had at his disposal a battlefleet superior in nearly every respect to the one lost at Pearl Harbor. Ironically, despite a naval campaign and ship losses that pushed the United States Navy to the brink of defeat in the South Pacific, this force was not committed. Instead Task Force One languished in backwater ports, rode at anchor, and carried out limited meaningful training for the first year of the war.

An examination of the reasons behind this stifling course of action for these battlewagons is the purpose of this paper. A chronological review of the operations of the battleships of the Pacific Fleet Battle Force, or lack thereof, will demonstrate that these ships were indeed a

fleet in being well before the United States took any substantial action in the war against Japan. In direct contrast to Robert O'Connell's view in *Sacred Vessels*, the lack of activity stemmed not from the inability of the battleships to contribute to the war at sea against Japan nor from the dismissal by naval officers of these ships as ineffective.¹ A review of the capabilities of the battlewagons, to include discussions of general design specifications; fire control, gunnery, and radar effectiveness; armor protection; propulsion engineering design; and underwater armor protection, will show that they were still quite viable weapon systems that naval officers protectively rationed for the threat faced in the southern Pacific. Instead, the decision to keep Task Force One out of the war was an evolving process whose rationale changed over the first twelve months of the war.

O'Connell, and other naval historians who write about the period, fail to recognize not only the existence of a United States battleship fleet in the year after Pearl Harbor, but also the potential for the ships' effective use and the complicated explanation for their inactivity. Samuel Eliot Morison, in his often quoted *The Two-Ocean War*, makes no mention of Task Force One. More recently, the general histories of the United States Navy by Robert Love, *History of the U.S. Navy* (2 vols.), and Nathan Miller, *The U.S. Navy*, also fail to mention the battleship fleet at Nimitz's disposal in 1942. Ronald Spector, in *Eagle Against the Sun*, dedicates one paragraph to the availability of battleships in the Pacific, but gets the numbers incorrect and simplifies the explanation of their lack of use to a function of inadequate escorts and tankers.² In similar fashion, George Baer, in *One Hundred Years of Seapower*, makes no mention of Task Force One, stating only that the battleships repaired after Pearl Harbor were left in San Francisco "because Nimitz could find no use for them in King's strategy of movement."³ By the end of this examination, the relevance of Task Force One as well as the rationale for its restricted employment will be clear.

Initially, the reason was purely logistical. A lack of preparation by the United States Navy for a war in the Pacific rendered it incapable of supporting a squadron of battleships. Then, as Nimitz oversaw the U.S. advance into the Solomon Islands and despite calls for the commitment of the ships from the highest levels, the lack of involvement stemmed from a continuation of logistical dilemmas combined with a less factually

1. Robert L. O'Connell, *Sacred Vessels: The Cult of the Battleship and the Rise of the U.S. Navy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 314–16.

2. Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 147–48.

3. George W. Baer, *The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990: One Hundred Years of Seapower* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 213.

based concern about the ships' suitability for combat. Then, as the Guadalcanal campaign reached its climax, logistics became the secondary impetus that kept the battleships out of action. The battleships remained uncommitted as commanders believed any tactical gain to be garnered by their presence was outweighed by a fear losing one of these combatant ships. Finally, at the end of the campaign for Guadalcanal, the ships of Task Force One were committed but too late and in such a way that their presence had no effect on the Navy's efforts around Guadalcanal. The strength and capability of the battleships of the United States Pacific Fleet were squandered during the Guadalcanal campaign by an absence of logistical planning and lack of appreciation for the purpose and tactical ability of the battleships by the senior officers of the United States Pacific Fleet.

Assets of Task Force One

The only undamaged battleship in the Pacific following Pearl Harbor was the *Colorado*, undergoing a major refit at Bremerton, Washington, until 26 February 1942.⁴ The eight United States battleships in the Atlantic offered little respite. Battleship support for the first year of the war in the Pacific would be restricted to only the first three of the new, fast battleships plus older ships transferred from the Atlantic or repaired in the wake of Pearl Harbor. By 20 December 1941, the three ships that had received relatively minor damage, *Maryland*, *Pennsylvania*, and *Tennessee*, were underway from Pearl Harbor to the West Coast for repairs. After nine days steaming, the ships arrived on the West Coast and commenced repairs and overhauls on 30 December 1941.⁵

The workmen moved at a furious pace not only to repair the damage inflicted at Pearl Harbor but also to complete major refits on each of the ships. Most importantly, the battleships received some of the most modern radar available at the time. Technicians fitted each ship with SC surface search radar, FC fire control radar, and new fire direction equipment.⁶ In the short space of fifty-seven days, four Pacific battleships were ready for sea.

4. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Colorado, 7 December 1941–30 November 1942*, Extract from 7 December 1941–26 February 1942, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard, Washington D.C.

5. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Maryland, 7 December 1941–30 November 1942*, Extract from 20–30 December 1941, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard, Washington D.C.

6. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Tennessee, 7 December 1941–30 November 1942*, Extract from 29 December 1941–25 February 1942, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C.

On 26 February 1942, *Colorado*, *Maryland*, and *Tennessee* set sail for San Francisco, arriving five days later.⁷ There they were joined by the *Pennsylvania* as well as three battleships from the Atlantic Fleet. *Idaho*, *Mississippi*, and *New Mexico* arrived in the Pacific within six weeks of the Pearl Harbor debacle.⁸ Due to perceived threats, the now reformed battlefleet was kept constantly on twelve hours steaming notice.⁹ The fleet, however, spent nearly the entire month of March tied to piers in San Francisco or anchored in the harbor.¹⁰

Vice Admiral Pye assumed command of the battlefleet, officially designated as Task Force One, on 4 April 1942. The fleet he took charge of was in nearly every aspect far superior to the battleline that had been devastated at Pearl Harbor. The three new additions of the *New Mexico* class from the Atlantic were regarded as the most modern of the older U.S. battleships.¹¹ All had been extensively refurbished during the 1930s. In contrast, three of the ships severely damaged at Pearl Harbor, *Arizona*, *Nevada*, and *Oklahoma*, had not been modernized since the 1920s and were the oldest battleships in the Pacific at the time of the attack.

The *New Mexicos* had several features that made them the most modern of the old U.S. battleships. Structurally the ships incorporated a "tower" bridge, very similar to that of the British *Nelson* class, which greatly improved the ability of the ship's control spaces to withstand shellfire and blast damage.¹² This class also had the best fire control equipment mounted on U.S. battleships at the time, the Mark 8 rangekeeper. The Mark 8 was the same system as that carried by the recently commissioned *North Carolina* class¹³ which, in conjunction with the Mark 3 fire control radar system, would prove to be so effective for the battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota* against the Japanese battleship *Kirishima* in Iron Bottom Sound in November 1942.

7. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Maryland*, 26 February–3 March 1942.

8. Commander in Chief Pacific, *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 29 January 1942, CinCPac Running Estimate, Microfilm, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md.

9. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Tennessee*, 19 March 1942.

10. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Colorado, Maryland, Tennessee*, 1–31 March 1942. *Tennessee* and *Pennsylvania* sortied for four days, 19–23 March. *Colorado* and *Maryland* sortied 28 March for approximately the same amount of time.

11. Norman Friedman, *U.S. Battleships: An Illustrated Design History* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 352.

12. *Ibid.*, 202–3.

13. *U.S. Naval Administration in World War II: Bureau of Ordnance, Fire Control (Except Radar) and Aviation Ordnance*, U.S. Navy Official Records, 10: 26, Microfilm, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md. (This repository hereafter cited as USNA.)

There were also several internal design features incorporated into the ships of Task Force One that made the force superior to its predecessor at Pearl Harbor. All but the oldest, the *Pennsylvania*, had been constructed without intermediate shell rooms between the magazines and the guns. The result was a reduced amount of hydraulic machinery to move the shells and thereby simplified loading procedures.¹⁴ Four of the seven also incorporated turbo-electric drive which allowed for “a very elegant form of underwater protection.”¹⁵ The lack of a direct mechanical connection between the turbines and the shafts allowed for a greater number of compartments and better watertight integrity below decks than the older ships. Three of the ships, *Colorado*, *Maryland*, and *Tennessee*, combined turbo-electric drive with a radical underwater defense design that was first incorporated into the *Tennessee* class in 1916.

