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# Admiral John H. Towers and the Origins of Strategic Flexibility in the Central Pacific Offensive, 1943

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Clark G. Reynolds

John Henry Towers entered World War II as an advocate of the aircraft carrier as the principal offensive component of the surface Navy. As Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, he was the U.S. Navy's counterpart to General H. H. "Hap" Arnold of the U.S. Army Air Forces. In October 1942 Towers was, partly because of his outspokenness, transferred out of Washington to Hawaii as Commander Air Force Pacific Fleet (ComAirPac) with a promotion to the rank of vice admiral. It was a new post designed to coordinate all aviation matters—administration, logistics, training, and allocation—in the war against Japan.

Like all "Pacific-type commands," ComAirPac was shore-based at Pacific Fleet Headquarters at Pearl Harbor, and Towers reported directly to the commander in chief of that fleet, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. Nimitz's chief of staff and principal adviser was Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, a battleship man and brilliant officer whose one real experience with carriers, by virtue of his last-minute substitution for the hospitalized Admiral William F. Halsey, won the crucial Battle of Midway that June. Not surprisingly, Towers and the handful of other aviation flag officers resented the fact that one of their own had not commanded in that epic battle in which four Japanese carriers had been sunk.

Between late 1942 and the summer of 1943 neither Vice Admiral Towers nor Rear Admiral Spruance had any opportunity to go to sea. Spruance was needed to counsel Nimitz about future operations in the Pacific theater. Towers had to juggle AirPac's stretched resources for the last two surviving carriers—*Saratoga* and *Enterprise*—and land-based Navy planes in the South

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Pacific until the newly-built carriers and planes, and trained pilots began arriving in mid-1943. As they did, Nimitz began organizing the new Central Pacific Force to mount the major counteroffensive westward toward Japan. In the spring of 1943 Nimitz had Spruance promoted to vice admiral and gave him command of the new force.

By selecting a nonaviator to command what would come to be known as the 5th Fleet, Nimitz rejected Towers' contention that an aviator should lead any fleet in which carriers comprised the main element. It also meant that Towers would remain shore-bound at Pearl Harbor, deprived of a seagoing command, which is precisely what Admiral Nimitz intended. In spite of Towers' proven ability to handle aviation matters, Nimitz resented Towers' criticisms of fleet policy, not simply Towers' belief that carriers and air admirals should be given the dominant role. Besides, Nimitz regarded Spruance as the better man.<sup>1</sup>

What Nimitz had failed to appreciate about Towers was that he was much more than a good aviator and administrator. He also was a very perceptive strategist who nine years before had written the first thesis at the Naval War College on the role of aviation in naval strategy and tactics.<sup>2</sup> He believed strongly, and said so, that the carriers would give the fleet unprecedented offensive mobility. Towers made these views known in regular morning conferences with Nimitz and the other admirals and in memoranda to the Pacific Fleet commander. But since his views did not prevail, he complained that fleet policy was too defensive.

For example, during the early months of 1943 Admirals Nimitz and Spruance, and General Delos C. Emmons of the AAF feared another possible Japanese carrier attack on Pearl Harbor and wanted to recall fleet units from the South Pacific for protection. Further, the commandant of the 14th Naval District in Hawaii and close confidant of Nimitz, Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, wanted to construct more bomb shelters at Pearl Harbor. Regarding this as a supreme waste of resources, Towers fired off a memorandum to Ghormley (his Academy classmate of '06) in June, saying, "I often wonder if Hitler's secret weapon isn't our defensive attitude."<sup>3</sup>

As Towers saw it, offensively employed carriers would provide the ultimate protection for Hawaii. In April 1943, a month after Spruance had presented Nimitz' defensive policy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in Washington, Nimitz asked Towers for his views on future strategy in the Pacific, specifically, possible operations against the Marshall Islands in the Central Pacific. Towers' reply was that for the current year most of the effort by the fleet's limited resources should be continued against Rabaul in the South Pacific. But when the new fleet forces became available at the end of the year, "the enemy's key position in the Carolines" of the Central Pacific should be attacked. He presented a preliminary draft for attacking Japanese bases in the Marshalls and advocated a subsequent attack on and capture of

