

GAMBLE AT LOS NEGROS

OPERATION BREWER AND THE CAPTURE OF LOS NEGROS

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Shortly after the United States and Imperial Japan assumed their roles as belligerents during World War Two, the Japanese began a rapid conquest of the various Pacific Islands held by the Allied powers. Among these were the Bismarcks, the northern Solomons, and New Guinea. In January 1942, Japanese forces overwhelmed and seized Rabaul, the capital township of the Territory of New Guinea, which thereafter provided Japan with a

formidable base of operations for its air and naval facilities in the region. In addition to a sizeable garrison of approximately 100,000 enemy soldiers, a ring of occupied islands around New Guinea provided for Rabaul's defense. The broad campaign undertaken by

Allied forces to drive the Japanese out of the area and deprive them of their Rabaul base consisted of a number of operations in the surrounding island chains, which



Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid (left center) with Gen. Douglas MacArthur (center) on the flag bridge of USS Phoenix (CL-46) during the pre-invasion bombardment of Los Negros Island, at the east end of Manus Island, on 28 February 1944. At right is Col. Lloyd Labrbas, acting aide to MacArthur.

fell under the overall code name of Operation Cartwheel.

One of the key sub-operations of Cartwheel was Operation Brewer, which began in February 1944 and consisted of a series of amphibious actions that sought to capture the Admiralty Islands. Brewer's success proved instrumental in both further isolating Rabaul, as well as providing Allied forces with new operating bases in the region. The Admiralty Islands group consists of 160 small islands, the chief of which are Manus and Los Negros, located 200 miles northeast of mainland New Guinea and approximately 360 miles west of Rabaul. The primary prizes offered by the two islands were the Momote airfield and Seeadler Harbor, the latter of which was one of the largest in the region. Seeadler is formed by the ellipse of Manus and the adjoining shoreline of Los Negros. The harbor is 1.5 miles wide and approximately 100 feet deep. Due to its depth and the protection afforded by its natural formation, it can accommodate a large fleet.

At the helm of Cartwheel was Gen. Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of Allied Forces in the South West Pacific. In undertaking Brewer, MacArthur worked closely with the Navy's 7th Fleet, under the command of Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid. As the two contemplated the conquest of the Admiralties, a favorable air reconnaissance report indicated that Los Negros might be abandoned and on 26 February, the order was given for a reconnaissance force to land on the island and either withdraw or advance as deemed necessary. In either case, MacArthur and Kinkaid were going to be on hand to make the determination. As Samuel Eliot Morison noted, "the whole operation was a gamble."

In the early morning hours of 29 February 1944, Task Group 74 and Task Force 76.1, under the operational command of R/Adm. William M. Fechteler, arrived in the vicinity of Los Negros. Task Group 74 consisted of light cruisers Phoenix (CL-46) and Nashville (CL-43), accompanied by destroyers Daly (DD-



Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid observing the Invasion.



Map of Eastern Manus and Los Negros, Admiralty Islands.