The sides of these three ships consisted of a series of four compartments separated by thin bulkheads. The inner two compartments were filled with either water or fuel, leaving the innermost and outermost void. A torpedo explosion would expend its energy within the outer void as well as against the two liquid filled compartments. Should the innermost void be breached, it would provide a flooding barrier that would protect the machinery spaces. Ship builders incorporated this design feature into all subsequent U.S. battleships including the new “fast battleships” built for World War II.¹⁶

The results of Japanese torpedoes at Pearl Harbor demonstrated the success of the design. Of the four battleships severely damaged by torpedoes, two incorporated the new design and two did not. The *Nevada* was hit by *one* torpedo. Without the multi-compartmented side and despite an additional torpedo blister added during a refit in the 1920s, the single gash in her side caused massive flooding.¹⁷ The *Oklahoma* was also without the new torpedo protection feature. She suffered three torpedo hits, flooded uncontrollably, and capsized in minutes. The *California*, on the other hand, was hit by a similar number of torpedoes as the *Oklahoma*, and they were not particularly effective. Three of the *California*'s four bulkheads remained intact after the detonations. Subsequent investigations by the Bureau of Ships determined that the *California* did not sink because of the damage from the torpedoes. Instead, she flooded because many of her manhole covers into the voids were open that morning for inspection which allowed the flooding to spread much more widely than it would have done had her watertight

14. Friedman, *U.S. Battleships*, 130.

15. *Ibid.*, 137.

16. *Ibid.*, 134.

17. *Ibid.*, 416.

integrity been set.¹⁸ The *West Virginia* did have the improved torpedo defense design but was hit by an overwhelming number of torpedoes nearly simultaneously. As it was, the seven torpedoes cracked even the fourth internal bulkhead which led to massive flooding but not so quickly as in the case of the *Oklahoma*. This allowed the ship's crew to counterflood and prevent the ship from capsizing.

In the spring of 1942, *Colorado* and *Maryland* were the best protected battleships in the Navy in terms of torpedo defense. Both underwent extensive overhauls prior to joining Task Force One. Each received an additional torpedo blister outboard of the multilayered design integrated into their hulls, further increasing their survivability.¹⁹

During the 1942 refits of the four Pacific battleships remaining following Pearl Harbor (*Colorado*, *Maryland*, *Pennsylvania*, and *Tennessee*) each received various other minor yet valuable additions. Armor was added to provide splinter protection to the bridges and pilot houses. The extremely effective 20-mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft gun was mounted in groups of sixteen on each ship.²⁰ The most valuable addition was undoubtedly radar. The battlefleet at Pearl Harbor had no radar. Not only did Admiral Pye's Task Force One have newer battleships with simpler loading systems, increased armor, vastly superior torpedo protection, and the latest in fire control equipment, but also surface search and *fire control* radar on every ship. The question was how well would this improved battle fleet be employed.

Employment of Task Force One

The activity and composition of Task Force One changed greatly during the ten months of its existence. Initially operating from the West Coast of the United States, it was an active, aggressively trained squadron that spent a great deal of time at sea. As 1942 progressed, higher headquarters reduced its size, and the amount of time-underway training diminished to a fraction of that spent training in the spring. When the remains of Task Force One finally arrived in the South Pacific in late 1942, combat proficiency became difficult to maintain as underway time nearly disappeared.

Immediately following Pearl Harbor, the Commander in Chief Pacific (CinCPac), Admiral Husband Kimmel, relegated the battleships in the Pacific to convoy duty between the West Coast and Hawaii.²¹ Although

18. *Ibid.*, 417.

19. *Ibid.*, 217.

20. *Ibid.*, 356.

21. Husband E. Kimmel, *United States Pacific Fleet Campaign Plan, No. 2-R5*, 10 December 1941 (never issued), p. 3, *CinCPac Running Estimate*, Microfilm, USNA.

New Mexico did escort one convoy, by January 1942 Admiral Nimitz, as the new CinCPac, recognized that the convoy escort mission was incorrect. The threat to convoys was Japanese submarines,²² and the battleships did not have the capability to protect against that threat. In fact, their liability in this role was apparent because their presence required extra destroyers to protect the battleship as well as the convoy. Anti-submarine escort ships were in short supply, and CinCPac began cancelling the convoy mission in late January 1942.²³

During the gathering of the new battleship fleet in San Francisco and a static month of March, Vice Admiral Pye envisioned a traditional role for these warships. Beginning in mid-April, the seven Pacific Fleet battleships operated for extended periods at sea as a battleship squadron. The battleline steamed and trained from 14 April through 10 May and 31 May to 19 June, usually staying within 600 miles of the West Coast of the United States.²⁴ Training included firing of main batteries, target practice, radar tracking and range finding, and other daily drills to ensure the combat efficiency of the crews.²⁵ By 20 June 1942, Task Force One had spent 74 percent of its time at sea together training as a battlefleet.

Upon returning to San Francisco in June, the focus of the squadron changed. For the next forty-two days, the ships of Task Force One were at sea for only seven. None of these days included training at sea as a task force. Instead, battleship divisions sortied from San Francisco individually to conduct training for a few days, with never more than one division absent from port at a time.²⁶

Preparations were taking place for the mass movement of the Task Force. On 1 August, Task Force One got underway for Pearl Harbor. The ships left a fruitful training environment behind. Admiral Pye's force had spent approximately 52 percent of his tenure underway since April.²⁷ The seven battleships, escorted by eight destroyers, spent fourteen days training en route to Hawaii.²⁸ The Task Force arrived at Pearl Harbor on 14 August only to encounter dramatic changes to its composition and training regimen.

Only four days after arriving, *Tennessee* departed Pearl Harbor for Puget Sound where she began another extensive refit. Entering drydock

22. Commander in Chief Pacific, *Estimate of the Situation*, 22 April 1942, pp. 15–16, CinCPac Running Estimate, Microfilm, USNA. In CinCPac Running Estimate from 22 April 1942 there is no fear expressed that the Japanese were even considering surface raider attacks in the Eastern Pacific.

23. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 29 January 1942.

24. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Colorado*, 14 April–19 June 1942.

25. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Tennessee*, 1 April–19 June 1942.

26. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Colorado*, 20 June–31 July 1942.

27. *Ibid.*, 1 April–31 July 1942.

28. *Ibid.*, 1–12 August 1942.

on 31 August 1942, she remained there until 22 May 1943, well after the Guadalcanal campaign had been decided.²⁹ The *Idaho* and *Pennsylvania* returned to the West Coast within a month of arriving. The *Pennsylvania*, like *Tennessee*, returned to undergo an additional massive refit which took place at Mare Island, California from 4 October 1942 through 5 February 1943.³⁰ *Idaho* left Pearl Harbor to act as a test platform for gunnery trials requested by Admiral King.³¹

Most of the next few months was spent in division training. The two divisions, BATDIV 4 (*Colorado, Maryland*) and BATDIV 3 (*Mississippi, New Mexico*), sortied as a task force twice between their initial arrival and final departure from Pearl Harbor. Unlike the stay on the West Coast, however, these sorties were short in duration. A total of twelve days were spent training at sea. The ships conducted exercises similar to those on the West Coast: main battery firing, radar calibration, and bombardment practice. Significant additions to the training schedule in September included several defensive exercises against surface attack at night or in low visibility.³² Maintaining combat readiness at Pearl Harbor must have been difficult, however, given the amount of underway time. Respectively, BATDIV 4 and 3 spent only 27 percent and 22 percent of their time training at sea.³³

After nearly three months at Pearl Harbor, the remaining units of Task Force One were further subdivided. On 8 November 1942, BATDIV 4 along with three destroyers as escort set sail for the South Pacific. For the next nine days, the pair of battleships conducted training that focused primarily on radar work and *night* offensive and defensive drills.³⁴ The *Colorado* and *Maryland*, the only remaining prewar battleships armed with 16-inch guns, arrived at Viti Levu, Fiji, on 17 November. Eight days later, these two ships along with eight destroyers were designated Task Force 65. For the next seventy-six days the combat effectiveness of Task Force 65 would atrophy. The two major combatants

29. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Tennessee*, 18 August 1942–22 May 1943.