Truk, the great advanced Japanese Fleet base in the eastern Carolines. This meant bypassing the Gilbert Islands to the south and keeping them neutralized by land-based and carrier air, an idea Towers had heard several months before from Marine General Charles F. B. Price. Such an attack on the “mutually supporting air bases in the Marshalls and northern Gilberts” would cause Japan to divert valuable naval and air forces away from Rabaul and the South Pacific.<sup>4</sup>

Towers was even ahead of the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff who did not give the go-ahead for a Central Pacific offensive until the following month, May 1943. The JCS drew up a plan for the defeat of Japan which called for the seizure of the Marshall and Caroline island groups, precisely what Towers had recommended and which the Combined Chiefs quickly approved. At the end of the month the key strategist for the Pacific, U.S. Fleet Commander in Chief Admiral Ernest J. King, met with Nimitz in San Francisco. They both agreed that the Marshalls should be taken first. By mid-June the main assault had been settled for Kwajalein on or before 15 November. These decisions were entirely in line with the thinking of Jack Towers. On the other hand, the Joint War Plans Committee of the JCS also suggested an alternate plan for taking the Gilberts first, at least to get an operation in the Central Pacific underway.<sup>5</sup>

Vice Admiral Spruance, now equivalent in rank to Towers and scheduled to command the operation, had doubts about an inexperienced new fleet and assault forces plunging into the Marshalls. He expected, and hoped, that the Japanese Fleet would sortie from Truk and give battle. He feared that Japanese land-based air forces in the Marshalls and Gilberts would contest his advance. Spruance insisted on complete aerial reconnaissance of the target islands by land-based planes, and he also wanted land-based airpower to support the landings along with the carriers. Since no U.S.-held islands were within bomber range of the Marshalls, Spruance hit upon the idea of taking the Gilberts first. From captured airfields in the Gilberts, land-based bombers and fighters could support the key landings in the Marshalls.

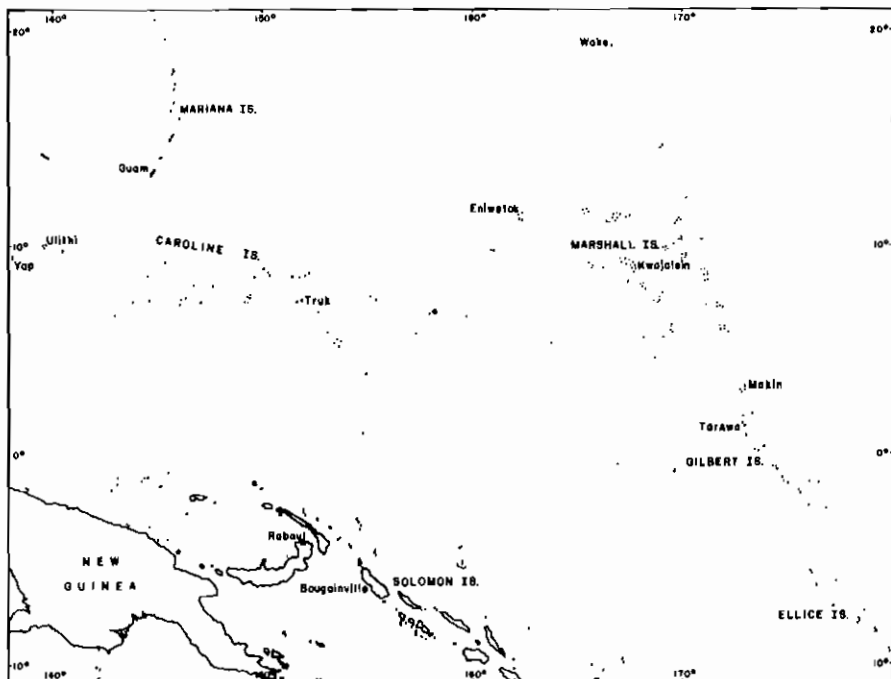
At first, no one at fleet headquarters bought Spruance’s proposal, but he spent June and early July convincing Nimitz of the soundness of invading the Gilberts first. Nimitz finally agreed and recommended JCS approval which came on 20 July. The JCS ordered the fleet to assault Tarawa and Nauru atolls in the Gilberts in mid-November, followed by the Marshalls on New Year’s Day of 1944. This timetable was affirmed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff a month later.<sup>6</sup>

