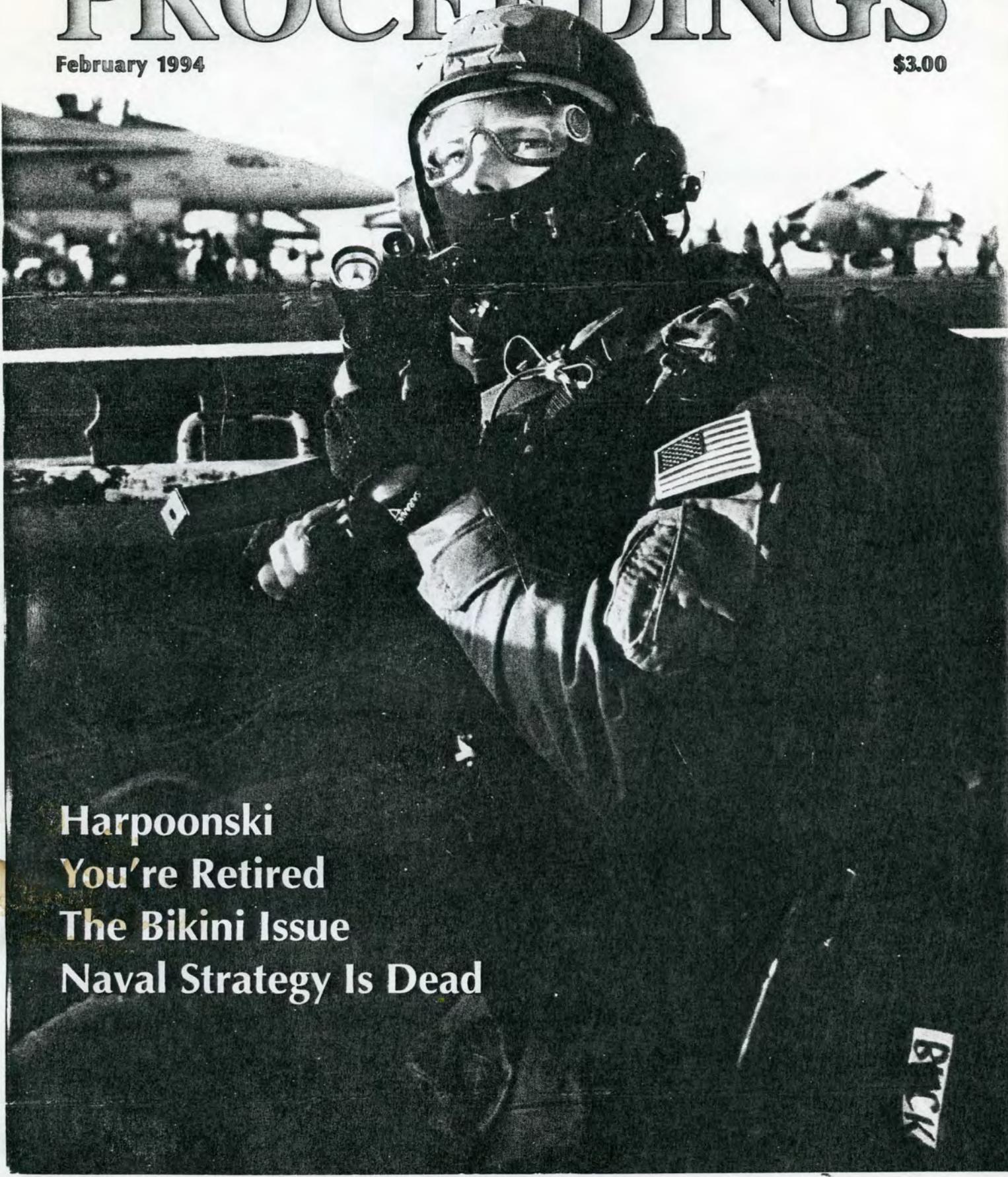


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U.S. ARMY AIR FORCE (P.J. SKEE)