30. The primary reason for *Tennessee's* refit was to replace the single-purpose secondary battery with a dual-purpose battery of 5-inch/38 guns. Also, deck armor and a blister to restore lost buoyancy were added. The principal reason for the *Pennsylvania's* refit was the same as for *Tennessee's*, replacement of the single-purpose secondary battery. The ship also received ten quadruple Bofors and fifty-one Oerlikons. Friedman, *U.S. Battleships*, 356, 372.

31. *Ibid.*, 352. *Idaho* conducted the trial on 10 October 1942. The ship fired over one hundred rounds per main gun without experiencing a single failure. This was a better training opportunity than any of her sister ships received during their time at Pearl Harbor.

32. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Colorado*, 21 September–20 October 1942.

33. *Ibid.*, 14 August–8 November 1942.

34. *Ibid.*, 8–17 November 1942.

would spend only eight days at sea training (11 percent of their time) between their arrival in Fiji and 1 February 1943.³⁵

BATDIV 4 was joined by BATDIV 3 on 18 December 1942. The *Mississippi* and *New Mexico* trained approximately eight days en route from Pearl Harbor to Fiji. Upon their arrival, the amount of time spent at sea dropped to approximately the equivalent of Task Force 65.³⁶

By 1 February 1943, the United States Battleship Fleet in the Pacific had been operational for eleven months. During that time, the ships sailed from three ports, each one closer geographically to the war than its predecessor. While they operated from San Francisco for five months, the battleships remained in the relative safety of the Eastern Pacific and spent over half their time at sea preparing to fight the enemy. As the United States initiated its counteroffensive at Guadalcanal in August 1942, the battleships operated from the forwardmost major naval base, Pearl Harbor. Task Force One spent only a quarter of its three-month stay training at sea. Finally, as the struggle for Guadalcanal reached a fever pitch, the four remaining battlewagons moved to the same theater as the major American effort in the Pacific but during the three months there spent only 10 percent of their time preparing to face the enemy. It was ironic that the amount of time spent at sea training to battle the Japanese was inversely proportional to the fleet's proximity to the surface battles that raged in the waters around Guadalcanal against that same enemy. Not once during the eleven months was a course of action executed to take the battleships of Task Force One within range of the enemy against whom they had trained so hard for decades to fight.

Assignment West Coast: Logistics in Action

In the first few months of the war, the Japanese juggernaut swept across the Western Pacific, crushing the collection of Allied forces that stood in its way. Admiral Nimitz realized that he needed to use his forces to relieve this pressure against the Allied forces as well as the Allied territory in the Southwest Pacific.³⁷ The assets available to accomplish the job were extremely limited. With the battlefleet damaged, CinCPac initially had three carriers, eleven cruisers, and thirty-seven destroyers available.³⁸ Yet the loss of the battleships greatly simplified the difficult logistical problems that faced the Navy in the Pacific, and in the great expanse of the Pacific Ocean for most of 1942, logistical problems centered on fuel. Keeping the Pacific Fleet supplied with fuel oil required

35. *Ibid.*, 17 November 1942–1 February 1943.

36. *Ibid.*, 8 December 1942–1 February 1943.

37. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 5 February 1942.

38. Kimmel, *United States Pacific Fleet Campaign Plan, No. 2-R5, 2*.

solving a complex equation with four primary parts: how to provide an adequate supply of fuel, how to provide sufficient tankers to move the fuel and refuel the warships, how to provide enough bases with tanks to stockpile the fuel, and how to ascertain the consumption rate of the ships in the fleet.

In the spring of 1942, a supply of fuel for the Pacific Fleet was not a great concern. The United States supplied two out of every three barrels of oil produced in the world. Also, over 60 percent of the world's refining capacity was located in the U.S.³⁹ The fuel for the Pacific Theater came primarily from California, whose production was on a par with that of Texas.⁴⁰ Supplies were so abundant that rationing in the Western United States was not instituted until December 1942, and even then, gasoline rationing commenced not because of a shortage of fuel but as a measure to conserve rubber.⁴¹

The success of the German U-boat campaign against tankers, however, threatened the very survival of Great Britain. Within six months of the United States's entry into the war, nearly 2 million of the 5.6 million tons of national tanker assets had been sunk.⁴² American tankers were required in the Atlantic to keep Great Britain in the war. As a result, Admiral Nimitz had, through most of the spring of 1942, only seven tankers with which to service the entire fleet. Nimitz's staff calculated that, at best, these ships could keep no more than four carriers and their escorts at sea for any period of time.⁴³ Although a limited number of commercial tankers were available, their usefulness was restricted. The ships did not have the equipment to refuel other ships underway, and there were no tanks in which to store their oil when they reached the South Pacific.

Soon after the Japanese attack, the Navy began investigating possible support bases along the lines of communication between Australia, Pearl Harbor, and the West Coast. Australia was experiencing a shortage already and was no help regarding fuel oil.⁴⁴ Also, there were many islands to choose from, but few had any facilities that could immediately

39. Robert Goralski and Paul W. Freeburg, *Oil and War: How the Deadly Struggle for Fuel in World War II Meant Victory or Defeat* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 166.

40. *Ibid.*, 162.

41. *Ibid.*, 166.

42. U.S. War Shipping Administration, *Gains and Losses of Ocean Going Merchant Vessels Available to the United Nations*, 19 June 1942, King Papers, Microfilm, USNA.

43. CinCPac, *Estimate of the Situation*, 22 April 1942.

44. Message Traffic to CinCPac throughout the winter of 1942 indicated that Australia was incapable of providing for her own domestic oil needs. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 23 February–31 March 1942.

be utilized. Admiral Richard E. Byrd, the famous explorer, conducted a survey of all bases in the South Pacific during late May and early June 1942. Only four had any type of oil storage capability. Tanks at Palmyra Island, Fiji, Samoa, and Bora Bora had a combined capacity of 295,000 barrels.⁴⁵ The Navy began constructing additional tank farms, but the storage they offered would not be available until October or November.⁴⁶ Even the tank farm at Pearl Harbor was far from sufficient, and the construction of new underground tanks was initiated early in 1942.⁴⁷ To the Pacific Fleet, these minimal amounts of tankage offered no solution to logistical shortages.

Although all of the capital ships in the Pacific consumed prodigious amounts of fuel, the battleships of Task Force One were by far the least economical. At a cruising speed of fifteen knots, the carriers and the new “fast” battleships required approximately 1,100 and 950 barrels per day respectively. The “old” battleships required approximately 1,200 barrels per day.⁴⁸ These requirements could quickly outstrip the storage and tanker reserves in the Pacific. Task Force One and her escorts (four to six destroyers) would burn in excess of 300,000 barrels of oil per month. The force needed less than thirty days at sea with its escorts in order to devour everything that could be stored in the South Pacific. If the Task Force tried to operate at high speeds, which for the battleships was only an increase in speed of three to four knots, the time to consume the oil accumulated in the South Pacific decreased to under ten days. The carrier task forces, which included two carriers and eight to ten escorts, were expensive as well, consuming approximately 225,000 barrels of oil each month.⁴⁹ Given the number of tankers available and the oil storage available, logistically the use of carriers and battleships anywhere but on the West Coast of the United States was an “either or” proposition.