Towers was kept out of the planning process. He steadfastly opposed wasting time, resources, and lives on the less-important Gilberts, believing that the many new carriers now arriving at Pearl Harbor could punch through the Gilberts to the Marshalls with their own aerial reconnaissance and close air support and attack the enemy fleet at or near Truk. Nimitz had

no choice but to solicit Towers' advice on the utilization of the new carriers, which he did on 11 August, but he did little to enlighten Towers on either the major operational plans or their details. Towers complained to Under Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal (who had served in his office as a naval aviator in World War I), that "those of us out here who are in a position to have a reasonably good idea of not only what is going on, but also of what is planned, have a feeling approaching utter hopelessness . . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Towers replied to Nimitz' request with a long memo on 21 August: "The rapidly expanding carrier strength of the Pacific Fleet is providing the Fleet with an air striking force of tremendous potential power and great strategic mobility." He noted that carriers should form the nucleus of the fleet and be kept concentrated in one force, while "extreme flexibility" should be exercised in redeploying them quickly as opportunities arose. Instead of tying them down in fixed timetables and locations, Towers argued that these fast carriers could neutralize island airfields, win local air superiority over beachheads, and range westward to strike Truk and bring on a fleet engagement. Land-based air "as may become available" would provide secondary backup to the carriers. Only qualified aviators who understood such strategic flexibility should lead such a force, whereupon he recommended that he, as ComAirPac, should command them.<sup>8</sup>

Nimitz disagreed with many of Towers' points in a personal meeting two days later, changed nothing in fleet doctrine and command, and gave



Spruance free rein in developing the operational plan for the Gilberts. Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner reported in as Spruance's amphibious commander and during September worked out the details with Spruance and his staff. The new fast carriers were to be assigned cruising sectors off the Gilberts beaches to repel incoming enemy air attacks, attack the southern Marshalls during the landings, and provide air support to the assault troops. If the Japanese Fleet appeared, Spruance would form the traditional battle line of battleships and fight a gunnery duel in the manner of Jutland. The thorough planning for the first amphibious operation in the Central Pacific was meticulous, characteristic of Spruance, but unfortunately it was faulty, for Spruance and his staff were ignorant of the need to employ the carriers' mobility.

This represented a fundamental difference between Spruance and Towers—traditional rigid planning versus carrier flexibility. As the target date, eventually moved to 20 November, approached, Towers repeatedly questioned Spruance's plans for the Gilberts in special conferences with Nimitz' admirals. On 19 September he "urged as large a carrier force as possible," since eleven fast carriers would be available as opposed to only five fast battleships. Ten days later, in his own words, "In polite language, I protested the over-stressing of the training for the classic Fleet engagement . . . ." He accused Spruance and Turner of overlooking "our overwhelming carrier strength" and was supported the next day by Admiral Halsey, visiting from the South Pacific. He especially disliked tying down the carriers to patrol sectors where, without mobility, they would be vulnerable to air and submarine attack.<sup>9</sup>

Then, on 5 October, the very day that six of the new carriers were raiding Wake Island, Towers challenged Spruance and Turner in a special meeting called by Nimitz. That evening he dictated to his yeoman, "I made the opening statement that I considered too much caution was being exercised, too large forces being employed against secondary objectives, stating that, to me, it appeared we were using elephant guns against rabbits. I made the blunt statement that I felt that, unless a more offensive attitude is taken and our great carrier strength employed to the limit, we might all lose our jobs, and justly so."<sup>10</sup>