On 2 February 1944—50 years ago—the United States invaded the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific and seized the island of Roi the next day. As a diversion from attacks on Kwajalein and the air base at Enewetok Atoll, ships of Task Group 94.6 under command of Rear Admiral Wilder Dupey Baker, U.S. Navy, prepared to bombard the Japanese Kurile Islands in the far North Pacific. Dormant since the recapture of the Aleutian island of Kiska in August 1943, the North Pacific Force had been engaged in fortifying the western Aleutians in the interim, and in procuring information about the northernmost Kurile Islands of Paramushiru and Shimushu. With relatively primitive navigational aids, the Eleventh Air Force and Fleet Air Wing Four had gathered information about those islands at extreme risk. Round-trip flights through perpetually foggy skies, at a distance of no less than 1,300 miles over the icy North Pacific, were the only ways to obtain reconnaissance photographs.

Directly south of the Soviet Kamchatka Peninsula, Shimushu and Paramushiru were the "Great Northern Shield" of Japan. Meant to defend against attack to Japan's northern flank from the United States or the Soviet Union, the islands were heavily fortified. Four major airfields covered the islands, and antiaircraft, coastal, and heavy machine guns dissuaded any invader from capturing them and attacking southward. Last but certainly not the least factor against any potential invader was the abysmal North Pacific

First Surface Strike on Japan

By Kevin Don Hutchison

weather. Rain, sleet, ice, and snow all could make their appearance there in a single hour.

In a 7 January 1944 letter, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, Admiral Chester Nimitz, U.S. Navy, directed Commander, North Pacific Forces, Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, U.S. Navy, to attack the Kurile Islands.¹ Fleet Air Wing Four had pursued this policy as weather permitted since its first bombing mission on 20 December 1943. Planning for a future invasion progressed steadily, with Nimitz unconvinced that he could maintain a Soviet-American supply route to Siberia after the Soviet Union's entrance into the war, without seizing the islands. With the long-hoped-for second front against



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Under the guns of ships like the light cruiser *Richmond* (CL-9) were the airfield, antitank trenches, hangars, and revetments of Kurabu Zaki, the Japanese-held southeastern tip of Paramushiru Island.

Japan promised by Russian leader Josef Stalin three months after Germany's surrender, the men and materiel thus released were to be directed against Japan's northern and western flank. This was to occur at some unknown future date. The mission of Task Group 94.6 was the initial step for the entire U.S. Navy's surface fleet, the first bombardment of Japanese soil in World War II.

The group consisted of the *Fletcher*-class destroyers *Picking* (DD-685), *Sproston* (DD-577), *Wickes* (DD-578), *Young* (DD-580), *Charles J. Badger*

(DD-657), *Luce* (DD-521), and *Kimberly* (DD-522) and the World War I-era *Omaha* (CL-4)-class light cruisers *Richmond* (CL-9) and *Raleigh* (CL-7). Lacking air cover from carriers the group used weather, darkness, and speed to protect Task Group 94.6 from Japanese aircraft. Without auxiliaries and support vessels, the group would steam to flank speed after the attack to place maximum distance between its vessels and danger. For this reason the North Pacific Force became the fastest task force of the war.

The target of the upcoming bombardment was the southeast peninsula of Paramushiru Island, Kurabu Zaki. After Fleet Air Wing Four's commander, Commodore Leslie Gehres, U.S. Navy, ordered bombing and photo reconnaissance missions on 18 January, a bombing blitz had begun.² PBY Catalinas and PV-1 Venturas dropped their bombs on Kurabu Zaki from 20 to 22 January and took the first photos on the last mission. The submarine *S-45* (under Commander Robert H. Calwell, U.S. Navy) arrived on 28 January at the westernmost Aleutian island of Attu after laying off Kurabu Zaki for a month. Finally, all intelligence information from aerial, submarine, Russian, and prisoner-of-war sources went to the task group commanders at a meeting the evening of 30 January on Attu.³

