

“SINK

Operation Hailstone
and the shipwrecks
of Truk Lagoon

EVERYTHING

BY NICHOLAS
A. VERONICO

IN SIGHT!”

Operation *Hailstone* was the code name for the American attack on the Japanese naval base at Truk Atoll in the Caroline Islands. Aircraft from US Navy fast carrier task forces inflicted heavy damage upon the enemy fleet anchored in the lagoon and, for the Japanese, it was a blood bath.

During World War I, the Japanese seized German colonies in Micronesia including the Carolines, Marianas, Marshall, and Palau Island groups. At the end of the war, The League of Nations Class C Mandate, known as the South Pacific Mandate, saw the former German possessions transferred to Japan. Beginning in the 1930s, the Japanese fortified the islands and the entrances to its 35-mile diameter, 105-mile circumference lagoon.

There are six entrances
to the lagoon
that

lead sailors to the southwestern islands, known as the Shiki Group (major islands listed largest to smallest: Moen, Dublon, Eten, Fefan, Uman, and Param), or to the east and southeastern islands, the Shichiyo Group (Udot, Ulalu, and Tol). In total, 25 islands comprise the two groups, most of which are ringed by wide coral reefs with mangrove swamps that lead to hilly terrain. The atoll's islands have three peaks taller than 1100 feet — Mount Tumuital on Tol Island (1483 feet), Mount Teroken on the central part of Moen Island (1214 feet), and Mount Tolomen on the southwest part of Dublon Island (1184 feet), plus another half dozen that reach heights between 700 and 1000 feet. The northern part of the atoll is ringed by a series of small, uninhabited coral islets. All of these geographic features combine to make Truk Atoll one of the best natural anchorages in all of the Pacific Ocean.

Truk Lagoon (today's Chuuk Lagoon) was the Imperial Japanese Navy's major supply center and anchorage for the central and south Pacific Ocean. Extensive construction had been carried out on the islands in the pre-war years including a variety of warehouses and bunkers, ship repair facilities, a radar station, and five airfields. The Guadalcanal and New Guinea invasions were supplied from Truk, as well as many smaller island garrisons. Until the beginning of 1944, the Japanese felt the atoll was impervious to attack due to the more than 350 aircraft stationed at that location, as well as its distance from most Allied-held island bases. Knowing that heavily fortified earned it the Allied nickname: "The Gibraltar of the Pacific." Because of its



Another Japanese ship is destroyed in the Truk Lagoon anchorage, east of Dublon Island, by planes from the fast carriers of Task Force 58. In addition to the direct hit that is engulfing nearly the entire ship, three near-misses can be counted in the water at the stern, and one bomb has just exploded sending a water column into the air. (US Navy)

remote location, little was known about Truk Lagoon and its facilities until early 1944, when the Allies took Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. A base was constructed on Stirling Island putting long-range Consolidated B-24/PB4Y-1 Liberators within 1000 miles (each way) of Truk. The first United States Marine Corps PB4Y-1 reconnaissance flight over Truk Lagoon took place on 4 February 1944, when a pair of planes from Marine Photoreconnaissance Squadron 254 (VMD-254) overflew the atoll

bringing back photos of a strong Japanese force at anchor, including photos of the battleship *Musahi*, as well as the atoll's shore installations. From their airfield on Stirling Island, the round trip was 2000 miles, leaving little in the way of spare fuel so navigation had to be precise. The Marines arrived mid-morning over the target area at around 20,000 feet. Below them



A marauding Grumman TBF-1 Avenger overfies the destruction at Truk.