

Victory In The Pacific

Reflections On The Tournament Trail

by Alan Applebaum

Over a decade has passed since "Keep on Truk-in" was written for the AH General. Since that time, the advent of the Avaloncon VITP tournament (and, recently, the Midwest Open) has brought the level of play of VITP to heights never before seen. In addition, a few individuals (you know who you are), apparently unimpressed by my profound analysis dating from 1985, have thrashed me repeatedly over stretches of 10, 20 and even 50 games. While VITP is history as far as Avalon Hill is concerned, it lives on in the hearts and minds of some of us out here in BOARDGAMER-land; accordingly, this article shares some of the hard-earned lessons of the tournament trail as well as some analysis (that is to say, repeated die-rolling) I have done this year. In order to save space, I will not repeat much of what appeared in "Keep on Truk-in", except to point out where I think I was wrong in that earlier article, which appeared in Volume 25, No. 4 of the General.

Overall Comments

Glenn Petroski has analyzed the results of over 600 tournament games of VITP over the last seven years, and reports that the IJN enjoys a win rate of approximately 55%. Most tournament players have recognized this and, accordingly, bid POC for the right to play the IJN. In theory, if players were bidding the correct amount of POC for the IJN, the tournament results should show a 50-50 win rate; since they do not, it is easy to conclude that most players are not bidding enough for the IJN. What the right number is, I'm not sure, but eventually Glenn should have enough data to tell us the bid which produces a 50-50 split over a statistically significant number of games.

IJN Strategy

Probably the most important article ever published on VITP was Alan Moon's "TKO in Three", which appeared in the General in the early 1980s. Moon recommended aggressive patrols (even unsupported by raids) to threaten as many POC as possible. He also made it clear that, for a number of reasons, the

IJN should not attack the Bay of Bengal or Indian Ocean. Moon explained that the IJN could accept combat with the Americans even when outnumbered, for the following reasons: (1) surface attrition would probably be even or favorable because of the IJN cruisers' attack bonus, (2) the IJN will usually be able to retreat safely from a losing battle because the speed-3 US BBs cannot pursue, and (3) the IJN, with its 12-5 numerical superiority in CV hulls on the first three turns, can afford even unfavorable carrier attrition. Moon argued that if the Allies suffered heavy losses (even if matched by the IJN), they would be unable to overcome a large POC deficit on the last three turns.

As the years went by, a number of sound defenses were developed to render the "TKO in Three" approach less effective than Moon had envisioned. These appeared in a number of articles in the General in the early and mid 80s. In response, IJN players shifted back to the "Take Hawaii" strategy that had been in vogue when the game was first released, and this remains the dominant IJN strategy to this day. Some IJN players may still dream of surprising the Allies by attacking the western portion of the board or simply defending the "perimeter" of Aleutians, Central Pacific, Marshalls, South Pacific and Indonesia, but the Allied last-move advantage and added firepower from the British make these approaches inferior. In any event, a western strategy has no surprise element because it requires the IJN to base forces in Saigon on the previous turn.

The IJN objective in focusing on Hawaii is to obtain a "Front Four" defensive perimeter of Hawaii-Marshalls-South Pacific-Indonesia at the end of Turn 5, with no Allied ports or bases on or inside this perimeter. If this is achieved, the IJN has a near-mathematical lock on the game regardless of fleet losses. In fact, holding the "Front Four" is so strong that the IJN can even afford Allied control of one or more of the less-important bases such as Attu, Midway or Guadalcanal. The IJN doesn't need to worry about its POC total either since it will be almost guaranteed to gain POC on Turn 6.

All this points to an all-out effort to take Pearl Harbor by controlling Hawaii on Turns 2 and 3. The Yokosuka SNLF moves to Truk at the end of Turn 1 to attempt to take Johnston Island on Turn 2. Sufficient surface and air forces are sent to Hawaii on Turn 2 to guarantee at least parity with the entire Allied raiding force (although you don't have to guarantee control -- just make it too expensive to contest). You still should patrol all other areas with at least one surface ship except for Indonesia, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, although you may be able to substitute LBA in the Marshall and South Pacific. The latter two areas are not important to control prior to Turn 5 as long as the Allies do not control them. Your second goal is simply to keep Indonesia safe. If you take Pearl you will have plenty of POC available on Turns 4, 5 and 6 so POC should not be a concern on Turns 2 and 3.

If the Allies save Pearl without engaging you in a major fleet battle, you have probably lost, but if the Allied LBA are in short supply on Turn 4 and most of your carriers have survived you can still pull the game out by attacking everything in sight, hoping to establish a "TKO in Three" - type perimeter (North Pacific-Central Pacific-Marshalls-South Pacific-Indonesia) by the end of Turn 5.

Allied Strategy

If the IJN do achieve the "Front Four" by Turn 5, since no gain is possible on Turn 6 the Allies are effectively left with two turns to regain 25-29 POC without being able to reach Japan with new reinforcements -- a pretty bleak situation. What can the Allies do? All the tactics for Turns 2-3 discussed in the General over the years can work, but each presents a high degree of risk.

If you are willing to lose CVs without sinking any IJN CVs in return, you can try a "suicide" carrier in Hawaii on Turn 2 combined with a defense of your patrollers in the Marshalls. Even leaving aside your CV losses, this move condemns you to a rather ineffective response in all other areas of the board since it requires you to commit all of your

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CVs and also rates to fail unless the IJN has made the Marshalls unduly weak.