Towers therefore recommended that the invasion of the Gilberts—Operation Galvanic—be abandoned in favor of a direct invasion of the Marshalls. The week before, Makin had been substituted for distant Nauru as the other amphibious target with Tarawa in the Gilberts, but Towers had no use for that atoll either. The seizure of the Marshalls would reduce the Gilberts in importance, as—Towers reminded Nimitz—he had recommended to him six months before. Noted Towers: "I did not remind him that Galvanic had been drastically modified since first ordered, nor did I remind him that it had been recommended by him"—at the urging of Spruance. Towers at least

wanted pre-Galvanic carrier strikes on the Marshalls and Nauru to eliminate enemy air strength.<sup>11</sup>

Spruance sat through these criticisms seething with rage, hating Towers for them. Averse to controversy of any sort and dead set against altering carefully laid plans (issued in their final form on 29 October), he and Turner argued for their Gilberts program. With Towers away over the next several days, his arguments were carried on by his articulate chief of staff, the brilliant Captain Forrest Sherman, and by visiting Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, commander of naval air forces in the South Pacific. Nimitz supported Spruance and rejected the proposed pre-Galvanic strikes, but the controversy resumed in mid-October when Towers returned. At one point Spruance actually agreed with Towers that to use carriers purely on the defensive was improper, but amphibious commander Turner strenuously disagreed. Finally, Nimitz decided to let Spruance run the Gilberts operation as he saw fit.<sup>12</sup>

Towers, however, had been thinking ahead. Late in September he had recommended in writing to Nimitz that, immediately following the seizure of the Gilberts, the carriers should be released to attack Truk, "... the best prospect of inflicting maximum damage on [the] enemy." Nimitz forwarded the recommendation to Admiral King, who liked it and ordered Nimitz to study it more closely. Nimitz asked Towers to elaborate, and on 1 November he did so, stating that the Truk raid should take place in mid-December. The only drawback Towers could see was that the Truk operation would force a delay in taking the Marshalls. Anyway, the Marshalls invasion was delayed days later when lack of sufficient transports and assault craft caused the Kwajalein assault date to be moved back two weeks, to mid-January 1944.<sup>13</sup>

Suddenly, events in the South Pacific forced Nimitz and his planners to adopt the strategic flexibility made possible by the new fast carriers. To protect Halsey's new beachhead at Bougainville in the Solomons, on the morning of 5 November planes from Halsey's only two carriers, the *Saratoga* and *Princeton*, crippled six Japanese cruisers at Rabaul which had been threatening to interfere at Bougainville. Immediately upon receipt of this news, Admiral Towers recommended to Nimitz that three of the carriers about to sortie to the Gilberts be sent first to Halsey for a follow-up strike on Rabaul. Everyone agreed, and Halsey gladly concurred.<sup>14</sup>

Now, however, Admiral Nimitz realized that the two carriers already in the South Pacific and the three to be sent there might be delayed from rejoining the Gilberts-bound armada. The next day, 6 November, he recommended that Spruance devise a possible alternate plan with only half his carrier strength, namely, postponing the assault on Makin. Logistical considerations ruled this out, whereupon Admiral Turner said that both Makin and Tarawa could still be assaulted simultaneously with only six carriers in support if the planned covering strikes on the southern Marshalls were eliminated. Since this would badly expose the carriers to Japanese

air strikes from the Marshalls, Towers again attacked the notion of invading Makin at all and suggested postponing Galvanic two more weeks. Nimitz demurred, however, from making any changes in the plan and was supported by a directive from Admiral King.<sup>15</sup>