During the initial five-month period of its existence, the role of Task Force One was seriously debated at the Cominch and CinCPac levels. CinCPac staff kept a watchful eye on Admiral Pye’s training schedules.⁵⁰ Sending a battleship division to New Zealand seemed to hold some

45. *Inspection Report by South Pacific Advanced Base Inspection Board, Rear Admiral R. E. Byrd USN(Ret.) Senior Member*, Appendix A, U.S. Navy Official Records, Base Maintenance Division Records, Box 82, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard.

46. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 1 April 1942.

47. Commander in Chief, US Fleet, Conversation Notes Cominch and CinCPac Conference of 25 April 1942, pp. 2–3, USNA.

48. *Logistics Estimate for Operation Against Chichi Jima (Operation Setting Sun)*, 15 January 1943, p. 3, Commander in Chief Pacific, CinCPac Running Estimate, Microfilm, USNA.

49. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 9 July 1942.

50. *Ibid.*, 25 March 1942.

possibilities.⁵¹ Admiral King recommended configuring a carrier task group with the battleships escorting the *Saratoga*.⁵² He also repeatedly asked that the employment of the “old” battleships be given “continuous study.”⁵³ Throughout this period, however, the operations of Task Force One were limited by the direction of CinCPac whose position was clearly delineated in a statement of 22 April 1942: If the BBs [battleships] operate from Pearl, Pearl supply can’t stand it.

Assignment Pearl Harbor: Logistical and Operational Concerns

As the United States entered its first summer of war, the changes to the strategic situation as well as an easing of the logistical problems combined to bring about change for Task Force One. The United States victory at Midway “restored the balance of naval power in the Pacific.”⁵⁴ This rendered insignificant any threat to Hawaii other than a raid by the Japanese. For the first time, the U.S. Navy began to realistically consider taking the offensive. The most important Navy assets, embodied in the three carrier task groups 11, 16, and 18, began operating more in the southern Pacific, taking much of their significant logistical requirements with them. Their extended absences along with newly completed oil storage tanks and the acquisition of additional tankers changed the supply situation in Hawaii enough for Admiral Nimitz to bring Task Force One to Pearl Harbor. Admiral Pye and his force left the West Coast on 1 August 1942, just days before the offensive at Guadalcanal was to commence. By their arrival on 14 August, the United States Navy had suffered another humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese, this time at Savo Island.

The importance of Guadalcanal as well as the tenuous hold U.S. forces maintained there in the late summer and early fall were readily apparent to the commanders at all levels. In message traffic, Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley lamented Japanese superiority in the area.⁵⁵ Admiral King acknowledged the critical role of the offensive to U.S.-Australian communications as well as the “powerful Japanese repercussion”

51. CinCUS, Conversation Notes, 25 April 1942, p. 3.

52. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 25 May 1942.

53. Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, Conversation Notes, CominCh and CinCPac Conference of 4 July 42, pp. 3–4, King Papers, USNA.

54. Ernest J. King, *U.S. Navy at War, 1941–1945: Official Reports to the Secretary of the Navy* (Washington: U.S. Navy Department, 1946), 49.

55. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 17 August 1942, 11 September 1942.

that he expected.⁵⁶ Admiral Nimitz, based on a personal visit to the operational area in September 1942, was very aware of the circumstances his subordinates were operating under.⁵⁷ By mid-September Nimitz had only one carrier available for use in the Pacific.⁵⁸ The surface forces allocated to the South Pacific consisted of only two heavy cruisers, of which the *Chicago* was damaged at Savo Island; four light cruisers; and nine destroyers.⁵⁹ Task Force One, as discussed earlier, remained at Pearl Harbor.

The logistical situation undoubtedly continued to play a large role in restricting the battleships to Hawaiian waters. Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher reported that throughout his tenure in the Southwest Pacific, fuel was his major concern.⁶⁰ Despite postwar criticisms about Fletcher's preoccupation with fuel, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance supported Fletcher's statements.⁶¹ During the months of August and September 1942, the warships attached to Ghormley burned nearly 200,000 barrels of oil each week.⁶² The expenditure of oil in the Southern Pacific often outstripped the ability of the Navy to resupply itself. On 5 September, Carrier Task Force 11 was unable to refuel at Tongatabu, by then the major forward staging base for all items going to Guadalcanal, because no fuel oil was available.⁶³ For the first few months of the Solomons campaign, Admiral Nimitz elected to keep the battleships away from Guadalcanal. Yet, unlike the first five months of Task Force One's existence, during the opening months of the Guadalcanal campaign other factors in addition to the lack of logistical support also contributed to the battlefleet's limited usefulness.

Nimitz was repeatedly pressured to commit the assets of Task Force One. Admirals King and Nimitz met in July 1942 to discuss the upcoming Guadalcanal operation. King wanted to send at least two of the old battleships to the Southern Pacific.⁶⁴ A few weeks later, in the wake of the Savo Island disaster, King recommended to Nimitz that three to five

56. Ernest J. King to General Marshall, 3 September 1942, Air Reinforcements for Guadalcanal-Tulagi Area, King Papers, USNA.

57. Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, Conversation Notes, CinCPac Conference of 28 September 1942, King Papers, Microfilm, USNA.

58. *Ibid.*, 16.

59. Ernest J. King Memorandum for General Marshall, 22 September 1942, Naval Strength in the Southwest Pacific, King Papers, Microfilm, USNA.

60. George Carroll Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer: The Story of Admiral Richmond Kelley Turner* (Washington: U.S. Marine Corps, 1991), 301.

61. Goralski and Freeburg, *Oil and War*, 188.

62. *Ibid.*, 157–58.

63. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 5 September 1942.

64. *Ibid.*, 4 July 1942.

of the ships belonging to Admiral Pye move south.⁶⁵ Nimitz did not send them. The topic was again discussed at length between the two admirals at a conference on 7 September, with the same lack of action on Nimitz's part. Even President Roosevelt entered the debate in October 1942 with a request routed through King that the old battleship fleet be used to bombard the Japanese installations on the island of Kiska.⁶⁶ By this time, logistical support alone was not the basis for the continued inactivity of Task Force One.

Nimitz feverently opposed the employment of the old battleships to support the Kiska operation. Of the three reasons put forward in opposition, the third in priority was concretely based on an objective evaluation. There were not enough main armament shells available for the mission. The second priority was not as objectively grounded. Nimitz stated that with other forces in the South Pacific, he relied upon the battleships to protect Hawaii from Japanese landings. The fact that an operation of that nature would entail substantial Japanese naval air strength and that King believed that such an effort by the Japanese was highly unlikely, brings up questions regarding the validity of this argument and, in retrospect, point to it as a subjective evaluation on CinCPac's part. The third reason, yet the one that held Nimitz's highest priority, was even more subjective than the second. The admiral acknowledged that there was a "small risk to OBBs from subs, mines, and aircraft" and therefore their employment was "hardly justified."⁶⁷ To Nimitz, any benefit was outweighed by the fear of losing an old battleship.

As a naval officer, Nimitz was obviously aware that naval warships had to fight in order to win. Nimitz's subjective decision revolved around the question of when would the result of the commitment of the old battleships be substantial enough to justify their risk and/or loss. This meant that the ships had to have a chance to fight and survive. Nimitz's evaluation of their ability to do so was a function of past performance and present capability. It also meant that something beneficial would be worth the possible loss. Finally, the impact of the loss of an old battleship on future plans would be a factor in the decision-making process for CinCPac. For Nimitz, commitment to the Aleutians met none of these criteria.

Around Guadalcanal, where the surface combat seemed to offer an effective venue for battleship employment and a tremendous benefit if successful, the situation continued to deteriorate, but to Nimitz the circumstances still did not warrant the presence of Task Force One. By mid-October, General Alexander Vandegrift, Commanding General of

65. *Ibid.*, 12 August 1942.

66. *Ibid.*, 14 October 1942.