The task group had conducted gunnery exercises and special formation practice for the operation in a drill area north of Adak Island late in the month. Spotting planes, aviation fuel, and aircraft bombs had been removed afterward, and all secret publications and correspondence had been left behind before the task group stood out of Kulak Bay at Adak. Officers such as Lieutenant Tom Lynch, U.S. Navy, in the *Luce* prepared a three-dimensional floor model of Kurabu Zaki for his gun director crews, and other crew members made as many other final preparations as possible before heading for Attu.⁴

Task Group 94.6 sortied from Masacre Bay, Attu, the evening of 1 February. It took a course south, charted to mislead any Japanese observers into believing that the group's objective was the mid-Kurile island of Matsuwa. Rear Admiral Baker's cold-water war experience had been in the submarine *L-11* in Irish waters, and he was acutely aware of enemy mines and uncharted seas. The S-boats had been patrolling off the

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northern Kuriles since April 1942, but the islands remained mostly a mystery.

The Paramushiru commander, Lieutenant General Fusaki Tsutsumi, was just beginning to receive reinforcements—crack troops from Senai, Honshu, and Manchuria—for the expected U.S. invasion.⁵ The ship's captains cautiously began making the journey, showing care for their screws in the treacherous ice floes, steaming from Hokkaido and Manchuria at the end of January. Unknown to Rear Admiral Baker, Vice Admiral Michitaro Tot-suka, the Northeast Area Fleet commander, had retained only one fighter squadron on Paramushiru/Shimushu over the winter and would begin to transfer his major air assets in April.⁶ While the waters surrounding the cape were not mined as Baker feared, the shore probably did conceal eight coastal defense batteries with six searchlights to direct them. Farther north, the harbors of Kashiwabara Wan, Paramushiru, and Kataoka Naval Base, Shimushu, held the Japanese Fifth Fleet (21st Cruiser Squadron, 1st Destroyer Squadron) which, if sortied with enough speed to intercept his return, would be a force approximately one-third of Baker's strength.⁷

With sea conditions moderate to rough on the approach to Paramushiru, the forecastles of all the ships gleamed bright white from the ice formed by steaming at high speed. By one hour before the bombardment, snow squalls had ended, and masts and gun houses of Task Unit 94.6.3 (the *Picking*, the *Sproston*, the *Young*, and the *Wickes*) 10,000 yards in the van could be seen clearly. A three-quarter moon revealed the peninsula as a snow-covered, flattened shoulder of land, extending from the mainland. No lights could be seen on the shore, but the brilliance of the moonlight would certainly expose the task group to any alert enemy observer.

Ten minutes before the bombardment, U.S. lookouts spotted a 5,000-ton maru standing down close inshore to the north. Neither enemy ships nor shore batteries greeted the task group with fire, assuring Baker that he had achieved complete surprise.

At 0231 the wavering flashes and deafening roar of U.S. 5- and 6-inch guns, firing star and high-explosive shells, filled the air. The lead destroyers, the *Charles J. Badger*, the *Luce*, and the *Kimberly* (Task Unit 94.6.2) opened fire on the southern airfield hangars, the cruisers *Richmond* and *Raleigh* (Task Unit 94.6.1) commenced fire on coastal guns at the cape's tip, and the remaining destroyers (Task Unit 94.6.3) swept the harbor and

joined the cruisers on their target. The targets appeared as a "churning mass of snow and debris," when the enemy steamer began firing machine guns from its bridge, and yellow flashes were observed on the high ground to the north.⁸

The *Richmond* fired a four-shell salvo, which hulled the steamer from stem to stern, as the *Charles J. Badger* claimed a torpedo hit astern on the enemy vessel. Heavy black smoke from the maru's stack changed to steam as she turned to port and beached, with flames licking from the forward hold.

Much of the enemy fire seemed directed overhead toward aircraft the Japanese believed were dropping the star shells. Automatic weapons fire emanated from about ten locations along the eastern coast. Five minutes after the attack began, tracer fire from O Zaki Point showered down on the U.S. attackers, and after ten minutes three volleys of 4- or 5-inch shells splashed off the *Richmond's* port quarter. A destroyer's 5-inch shells quickly silenced the fire from O Zaki.