That night, in a long conversation with Towers, Turner expressed his chagrin at the planned Central Pacific operations as merely “playing around the fringes.” He said he wanted “a direct assault on and occupation of Truk,” (Towers’ words) followed by a push into the South and Southwest Pacific. Towers urged him to say so at the usual meeting next day, and he did. The day after that, 8 November, the designated fast carrier commander for the Gilberts, Rear Admiral Charles A. Pownall, recommended post-Galvanic carrier strikes against Japanese air and submarine bases in the Marshalls. But Spruance insisted on keeping the fast battleships off the Gilberts to engage the Japanese battle line, should it appear! Spruance still devised his strategy and tactics along battleship lines. Nimitz decided to postpone a decision on this recommendation, for time was running out. That very same day, the 8th, the task group being sent south to Halsey—carriers *Essex*, *Bunker Hill* and *Independence*—sortied from Pearl, followed to sea two days later by the two task groups totalling six carriers bound for the Gilberts. Galvanic was finally underway.<sup>16</sup>

The first instance of Towers’ strategic flexibility worked handsomely. The *Essex* and *Saratoga* task groups administered the necessary blows to Rabaul on 11 November and repelled a determined land-based air attack. Then they wheeled northward to join the bombardment ships and escort carriers off the Gilberts. Spruance’s timetable did not have to be upset after all. Yet, back at fleet headquarters on the 13th, Towers found himself confronted with another situation calling for strategic inflexibility. A proposal was submitted to establish strict rules for shipping pools and priorities for the Pacific. He countered it with the observation that air operations required mobility and recommended his own revision of the plan to accommodate the special needs of aviation. His revisions were adopted verbatim by Nimitz and his staff two days later.<sup>17</sup>

But there was still no flexibility in the Spruance-Turner air support plan for Galvanic. Neither the small escort carriers nor the supposedly “fast” fast carriers were allowed to move outside their defensive cruising sectors after beginning their strikes on the target atolls and southern Marshalls on 18 and 19 November. The next night, the 20th, after the troops had stormed ashore, long-range Japanese torpedo bombers pinpointed and attacked the *Essex* group off Makin. They were based in the northern Marshalls—Kwajalein—as Towers had warned. The light carrier *Independence* took a damaging torpedo hit that forced her to retire for repairs that would take six months.

Lest more carriers be stricken, Towers confronted Admiral Nimitz the next morning and recommended that the fast carriers be released from their



defensive sectors to go north and strike Kwajalein with its airfields and submarine anchorage. When Nimitz inquired of Spruance's motives for tying down the carriers, Towers and Rear Admiral Charles H. McMorris, Nimitz' deputy, explained Spruance's fear of a Japanese Fleet sortie and battle. After a long discussion, Nimitz finally concurred and ordered Towers, McMorris, and Forrest Sherman to write Spruance a directive for six fast carriers to be released to hit Kwajalein. The order went out on the 24th, too late to save the escort carrier *Liscome Bay*, located by a Japanese submarine that very morning and sunk with a loss of 644 men.<sup>18</sup>

Towers' case for strategic flexibility had finally carried the day, but only after lives and ships had been lost or crippled. Admiral Pownall pulled six carriers off station and struck Kwajalein on 4 December, but his unaggressive leadership caused the new *Lexington* to be torpedoed and nearly lost in a seven-hour-long night torpedo-plane attack. After much discussion and criticism of Spruance's misuse of the carriers, Nimitz held a special meeting on 23 December with Towers, McMorris, and his planning officer, Forrest Sherman, whom he had just moved from Towers' staff to his own. As Towers recorded it, "I strongly recommended changes to bring about more aggressive use of carrier forces," beginning with the relief of Pownall by Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher. This was done immediately, and Mitscher soon proved his worth. The Marshalls landings, now set for the end of January 1944, were planned to include the operation long advocated by Towers—a major carrier attack on Truk in February.<sup>19</sup>

Not only that, Towers won another cause he had championed, to the irritation of Nimitz, namely, that either the Pacific Fleet commander or his deputy should be an experienced naval aviator. To Nimitz' everlasting credit, he had been forcibly impressed with the wisdom of this idea during the foregoing events. At the beginning of January, he and Admiral King agreed to elevate Towers to Deputy Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the position would be redefined to include all aviation matters. With Towers continuing to provide Nimitz with the expertise for strategic flexibility for the carrier-centered fleet, and Mitscher leading those carriers under Spruance, the Central Pacific offensive of 1944 could go forward aggressively. Jack Towers' victory had been a major step forward in the strategic transformation of the modern U.S. Navy.