67. *Ibid.*, 16 October 1942.

the Marine forces on Guadalcanal, demanded that the United States Navy establish control of the seas around Guadalcanal.⁶⁸ Nimitz and his staff admitted that they were unable to do meet Vandegrift's demands.⁶⁹ Ironically, naval officers in the theater wanted ships with guns larger than five inches; yet, Nimitz bartered hard with King to acquire more *light* surface units for the Southern Pacific.⁷⁰ Estimates of the Japanese situation developed by CinCPac staff all portrayed an enemy which was capable of putting more ships, planes, and troops into the struggle for Guadalcanal than the United States could and suggested that the situation would persist until late 1942 or early 1943.⁷¹

Operational recommendations from subordinate commanders were strongly against the commitment of the battleships. Ghormley informed Nimitz that "surface ships cannot operate, especially in very restricted waters, where they are subject to attack by shore based aircraft and submarines in addition to possible coordinated surface attack."⁷² The air raids and night capability of the Japanese made it apparent that U.S. ships could only operate around Guadalcanal in daylight.⁷³ Given these circumstances, Nimitz believed the old battleships had no place in the struggle for Guadalcanal.⁷⁴ The battleships of Task Force One remained at Pearl Harbor.

Assignment Fiji: Pure Operational Unsuitability

Considerations of operational capability and survivability of the sedentary Pacific battleships were undeniably more important than logistical concerns by late November 1942. The storage tank projects begun in the spring at Efate and Espiritu Santo provided a surplus of fuel in the theater for the first time. On 20 November, Nimitz informed Washington that he needed no additional tankers.⁷⁵ Soon afterward, CinCPac

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 15 October 1942.

70. In early November, based on his experiences fighting in the Solomons before his death, Admiral Norman Scott sent word to Nimitz that given the strength of the Japanese surface units, "early effective hits which can only be made by larger guns" were required. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 8 November 1942 and 22 October 1942.

71. Ibid.

72. Robert L. Ghormley to Admiral King, 11 August 1942, King Papers, Microfilm, USNA.

73. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 11 September 1942.

74. Ibid., 12 August 1942.

75. Ibid., 20 November 1942.

Staff passed the word that there were “no insuperable logistic difficulties” in the Southern Pacific area.⁷⁶

Despite the improvement in the logistical situation, from the perspective of naval commanders in the Pacific, the struggle for Guadalcanal was far from over. An expensive battle for the United States in terms of ships lost or damaged took place on the night of 12–13 November. Every ship in Admiral Dan Callaghan’s force was either sunk or damaged in exchange for the sinking of the *Hiei*, the first Japanese battleship sunk during the war. On the night of 14–15 November the first combat between battleships took place in the same area. Again, U.S. naval forces sank a Japanese battleship, but only at the cost of one of only two “fast” battleships in the Pacific. The damage to *South Dakota* was severe enough that the ship departed the South Pacific within two weeks of the battle to be repaired.⁷⁷

Whereas the *South Dakota* was limping home, nearly all of the remaining U.S. cruisers available in the Pacific were crushed at the Battle of Tassafaronga on 30 November 1942. A barrage of Japanese torpedoes sank one cruiser and seriously damaged three others. The gap in surface units that this defeat created could not be filled by fast battleships as had happened in mid-November. The *North Carolina* was still under repair after being torpedoed in September. The *Massachusetts* was committed to Operation Torch, and the *Indiana* was just finishing her shakedown. The sole fast battleship available, the *Washington*, could not fight surface actions and escort carriers simultaneously. As the year moved to a close, the United States’s hold on Guadalcanal was still precarious.

In early December, Admiral Nimitz admitted that U.S. naval superiority was still not established in the Guadalcanal area.⁷⁸ By early January, the pace of Tokyo Express runs increased significantly. Upwards of twenty Japanese destroyers ran the “Slot” at night.⁷⁹ Admiral Halsey’s response was confined to ineffective attacks by PT boats, destroyers, and aircraft. By 31 January 1943, CinCPac message traffic indicated a major offensive surpassing anything previously witnessed was close at hand.⁸⁰

76. Commander in Chief Pacific, *Estimate of the Situation: Solomon Islands*, 15 January 1943, p. 9, *CinCPac Running Estimate*, Microfilm, USNA.

77. *War Diaries, U.S.S. South Dakota, 20 March 1942–31 January 1943*, 29 November 1942, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard.

78. Commander in Chief Pacific to CinCUS Fleet, 8 December 1942, Future Operations in the Solomons Sea Area, p. 2, *CinCPac Running Estimate*, Microfilm, USNA.

79. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 6 February 1943.

80. *Ibid.*, 31 January 1943.

Despite Japanese losses in the fall of 1942 and recent additions to the U.S. Navy, CinCPac intelligence reported that overall in the Pacific the Japanese still maintained nearly a two-to-one advantage in every class of warship.⁸¹ Concentration of Japanese naval assets in the Solomons could still severely jeopardize the United States effort. It was not until 9 February 1943 that the increased Japanese activity was determined to be a withdrawal and not a renewed offensive.⁸² The struggle for Guadalcanal was over.

Despite the perceived Japanese buildup, senior United States Navy officers still saw no role for the battleships of Task Force One. On 8 November BATDIV 4 (*Colorado, Maryland*) got underway for the South Pacific, followed approximately four weeks later by BATDIV 3 (*Mississippi, New Mexico*). Yet, despite the increased logistical capability of the Navy in the Guadalcanal Theater, the operational training of the battleships would decline to almost nothing, and they remained uncommitted to the battle for Guadalcanal. BATDIV 4, comprised of the two remaining old battleships with 16-inch guns, arrived in Fiji on 17 November 1942. From their arrival until the peak of the suspected renewed Japanese offensive, the ships spent only eight of their seventy-six days underway. The eight days were split among three different underway periods in December and early January, before the scare. All three periods were short training evolutions restricted to the area around Fiji.⁸³ The schedule for the ships of BATDIV 3, upon their arrival on 18 December, was very similar to BATDIV 4's. The battleships spent only 10 percent of the time in the South Pacific up to 1 February underway preparing to meet the enemy they were designed to fight.

Nimitz sent the battleships south because the loss of cruisers in Halsey's area warranted "additional gunpower" to offset the Japanese efforts.⁸⁴ As the *Mississippi* and *New Mexico* arrived in Fiji, CinCPac expressed satisfaction regarding the ships' additional antiaircraft protection.⁸⁵ Yet Nimitz cautioned Halsey that the battleships were only there to be used as a last ditch effort to stop the Japanese. Halsey did not even give the old warwagons that much credit.

81. Intelligence ship comparison, U.S. vs. Japan: battleships, 3 vs. 9; old battleships, 4 vs. 0; aircraft carriers, 2 vs. 7; heavy cruisers, 4 vs. 8; light cruisers, 7 vs. 10; destroyers, 63 vs. 40+. CinCPac, *Estimate of the Situation: Solomon Islands*, 15 January 1943, 6–10.

82. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 9 February 1943.

83. *Log Book, U.S.S. Colorado, 1 December 1942–1 March 1943*, 1 December 1942–1 February 1943, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard.

84. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 3 December 1942.

85. The two ships were outfitted with two quadruple 40-mm and forty-six single 20-mm mounts before arriving in Fiji. *Ibid.*, 3 December 1942.

Halsey viewed the battleships as a liability. In December, he had the ships of BATDIV 3 stripped of most of their recently acquired anti-aircraft weapons in order to strengthen BATDIV 4. Within two weeks of their arrival, Halsey requested permission to send the *Mississippi* and *New Mexico* back to Pearl Harbor.⁸⁶ Only a strong recommendation from Nimitz to Halsey kept BATDIV 3 in the South Pacific during the January scare.⁸⁷ The mission for all four ships remained one of a last resort defensive nature. Both battleship divisions still suffered from a nearly complete lack of underway time. Neither commander felt the battleships could do any good in the struggle for the waters around Guadalcanal.