The *Luce* had a typical bombardment mission. Under orders from Commander Hinton A. Owens, the destroyer fired at six-second intervals up and down the beach. Smoke and starshells falling short in the bombardment obscured the south hangar group. Other salvos tore up the northern landing strip, then 20 more destroyed a large building near the fish cannery on the shore. At "cease fire," the *Luce*, with Task Unit 94.6.2, steamed north to bombard a suspected enemy position at Otomaye Wan. No enemy installations were hit.¹⁰

Fifteen minutes after the attack began, shells on the coastal battery at the cape's tip created a fire, which grew in intensity until it and the burning ship were the largest fires on the enemy shore. Believed to be a gasoline dump, the cape fire could be seen 20 miles seaward on withdrawal, and was still burning five hours later, according to aircraft reconnaissance.¹¹

The first U.S. bombardment of Japan continued for 34 minutes, raining 5,745 rounds of 3-, 5-, and 6-inch projectiles on the target 1,280 miles north of Tokyo. Approximately 141 tons of shells destroyed one merchant ship, started several fires, and caused multiple secondary explosions.¹² In taking the Japanese by complete surprise, the U.S. task group sustained no damage. The only casualties were gun crew members who passed out from excessive smoke in the gun mounts.¹³

The attack on 4 February was the first of four Task Forces 94 and 92

launched on Kurabu Zaki in World War II. The first attack, however, incited worldwide speculation and kudos, accomplishing adroitly its purpose of drawing Japanese attention from more active theaters (even if it failed to upset the Japanese during the 2 February Marshall Islands invasion). The Chinese newspaper *Takungpao* predicted the Japanese would battle the U.S. fleet in large-scale action and be defeated. Vichy radio quoted a Japanese communique, which announced that the invasion of the Kurile Islands was under way. Admiral Nimitz expressed his pleasure to Vice Admiral Fletcher in a letter dated 10 February. And Rear Admiral Baker received the Navy Cross from Nimitz on 16 May at Pearl Harbor.

Perhaps of greatest pleasure to the North Pacific sailors were the sentiments of Vice Admiral Fletcher in a message to the task group on 7 February 1944 from Adak. It read:

Express my gratification to all units your command whose combined efforts assured first naval surface ship bombardment Japanese territory during this war. . . .¹⁴

⁵Correspondence of ADM Chester Nimitz to VADM Frank Jack Fletcher, Naval Archives, Washington Navy Yard.

⁶History, Fleet Air Wing Four, January 1944.

⁷Action Report, Commander Task Group 94.6, Serial 066, 12 February 1944. Report of Bombardment of Southeast coast of Paramushiru on 4 February 1944 by Task Group 94.6, p. 2.

⁸Action Report, Commanding Officer (of destroyer *Luce*), 9 February 1944, unnumbered pages, #4 under "Part VI—Personnel Performances."

⁹Interrogations of Japanese Officials, U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey (Pacific), Naval Analysis Division, 1946, pp. 273, 446.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 446.

¹¹Information Bulletin, Kurile Islands, CinCPac—CinCPOA Bulletin No. 60-45, 15 March 1945. Principal Installations Map. Conclusion based upon author's study of surviving Soviet, Japanese, and U.S. Army and Navy records.

¹²Japanese Monograph No. 89, Northern Area Naval Operations, February 1943-August 1945, p. 54 (records strength of Northeast Area Fleet, 5 August 1943). Japanese Naval Directives and movements of VADM Shiro Kawase provided by the Department of Military History, Tokyo, infers location of Japanese fleet. Strength estimate is the author's, based on comparative ship data and numbers.

¹³Action Report Commander T.G. 94.6, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴Action Report (*Luce*), p. 1.

¹⁵Action Report Commander T.G. 94.6, pp. 5, 8.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 4-5, 7.

¹⁷Review of all Action Reports of ships of 94.6 by author, Naval Archives, April 1992.

¹⁸ComNorPac message to T.G. 94.6, 7 February 1944, Naval Archives.

Mr. Hutchison is an information specialist living in Michigan. His father, a veteran of the fighting in the North Pacific, influenced his interest such that his book on the subject is slated for publication later this year by Greenwood Press.