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## Notes

1. Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1980), p. 366, goes so far as to say that "Nimitz came to hate Towers . . ." Towers had commanded the carriers *Langley* (1927-28) and *Saratoga* (1937-38) and had twice been chief of staff to the fleet carrier commander (1931-33, 1936-37).

2. Captain John H. Towers, "The Influence of Aircraft on Naval Strategy and Tactics," Naval War College Senior Class of 1934, Thesis Record Group 13, Naval War College Archives, Newport, R.I.

3. Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 161; Towers to Ghormley, 9 June 1943, Towers Papers, in possession of the author.

4. Buell, *Spruance*, pp. 160-162; E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976), pp. 237-238; author's conversation with Vice Admiral W. M. Beakley in 1965; Vice Admiral Herbert D. Riley to Mrs. John H. Towers, 19 July 1961, Towers Papers; Towers "Memorandum for Files," entries of 5 October and 7 November 1943 (hereafter cited as Towers Diary); Captain Miles Browning to Halsey, 1 May 1943, Halsey Papers, Box 13, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Towers to Nimitz, 28 April 1943, Halsey Papers, Box 16.
5. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Aleutians, Gilberts and Marshalls* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1957), pp. 80-82; Buell, *King*, pp. 356-358; George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer: The Story of Admiral Richard Kelly Turner*. (Washington: U.S. Gov't. Print. Off., 1972), v. 2, pp. 613-616.
6. Morison, pp. 83-84, 201; Buell, *King*, pp. 358-359; Buell, *Spruance*, p. 165; Potter, p. 245; Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944* (Washington: U.S. Gov't. Print. Off., 1959), p. 207.
7. Towers to Forrestal, 18 August 1943, Towers Papers; Clark G. Reynolds, *The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 75.
8. Towers to Nimitz, 21 August 1943, Towers Papers; Reynolds, pp. 75-77.
9. Towers Diary, 19, 29, 30 September 1943; Reynolds, pp. 77, 93-95.
10. Towers Diary, 5 October 1943; others recorded Towers as saying, "Spruance wants a sledgehammer to drive a tack." Dyer, v. 2, p. 629.
11. Towers Diary, 5 October and 6 November 1943.
12. *Ibid.*, 7, 9 October 1943 (notes kept by Sherman), and 11, 14, 17 October 1943; Buell, *Spruance*, pp. 216-219; Reynolds, pp. 88-89, 95-96; Dyer, v. 2, pp. 632-639.
13. Towers to Nimitz, 21 September, 23 October and 1 November 1943, Towers Papers; King to Nimitz, 21 October 1943, and Nimitz to Towers, 30 October 1943, Towers Papers; Towers Diary, 2 November 1943; Potter, pp. 254-255.
14. Towers Diary, 5 November 1943.
15. *Ibid.*, 6, 8 November 1943.
16. *Ibid.*, 7, 8 November 1943, in which Towers quoted Turner.
17. Reynolds, pp. 100-102; Towers Diary, 13, 15 November 1943.
18. Reynolds, pp. 102-104; Towers Diary, 21, 24 November 1943. After the loss of the *Liscome Bay*, Rear Admiral Arthur W. Radford, one of the carrier task group commanders, observed that Spruance "practically let us write our own ticket." Author's conversation with Radford in 1965.
19. Reynolds, pp. 105-108, 114-115, 121-123; Towers Diary, 23 December 1943.
20. Reynolds, pp. 47-48, 120-121; Towers to Nimitz, 4 October 1943, Towers Papers. Towers was awarded the Legion of Merit on 25 February 1944 for his role as ComAirPac since October 1942, and in Towers' Fitness Report for the period 1 April 1943 to 27 February 1944, Nimitz gave him all 4.0 marks with the comment, "An excellent officer who has performed most satisfactorily the highly important and complex duties of ComAirPac during a period of great expansion." Military Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Mo.