Ironically, on 2 February 1943, the four battleships sortied with three escort carriers as Task Force 69 to aid in the predicted renewed battle for Guadalcanal. On 8 February, Admiral Halsey ordered the force to intercept a Japanese task force northeast of Guadalcanal. Before any action could be taken, naval intelligence determined that the contact was a hoax of Japanese origin. The battleships returned to Fiji having finished their first year of the war fulfilling a role as illusory as the one Japanese target they were tasked with destroying.

The Commanders' Decisions

As assets, warships are subject to the decisions of the commanders who control their assignments. The employment of the ships of Task Force One, or the lack thereof, rested in the hands of two officers during that first year of the war. After the employment of the battleships in the South Pacific became logistically feasible in the autumn of 1942, they came under the purview of William F. ("Bull") Halsey, who, although given some latitude to employ them, made little use of the ships. The second officer, of course, was Nimitz. Despite the repeated inquiries from the highest levels about utilizing these assets, the ships remained out of harm's way. That decision was ultimately and obviously Nimitz's. Yet, Nimitz must have received a great deal of input from his chief of staff, Admiral Raymond Spruance, during the last six months of 1942. Spruance was one of the foremost battleship officers in the Navy at the time, so his advice was critical with regard to the old battleships. The decision making of these three officers also needs to be examined to achieve a complete understanding of the reasons behind the impotence of these assets.

Halsey's rationale is the easiest to comprehend. His philosophy of "hit hard, hit fast, and hit often" amply described what he wanted to do

86. *Ibid.*, 21 December 1942.

87. *Ibid.*, 5 January 1943.

to the Japanese. Converted to aviation as a captain,⁸⁸ Halsey accepted aircraft wholeheartedly as the means to carry out his philosophy. As the commander of a carrier task force in the spring of 1942, he lobbied strongly to take the war to the Japanese. The result was that Nimitz trusted him to command multiple raids against Japanese held islands as well as the task force that carried Doolittle's planes to the departure point for their raid against Tokyo. As aviation strength relative to the Japanese around Guadalcanal continued to grow, it seemingly offered a less costly avenue to success than his surface forces did.

During his first six weeks of command in the Southwest Pacific, Halsey had ten ships sunk in surface combat and eleven seriously damaged, and two of his admirals—Dan Callaghan and Norman Scott—were killed. In exchange, his surface forces sank only three destroyers and two battleships, although one of the battleships had to be sunk by aircraft the day following its surface confrontation.⁸⁹ Results like these would only reinforce Halsey's already established preference towards airpower. His handling of the battleships once they were under his control also confirms his orientation.

Aircraft were the "ship killers" for Halsey. He stripped two of the battleships from Task Force One of recently acquired anti-aircraft armaments in order to strengthen the remaining two. His choice of which ships to disarm again points to his concentration towards aviation. The *Mississippi* and *New Mexico*, with their similar throw weight to the 16-inch gun ships and their superior Mark 8 range keeper, would have been better choices for a gun duel in Iron Bottom Sound. To Halsey, the differing capabilities of the ships mattered little. The battleships were a liability. The recommendations of Admiral Scott, the surface combatant, for big-gun ships around Guadalcanal were not to be fulfilled by Halsey, the aviator.

Any justification for Spruance not to use the old battleships must have been more complex. Spruance, having served six tours aboard battleships, including two years as the commanding officer of the *Mississippi*, was devastated by the destruction of the foundation of his naval career in the attack on Pearl Harbor. The success of the Japanese gave him a new appreciation for the strength of aviation and spurred his interest in air warfare.⁹⁰ Yet despite his reputation as a thinker, as an opera-

88. Robert W. Love, Jr., *History of the U.S. Navy* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1992), 546.

89. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1963), 196–212.

90. Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1974), 98, 117.

tor he remained mired in the dogma of line-ahead battle tactics he had studied for over thirty years.⁹¹ Also, he was disappointed with the gunnery of his cruisers in the springtime raids against Japanese islands.⁹² United States surface navy problems seemingly must have increased in magnitude following Japanese success at Savo Island. There was little solace to offer the recently appointed chief of staff after this example of Japanese superiority at night surface combat, although radar offered promise.

Spruance had experience with radar. His cruiser force in the spring was equipped with various types. Yet his last individual ship command, the *Mississippi*, did not have any. Until the reports from the battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota* were published and digested, using radar to provide accurate fires from battleships could not be fully appreciated as the solution to Japanese nighttime superiority. Therefore, to this battleship admiral who was still in transition to an age of naval aviation, his old warhorses would be nothing but wasted cannon fodder. As a commander, he could not reconcile the loss of the ships in this manner, given the possibility of a reasonable mission in the near future that would take full advantage of the abilities of the ships.

From his tour as a student as well as *two* additional tours on the faculty at the Naval War College before the war, Spruance was very familiar with the Navy's plan for a Pacific conflict. The march across the Central Pacific needed to be a systematic movement that required complicated amphibious assaults, assaults for which the old battleships were "tailor-made" and an essential element of support. One of Spruance's underlying philosophies of war was that danger was unavoidable, but he always sought to minimize that danger.⁹³ The loss of additional old battleships trying to secure Guadalcanal would certainly diminish the support for the main thrust across the Central Pacific. Withholding them from what was an important yet secondary theater except in the most dire of situations, in order to conserve them for the main effort, would be in keeping with Spruance's philosophy of minimizing the long-term danger to the war effort. Spruance had this, among many other things, to offer to his partnership with Nimitz.

91. "Doctrine called for forming the ships in column, with the admiral leading his ships into battle as a cohesive group, navigating in obedience to his commands. Spruance decided to follow standard doctrine. He would maneuver the ships in unison, uncovering their batteries in order to enable them to fire broadsides at the enemy ships." Spruance during his bombardments of Japanese islands in the spring of 1942. *Ibid.*, 101.

92. *Ibid.*, 101–14.

93. *Ibid.*, 154.

Nimitz, like his two subordinates, was a fighter.⁹⁴ Upon assuming command of the Pacific, he immediately authorized raids into Japanese-held islands in the Marshalls and to Wake Island. He pushed all the assets he could into the fights at Coral Sea and Midway. He also supported the move against Guadalcanal. Even as circumstances deteriorated and losses mounted in and around Iron Bottom Sound, Nimitz pushed his men to attack. In October, he declared that U.S. forces must never lose the chance to grapple with the enemy “under the principle of calculated risk.”⁹⁵ The calculation was that the benefit to be gained was worth losing the units and the personnel involved.

Nimitz, like most senior officers of the time, had battleships in his background. In addition to three tours as a junior officer, he had served as Commander Battleship Division One in 1938–39. Yet, he was oriented strongly towards submarines. He was a recognized expert on submarine diesels as a junior officer, and by 1941, had spent over a third of his career commanding or associated with submarines. The emphasis he placed on submarines in the Pacific war was highlighted by his choice of a submarine for his change of command ceremony when he became CinCPac.⁹⁶

Nimitz also understood the importance of aviation in the war which he was to control. He believed that carrier forces would be the principal means of taking the war to the Japanese. The overwhelming force of carriers that American industry would provide beginning in the summer of 1943 would support the major thrust across the Central Pacific.⁹⁷ Nimitz’s war was to be one of carrier aviation and submarine strangulation. The old warwagons of his junior officer days would be useful for escorting and supporting the amphibious assaults. For Nimitz, the loss of battleships in surface combat rarely fit into his criteria for “calculated risk.”

As intimated earlier, despite pressure, Nimitz refused to commit the old battleships to Guadalcanal or to the Aleutians. The only commitment of battleships to surface combat in the Guadalcanal campaign can be explained within the boundaries of Nimitz’s approach to the war. By mid-November, the battle for the island was still very much in question. The devastating night bombardments by the Japanese had to be stopped. The losses on the night of 12–13 November meant that the only reasonable force capable of accomplishing this mission were the two fast battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota*. The ships were committed as a last

94. Spruance was elated upon Nimitz’s assumption of command: “Then we commenced to go places and fight.” *Ibid.*, 98.

95. *Message Traffic, CinCPac Running Estimate*, 22 October 1942.

