Operation Hailstone (Japanese: 鸨立, lit. "the airstrike on Truk Island"), 17-18 February 1944, was a massive United States Navy air and surface attack on Truk Lagoon conducted as part of the American offensive drive against the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) through the Central Pacific Ocean during World War II.

Prior to Operation Hailstone, the IJN had used Truk as an anchorage for its large Combined Fleet. The coral atoll surrounding Truk's islands created a safe harbor where the few points of ingress and egress had been fortified by the Japanese with shore batteries, antiaircraft guns, and airfields. American estimates of Truk's defenses and its role as a stronghold of the Japanese Navy led newspapers and military men to call it the "Gibraltar of the Pacific", or to compare it with Pearl Harbor. Truk's location in the Caroline Islands also made it an excellent shipping hub for armaments and aircraft moving from Japan's home islands down through the South Pacific Mandate and into the Japanese "Southern Resources Area".

By early 1944, Truk was increasingly unsustainable as a forward base of operations for the Japanese. To the west, American and Australian forces under General Douglas MacArthur had moved up through the Southwest Pacific, isolating or overrunning many Japanese strong points as part of Operation Cartwheel. The U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Army, under the command of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, had overrun the most important islands in the nearby Gilbert Islands and Marshall Islands, and then built numerous air bases.

As a result, the Japanese Navy had to relocate the Combined Fleet's forward base to the Palau Islands, and eventually to Indonesia, and the Fleet had begun clearing its major warships out
Nevertheless, the Hailstone attack caught a good number of Japanese auxiliary ships and cargo ships in the harbor, as well as some warships. Between the air attacks and surface ship attacks over the two days of Operation Hailstone the worst blow against the Japanese was about 250 warplanes destroyed. Also, about forty ships — two light cruisers, four destroyers, nine auxiliary ships, and about two dozen cargo vessels — were sunk.

Considerable damage was inflicted on the various island bases, including dockyards, communications centers, supply dumps, and its submarine base. Truk remained effectively isolated for the remainder of the war, cut off and surrounded by the American island hopping campaign in the Central Pacific, which also bypassed important Japanese garrisons and airfields in the Bismarck Archipelago, the Caroline Islands, the Marshalls, and the Palau. Meanwhile, the Americans built new bases from scratch at places like the Admiralty Islands, Majuro, and Ulithi Atoll and took over the major port at Guam.

Background

The Japanese occupied Micronesia, including the Caroline Islands, in 1914, and established Truk as a base as early as 1939. The lagoon was first built up to house the LN’s 4th Fleet, its “South Seas Force”. After the outbreak of war with the United States, the 4th Fleet was put under the command of the Combined Fleet, which continued to use Truk as a forward operating base into 1944. In addition to anchorages for warships, and port facilities for shipping between the home islands and the Southern Resource Area, five airfields and a seaplane base were constructed at Truk, making it the only major Japanese airfield within flying range of the Marshall Islands.

Despite the impressiveness of U.S. Navy leaders and the American public concerning Truk’s projected fortifications, the base was never significantly reinforced or protected against land attack. In fact, the development of Truk only began in concert, and in hurried fashion in late 1943, when the airfields were extended, shore batteries were erected, and other defensive measures taken against a U.S. invasion.

Because aircraft stationed at Truk could potentially interfere with the upcoming invasion of Iriomote, and because Truk had recently served as a ferry point for the repurposing of aircraft to Admiral Raymond Spruance ordered Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher’s Task Force 58 (TF 58) to carry out an raid against Truk. Three of TF 58’s four carrier task groups (TGs) were committed to the operation. Their total strength consisted of five fleet aircraft carriers: the Enterprise, Yorktown, Essex, Intrepid, and Bunker Hill and four light carriers, the Belleau Wood, Cabot, Monterey, and Cowpens, carrying a total of 500+ warplanes. Supporting these aircraft carriers was a task force of seven battleships, and numerous heavy cruisers, light cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.

The Japanese, meanwhile, understood the weakness of their position at Truk. The LN had begun withdrawing fleet units from its anchorages as early as October 1943. The effective abandonment of Truk as a forward operating base accelerated during the first week of February 1944, following Japanese sightings of U.S. Marine Corps PB4Y-1 Liberator reconnaissance planes sent to reconnoiter the area.

Attack

The three carrier task groups committed to Hailstone moved into position and began launching their first fighter sweep 90 minutes before daybreak on 17 February 1944. No Japanese air patrol was active at the time as the LN’s 22nd and 26th Air Flotillas were enjoying shore leave after weeks on high alert following the Liberator sighting. The Japanese problem for Japan was the lack of radar on Truk, which would have permitted intercepting low-flying planes — a weakness probably known and exploited by Allied intelligence organizations. Because of these factors, U.S. carrier aircraft achieved total surprise.