96. E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 19–84.

97. *Ibid.*, 68, 211.

resort, which was the same guidance given to Halsey for the old battleships in January. In this one instance, battleships fit into Nimitz's criteria for calculated risk. The opinions contained in contemporary literature are mixed in regard to this point.

Unfortunately, Robert O'Connell completely misses the essence of this critical balancing act in *Sacred Vessels*. For O'Connell, nearly overnight the Navy leadership had changed to more enlightened "people with more varied backgrounds" who would "win the war with carrier task forces and submarines" while simultaneously dismissing the viability of the battleship.⁹⁸ In actuality, some senior officers, Nimitz in particular, understood just how essential the platforms were to the Pacific war. In the Solomons, he could not afford to use them. Initially, this was due to logistics but later was because of the psychological impact losing one or more would have in the United States, as well as operationally for the Central Pacific campaign. Nimitz and Halsey were willing, however, to employ them as a last resort to ensure efforts in the South Pacific were not defeated. The conservation of units in order to "save the day" is a tactic that many commanders, Napoleon included, reserve for their most powerful units.

This point is reinforced in *One Hundred Years of Seapower*, as George Baer comes much closer to clearly showing some operational reasons for the limited use of Task Force One. Baer effectively demonstrates that naval planners in the 1930s considered cruisers as the "expendable major surface unit."⁹⁹ Battleships, due to their economic as well as operational value, were not expendable during the struggle for Guadalcanal. In other words, they could be used only if absolutely necessary. Initially in the Solomons, as battleships were not logistically supportable in the South Pacific, cruisers were the only alternative. When battleships, both fast and slow, arrived in the autumn of 1942, cruisers still remained the surface ship of choice for surface engagements unless the situation was desperate enough to risk the loss of a battleship. This was the case when Halsey committed *Washington* and *South Dakota* in November and when he ordered his old battleships to sea in early February 1943. Although Baer's claim that the carriers attained the position as the dominant capital ship "by the chance disablement of the battleships"¹⁰⁰ is thereby questionable, his evidence about relative attitudes towards battleships and cruisers endorses the stance taken by all three of the Pacific naval decision-makers in 1942. Between the aviation orientation of the theater commander, the operational constraints and concerns of the chief of staff, and the calculated-risk approach of the

98. O'Connell, *Sacred Vessels*, 315.

99. Baer, *U.S. Navy, 1890-1990*, 139.

100. *Ibid.*, 212.

Commander in Chief, Pacific, the battleships of Task Force One wallowed in tactical passiveness in order to benefit long-term strategic capability despite the elimination of logistical shortcomings.

Employment Revisited

Unfortunately for the United States tactical naval efforts in the Solomons, this exile of the battleships to a state of impotence and reliance on cruisers was unwarranted. Senior officers considered the new, “fast” battleships of the Pacific Fleet capable and effective enough to face Japanese surface opponents in Iron Bottom Sound, hence the commitment of the *South Dakota* and *Washington* in November 1942. The battleships of Task Force One, as discussed earlier, by virtue of the yard work of early 1942 were far more capable than the battleships lost at Pearl Harbor. The refurbished battlewagons had some differences and in one case a glaring deficiency when compared to the new classes. Yet these differences were not enough to prevent these ships from also successfully challenging Japanese opponents around Guadalcanal. The commitment to the fight for the Solomons of the battleships of Task Force One, especially the four battleships that CinCPac sent to Fiji, would have provided viable weapons systems capable of adding a great deal to the fight for sea superiority.

In terms of defensive measures, the old battleships had enough protection to take damage and keep on fighting. The torpedo protection of the *New Mexico* hinged on the compartmentalization of turbo-electric drive. A single torpedo would have been hard pressed to take her down.¹⁰¹ With the improved torpedo defensive system plus an additional blister, *Colorado* and *Maryland* were even better prepared. Although their torpedo protection was never tested, multiple torpedo hits would have been needed to ensure their destruction. The ships could have taken damage and still kept fighting. The more modern torpedo protection of the “fast” battleships granted no immunity from damage anyway. On 15 September 1942, a single Japanese torpedo blew a hole in the port side of the *North Carolina* and effectively removed her from the struggle for Guadalcanal.

The difference between the old and new battleships in anti-aircraft weaponry was not as significant as it might seem. The shipyards refitted all the old battleships with large numbers of the highly effective 20-mm Oerlikons; several 40-mm Bofors were also added. Admiral Halsey, when stripping the two *New Mexicos*, undoubtedly “beefed up” the anti-air

101. A single torpedo was not enough to sink either *California* at Pearl Harbor or *Pennsylvania* in 1945. Friedman, *U.S. Battleships*, 373.

armament of the two *Colorados* even further. Granted, neither class yet had the advantage of the 5-inch/38 dual purpose gun that proved to be so effective in an anti-air role. Yet how important would that truly have been? At this point, the proximity (VT) fuze that truly made the 5-inch/38 such a deadly weapon was not in use. The repeated losses of U.S. and Allied ships to Japanese aircraft in the first year of the war demonstrated quite poignantly that capital ships could not stand alone against air power regardless of anti-air armament. With their additional anti-air weapons, the old battleships had similar anti-air capability to their faster sister ships that did enter Iron Bottom Sound.

Also, by the time the old battleships were logistically supportable in the South Pacific, they would have benefitted from improved air cover around the lower Solomons. In November, the Cactus Air Force at Henderson Field was well along in establishing local air superiority around Guadalcanal. A conservative estimate of combat aircraft losses for the period from 15 November 1942 to 1 February 1943 showed Americans shooting down Japanese planes at a 2 to 1 ratio. Also the highly skilled Japanese naval aviators who had battled through the autumn were being killed at such a rapid rate that the quality of the pilots flying in December possessed "but a third of the skill of the men they replaced."¹⁰² By the January scare, coordinated air cover for old battleships in Iron Bottom Sound, when combined with their organic anti-air weapons, would have provided a high degree of protection. With the limitations of night-flying at this time, air cover would have been limited to daylight hours. Given Japanese limitations, however, the real threat to ships from aircraft was also restricted to daylight hours.¹⁰³ The shield would have been somewhat porous, but, given the results of air attacks throughout the war, what shield was not?

The armor of the old battleships, significantly increased during the modernizations of the 1930–40s, provided more than a modicum of protection from surface attack. The *South Dakota*, with a 5-inch armored deck, a 1.5-inch bomb deck above that, and a .5-inch splinter deck below, proved to be relatively impervious to structural damage from Japanese hits. Not one of the twenty-six rounds that struck the ship on 15 November penetrated her armor. The Bureau of Ships attributed some of the success to ineffective Japanese shells.¹⁰⁴ Given that any U.S.

102. Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 612.

103. John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign: Naval Fighter Combat from August to November 1942* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994). This book offers perhaps the most comprehensive look at the capabilities of naval aviation in the Solomons during this period.

104. Friedman, *U.S. Battleships*, 303.

battleship would have faced the same threat, the *New Mexico* and *Colorado* classes, with slightly less armor protection, were still well shielded.¹⁰⁵ Undoubtedly, in a battle with Japanese surface units, damage would have been incurred. The secondary batteries of the old battleships were exposed 5-inch guns. The crews and weapons systems would have suffered. Yet in terms of barbette, belt, conning tower, and turret armor, the old ships equalled or *exceeded* the “fast” ships in most areas.¹⁰⁶ The old battleships were built to sustain damage and, like *South Dakota*, take the hits and continue to function.

The additional gunpower Nimitz yearned for following the cruiser losses at Tassafaronga was certainly available in the form of the old battleships. The *Colorados* mounted eight 16-inch/45-caliber guns. With a muzzle velocity of 2,600 feet per second and a 2,250 pound shell, these guns were capable of penetrating every armored space aboard *any* Japanese ship, except the new “super” battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*, at 20,000 yards.¹⁰⁷ The *New Mexico* and her sisterships mounted the 14-inch/50-caliber gun. Although this weapon had somewhat less penetrating power than the 16-inch, it had the ability to pierce the armor of any Japanese ship out to 16,000 yards, again with the exception of the brand new “super-battleship” *Yamato*.¹⁰⁸ The *New Mexico* had the benefit of carrying twelve guns in the main battery. The increased number of guns allowed a higher rate of sustained fire and therefore a similar broadside throw weight from the two different classes of old battleships as well as the new “fast” battleships.¹⁰⁹ Not only were the main guns of the old and new battleships similar, but so were the radar and fire control systems to effectively aim them.

The only example of the combat effectiveness of the radar and fire control systems for the battleships from the fall of 1942 was the battle on 15 November. Conditions that night were good: calm sea, two- to six-

105. *New Mexico* had a 5-inch armored deck, a 2.75-inch splinter deck below, and *two* decks above with the equivalent of .75 inches of armor. *Colorado* had a 3.5-inch armored deck, a 1.5-inch splinter deck below, and *three* decks above. *Ibid.*, 442–45.

106. *Ibid.*, 442–48.

107. *Ibid.*, 214.

108. *Ibid.*, 119.

109. Weight of 14-inch/50 shell: 1,500 lbs. Sustained rate: 9–10 rounds per minute. $9 \times 1500 = 13,500$ lbs. Weight of 16-inch/45 shell from old battleships: 2,250 lbs. Sustained rate: 5–6 rounds per minute. $6 \times 2250 = 13,500$ lbs. Weight of 16-inch/45 armor-piercing shell from fast battleships: 2,700 lbs. Sustained rate: 5–6 rounds per minute. $5 \times 2700 = 13,500$ lbs. *Ibid.*, 190, 271, 353.

knot wind, ceiling 2,000–10,000 feet, and visibility twelve miles.¹¹⁰ Both *Washington* and *South Dakota* employed the SG surface search radar and the Mark 3 FC fire control radar. Each ship gained fire solutions to their targets via radar. *Washington* opened fire at 18,500 yards. *South Dakota* followed soon after at nearly 16,000 yards. The FC radar allowed operators to accurately spot the splashes of their shells and provide corrections to the guns. The *Washington* tracked and fired at her second main battery target for five minutes before it was visually acquired.¹¹¹

In the aftermath, the battle reports attributed nearly all of the success of the U.S. battleships to their fire control radar. “Training in radar ranging and spotting cannot be overemphasized, it is the only effective means of controlling fire at night.”¹¹² Ironically, success that night came from two ships that had rarely fired their main guns. The *Washington*, commissioned nearly eighteen months before, had only fired her main battery twice at night. Both times were in January 1942, eleven months before she employed them in Iron Bottom Sound. Even more surprising was the limited live-fire training for the crew of the *South Dakota*. The ship, just commissioned in March, had only finished her shake down cruise in late July. Between getting underway as an operating unit of the Navy and her commitment to combat, the ship fired the main battery only three times, *never* at night.¹¹³

Between the completion of the refits in early 1942 and their arrival in the South Pacific, the old battleships had the benefit of radar and more practice. The old battleships all mounted the same Mark 3 FC fire control radar as the *Washington* and *South Dakota*.¹¹⁴ Each ship, with the gear on board since the spring refits, had more time and practice with the equipment than at least the *South Dakota*. Their training, though severely limited upon arrival at Fiji, had been filled with daily gun drills, frequent radar ranging exercises, and periodic night combat exercises. The *Colorado* conducted ten main-gun live fire exercises in the three months between 15 July and 12 November.¹¹⁵ The old battle-

110. *Action Report, U.S.S. South Dakota (BB 57), Night Engagement 14–15 November, 1942 with Japanese Naval Units off Savo Island*, p. 4, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard.

111. *Action Report, U.S.S. Washington (BB56) Battleship Night Action Battle off Guadalcanal*, pp. 6–7, U.S. Navy Official Records, Operational Archives, Washington Navy Yard; *Action Report, U.S.S. South Dakota*, 2, 19; *Action Report, U.S. Washington*, 29.

112. *Action Report, U.S.S. South Dakota*, 12.

113. *Action Report, U.S.S. Washington*, 47; *War Diaries, U.S.S. South Dakota*, 20 March–15 November 1942.

114. Friedman, *U.S. Battleships*, 354–67.

115. *War Diaries, U.S.S. Colorado*, 15 July–12 November 1942.

ships were, in many respects, more qualified to use their main guns than their faster sister ships.

In the category of speed there was truly a glaring deficiency in the old battleships relative to the “fast” battleships. The “fast” battleships, with a maximum speed of 28–33 knots, were truly superior. With a maximum speed of 18–19 knots, the old BBs could not attempt to fill the role of escort to the carriers. Yet this deficiency in one category should not have been enough to sentence the old battleships to an almost permanent anchorage at Fiji. This speed was fast enough to allow the slower battlewagons to operate from Espiritu Santo to Guadalcanal. Using the substantially shorter eastern approach to Iron Bottom Sound, the ships of Task Force One were capable of remaining out of range of Japanese aircraft during daylight but still reach the sound at a reasonable hour to interdict the Tokyo Express.¹¹⁶

The old battleships that initially operated as part of Task Force One and subsequently moved to the South Pacific certainly had their drawbacks. Based on thirty-year-old designs and many antiquated systems, the ships would never be the backbone of the Fleet again as they had been prior to Pearl Harbor. The capabilities they did have, however, meant they were still a viable weapons system for the struggle in the Solomons. Their improved defensive capability and fire control as well as their inherent gunpower provided assets that could challenge the Japanese. They needed only the belief that their commitment was worth the risk from the commanders to do so.

Conclusions

As the United States entered the war in the Pacific, the initial blow at Pearl Harbor seemed to condemn the U.S. Navy to a struggle without the benefit of what had been the foundation of the fleet. The Japanese rendered the Pacific battlefleet impotent in the shallow waters of Pearl

116. Steaming distance from Espiritu Santo to Iron Bottom Sound via a route around the northwest tip of Guadalcanal was approximately 650 nautical miles. To arrive at the same location in Iron Bottom Sound via the Sealark Channel was sixty-five to seventy nautical miles less. For the old battleships, from any position along a track from Espiritu Santo to Iron Bottom Sound, the eastern route would be approximately four hours shorter than the northwest route. From a point one hundred nautical miles southeast of Guadalcanal, the old battleships would have been free to patrol, safe from Japanese aircraft during the day. Using the shorter route, elements of the task force would have been available to interdict Japanese naval forces in Iron Bottom Sound in approximately nine hours. This type of responsive interdiction was used by Norman Scott’s task force and led to success in the Battle of Cape Esperance.

Harbor. The Navy quickly turned to the aircraft carrier as the successor to the battleship.

Yet before the Navy ever faced its opponent in the numerous sea battles that would dot the seascape of the Pacific, the foundation of the pre-Pearl Harbor Navy was back stronger than ever. The battleships of Task Force One gathered at San Francisco ready to fight. Their capabilities, by virtue of additional equipment, newer generation ships (the *Idahos*), and refits, were far superior to their predecessors lost at Pearl Harbor. Due to other circumstances, however, there was no place for the slow battlewagons of an earlier age of naval warfare.

Initially, the logistical cost of the ships could not be paid. The lack of logistics readiness on the part of the United States prevented valuable assets from being employed. As these logistical shortages were overcome, however, Task Force One still remained uncommitted. The inability to use these assets initially was supplanted by unwillingness. Despite capabilities that made them viable weapon systems in the surface combat environment of Iron Bottom Sound, the battleships were relegated to limited training and fulfilling a role as a last ditch defense measure while the bitter fight they were designed for raged. The lack of logistical planning as well as the lack of appreciation for the purpose and tactical ability of these battleships kept them out of the first year of the war. Ironically, the strong desire to keep them safe to fulfill other defensive and supporting missions meant that they would never achieve their offensive potential.