Japanese pilots scrambled into their cockpits just minutes before TF 58 planes arrived over Eten, Param, Moen and Dublon islands. Though there were more than 300 Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service (IJNAS) and Imperial Japanese Army Air Service (IJJAS) planes present at Truk on the first day of attacks, only about half of them were operational compared with over 500 operational aircraft among the carriers of TF 58. U.S. Navy fighter pilots in their Grumman F6F Hellcats, with the advantages of speed, altitude and surprise, achieved a one-sided victory against IJN pilots flying the inferior Mitsubishi A6M Zero. As many as 30 of the 80 Zeros sent up in response to the fighter sweep were shot down, compared with four Hellcats reported lost. Only token aerial resistance was encountered for the rest of the morning; almost no Japanese aircraft were present by the afternoon.

Due to the lack of air cover or warning, many merchant ships were caught at anchor with only the islands’ anti-aircraft guns for defense against the U.S. carrier planes. Some vessels outside the lagoon already steaming towards Japan were attacked by U.S. submarines and sunk before they could make their escape. The IJN lost the battleship Aikoku Maru — was given special attention by carrier bombers. Multiple air groups attacked these ships, including serious damage. Yorktowns dive and torpedo bombers dropped two bombs on Katori and hits on another carrier and multiple destroyers; Essex bombers claimed five hits on a Katori-class cruiser as well, stating that the ship was stopped dead in the water after the attack.

At this point reports reached Admiral Spruance concerning the group of warships fleeing through North Pass. The Admiral put himself in tactical command of Task Group 50.9, made up of four destroyers, two heavy cruisers and the battleship Iowa. This convinced her in the face of a U.S. invasion.

The battered Japanese ships did not stand much of a chance against Task Group 50.9, though members of his staff saw Spruance’s decision to engage in surface action which likely would have achieved similar results as needlessly reckless. Indeed, the Japanese destroyer Makaze managed to fire torpedoes at the battleship New Jersey during the engagement. Fortunately for Spruance, the torpedoes missed, and the “battle” ended with predictably one-sided results. The U.S. Navy surface combatants incurred virtually no damage. The LN lost Makaze. Shonan Maru, Katori and Aikoku Maru. Destroyer Nowaki was the only Japanese ship from this group to escape.

Relatation for the day’s strikes arrived late in the night in the form of small groups of Japanese bombers probing the task groups’ defenses. From roughly 21:00 on, 17 February, to just minutes past midnight on 18 February, at least five groups of between one and three enemy planes attempted to sneak past screening ships to strike at the fleet carriers. One such plane, a Nakajima B5N “Kate” bomber, managed to evade night fighter planes protecting the U.S. task force and dropped its torpedo on Task Group 58.2. The torpedo struck Intrepid on the starboard quarter of the ship, damaging steering control and killing 11 sailors. Intrepid was forced to retire for the U.S. repairs and did not return to combat until August 1944.

Aftermath

Truk, like so many other Japanese bases, was left to itself without hope of resupply or reinforcement. Army forces which had arrived at the atoll before the U.S. attacks put increasing strain on dwindling ammunition and supplies. Dwindling ammunition even limited the ability of shore batteries to fend off intermittent attacks by Allied forces, including experimental raids by Boeing B-29 Superfortresses and attacks by another carrier aircraft.

Losses at Truk were severe. Some 17,000 tons of stored fuel were destroyed by the strikes. Shipping losses totaled almost 200,000 tons including precious resources in fleet oilers. This represents almost one third of total Japanese shipping losses between 1 November 1943 and 30 June 1944. Moreover, the isolation of this whole area of operations by submarine and air attack began the effective severing of Japanese shipping lanes between empire waters and critical fuel supplies to the south. The ultimate effect of such a disconnection was later seen during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, when the U.S. forces used to sortie separately from Japan and Lingga Roads due to fuel constraints. The neutralization of Truk, and the seizure of Iriomote, paved the way for the upcoming invasion of Iwo Jima, which for the first time put U.S. land-based heavy bombers within range of the Japanese home islands.

Truk is renowned today as a tourist destination for divers interested in seeing the many shipwrecks left in the lagoon, many of which were caused by the Operation Hailstone strikes.

List of warships in Truk at the time of attack

List derived from Jeffery’s War Graves, Munition Dumps and Pleasure Grounds (2007)
Warships sunk

CL Katori (1) 5,800 tons
CL Naka (1) 5,195 tons
DD Makaze (1) 2,000 tons
DD Fumizuki (1) 1,320 tons
DD Ote (1) 1,270 tons
DD Tachikaze (1) 1,215 tons
Submarine chaser CH-29, 440 tons
Submarine chaser CH-24, 440 tons
Auxiliary submarine chaser Shonan Maru #15 (715), 355 tons
Motor torpedo boat #10, 85 tons

Warships damaged

Repair ship Akashi (1) 10,500 tons
Seaplane tender Akitsushima (1) 4,650 tons
DD Matsuza (1) 1,400 tons
DD Shigure (1) 1,685 tons
Submarine L10 (710), 2,919 tons
Submarine RO-42, 1,115 tons
Submarine chaser Chi-20
Target ship Hakachi (1) 1,641 tons

List of merchant ships in Truk at the time of attack

List derived from Jeffery's War Graves, Munition Dumps and Pleasure Grounds (2007)

Merchant ships sunk

Auxiliary cruiser Aikoku Maru (1) 10,348 tons
Auxiliary cruiser Akagi Maru (1) 7,367 tons
Auxiliary cruiser Kiyosumi Maru (1) 6,983 tons
Navy transport Hoki Maru (1) 7,112 tons
Navy transport Yamagiri Maru (1) 7,112 tons
Navy transport Fusikawa Maru (7) 6,938 tons
Navy transport/freighter San Francisco Maru (1) 5,831 tons
Navy transport Reijo Maru (1) 5,446 tons
Navy transport Seiko Maru (7) 5,385 tons
Navy transport/passenger/cargo ship Kennyo Maru (1) 4,862 tons
Navy transport/freighter Hanakawa Maru (1) 4,739 tons
Navy transport/passenger/cargo ship Sankisan Maru or Yamakisan Maru (?) 4,776 tons
Navy transport/freighter Hokyō Maru (1) 4,217 tons
Navy transport/freighter Momokawa Maru (1) 3,829 tons
Navy water carrier/passageenger/cargo ship Nippo Maru (1) 3,764 tons
Navy transport/freighter Unkai Maru #6 (1) 3,220 tons
Navy transport Taiso Maru (1) 2,827 tons
Navy transport/freighter Shotan Maru (1) 1,999 tons
Navy transport/freighter Gosei Maru (1) 1,931 tons
Freighter Tasikichi Maru or Tachi Maru (1) 1,891 tons
Army transport Gyozen Maru (1) 6,854 tons
Army transport/freighter Nagano Maru (1) 3,824 tons
Army transport Yubae Maru (1) 3,217 tons
Submarine tender Heian Maru (1) 11,614 tons
Submarine tender Rio de Janeiro Maru (1) 9,626 tons
Fleet oiler Shinkoku Maru (1) 10,020 tons
Oil tanker Fujisan Maru (?) 9,524 tons
Auxiliary oil tanker/whaler Tonnan Maru #3 (1) 19,209 tons
Auxiliary oil tanker Houtou Maru or Hoyō Maru (1) 8,691 tons
Auxiliary oil tanker/passageenger/cargo ship Amagisan Maru (?) 7,620 tons

Merchant ships damaged

Cargo ship Suya (1) 3,800 tons

Footnotes

1. Deaths included 29 aircrew from assorted carriers plus 11 sailors aboard Intrepid. Aircraft losses included 12 fighters, seven torpedo-bombers, and 6 dive-bombers.

2. All dive bomber squadrons with the exception of Bunker Hill’s VB-17 flew the Douglas SBD Dauntless at this time. VB-17 was the first squadron to use the newer Curtiss SBD Helldiver, which later replaced the Dauntless as the US Navy’s standard dive bomber.

Citations
References

Bibliography


Primary sources


Further reading


Video

- Quest for Sunken Warships: "Operation Hailstone". 2007, documentary, Military Channel, last aired 30 September 2010, 4:50p MDT.

External links

- "TRUK LAGOON AREA STUDY". National Park Service. Archived from the original on 2012-11-06.
- WW2DB. Attack on Truk

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After Operation Hailstone, the Japanese garrison on Truk was isolated as American forces continued their advance towards Japan by invading other Pacific islands. Surviving vessels participated in the New Guinea campaign, mostly in the role of "Tokyo Express" transports. Yayoi was lost in an air attack off New Guinea and Fumizuki in Operation Hailstone at Truk. ... The force departed Majuro on 12 February and conducted Operation Hailstone, a major air strike on the Japanese base at Truk, four days later. Operation Hailstone (Japanese: 剛島突撃戦, translit. Torakku-to Kūshū), lit. "the airstrike on Truk Island"[13], 17–18 February 1944, was a massive United States Navy air and surface attack on Truk Lagoon conducted as part of the American offensive drive against the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) through the Central Pacific Ocean during World War II. Prior to Operation Hailstone, the IJN had used Truk as an anchorage for its large Combined Fleet. The coral atoll surrounding Truk Lagoon is located in the ...