Trying to defend Singapore is similarly an "all-or-nothing" strategy, as it also ties up most of your airpower for the turn. If you break IJN control of Indonesia on Turn 2 you will probably win; if you fail you will probably lose. How many 6s can you roll??? Given a 50% chance -- maybe even a 1/3 chance -- to control Indonesia, you should probably try it if you think your opponent is a better player than you, but not otherwise.

Since a huge defense of Hawaii on Turn 2 or 3 is likely to leave your fleet in ruins even if you win the battle, your only other reasonable approach combines attrition and position. If you can stop the Yokasuka SNLF from taking Johnston with a "suicide" CV and also kill off three or four IJN CVs which are scattered around the board, your six LBA can probably hold Hawaii on Turn 3. The "suicide" CV has only a 50-60% chance to stop the SNLF, so this shouldn't be the main element of your defense. If you can save Pearl without losing 4 or 5 CVs yourself, you should be in good shape, particularly if you can hold Lae, Midway or Dutch Harbor.

If Pearl looks like it's going to fall, you may be able to extract enough air units from the battle to stabilize your defense and threaten South Pacific and Indonesia on Turn 4 while maintaining a small threat in the Northeast corner of the board. You hope to keep the IJN POC total down, prevent the formation of a complete perimeter and possibly recapture Saigon and Singapore by Turn 5 or 6. This defense takes a lot of skill, luck and discipline, as you will be constantly relying on insecure forward bases. If you lose Pearl, it is still possible to win the game (check out Dave Targonski's performance in the [General Series Replay](#) a few years back) but only if you maintain heavy pressure on Indonesia.

Strategic Summary

Control of Pearl Harbor and Indonesia has become almost the entire focus of the modern game. Most IJN players will make an all-out attempt to take Pearl on Turns 2-3. The Allies can win if they either save Pearl or extract a sufficiently high price for it; otherwise, the game will generally be over after four or five turns.

The "TKO in Three" approach is viable, but gives the USN too good a chance to gain the upper hand after Turn 2 by rolling hot dice in a decisive battle against half of the IJN fleet.

IJN Tactics

Turn 1

After 20 years, there ought to be a consensus about Turn 1. Here's my view: 3 BBs in the Japanese Islands. Two will lose to the three Allied cruisers (that is, fail to control the area) about 20% of the time. A good risk against a stronger player, but what do you gain? Another BB for the Central Pacific, possibly unused. Similarly, four CAs to the Marianas. Three will lose 15% of the time. Why fool around? I don't know how many of the remaining ships should go to Pearl, but I have been sending nine for about 10 years (the balance to Central Pacific, of course) and have never been burned.

All eight fast CVs to Hawaii. For a 2-factor CV to help you in significantly in the Central Pacific, all of the following must occur: a US CV must appear (about 50%), the first round of combat must be pure day (72%), the 2-factor CV must sink the US CV (about 35%) while the Hosho alone would have failed (77%) -- a combined chance of about 9-10%. Even if you factor in the possibility that each of the Hosho and the second CV will sink a US CV (about 3%), sending the eighth carrier to Hawaii seems indicated.

Yokasuka SNLF to Aleutians, then to Truk at the end of the turn. Taking Midway is not necessary. Four LBA in Indonesia, one in South Pacific, one in Marshalls, like always.

In the air raid phase: in Hawaii, each of the eight CVs shoots at a ship on the first round. The 7th AF is only hit on a 6 and is not as critical on Turn 2 as I believed earlier. It doesn't matter too much whether you ignore the cruisers or the 4-5-3s on the first round. Sinking ships is good (which argues for shooting at the cruisers), but the US BBs are needed so the Allies can win a night combat on Turn 2. If the Allies' only Turn 2 BBs are the reinforcements, the IJN can seriously threaten either US Mandates or Coral on Turn 2 in addition to Hawaii without much fear of losing

CVs in a night action. (By the way, I notice some folks are still asking their IJN opponents to roll out the two air raids against bottomed ships after the US retreats. In 20 years, I have never seen a single bottomed ship survive. Do we still need to do this?)

In Indonesia, the conventional wisdom is still good: all shots on the 5th AF until killed.

If heavy US metal shows up in the Central Pacific, a little-used ruling comes up -- the IJN has to declare first whether they are staying or retreating after the first combat round. Even if the first round was "day", I recommend a confident "I'm staying". Let the US decide whether to risk the entire game on a single die roll. If the US does stay and you feel you need to run on the third round, you will not be too much worse off than if you had run on round two.

Turn 2

The Turn 2 moves presented in "Keep on Truk-in" have been refined a bit over the years. First of all, since a raid will always be made on Hawaii regardless of the US patrols and LBA placement (and your opponent knows it), there is no point in being coy. Patrol at least six or seven cruisers there to make sure that the USN cannot eliminate all of your patrollers without a protracted, bloody struggle. You still need to patrol the US Mandates and Coral Sea even if you are concentrating on Hawaii, so that if the US makes a massive commitment to Hawaii on Turn 2 you will get the other two areas for free. In effect, this transposes the game into a "TKO in Three" type, usually to the IJN's benefit since US losses will be heavy and Attu, Dutch Harbor, Midway, Philippines, Singapore, and possibly Lae will all fall on Turn 2. This is ample compensation for failure to take Pearl.

If four or more LBA will be needed to defend Indonesia, you won't have any for the South Pacific, so consider patrolling a single BB in the South Pacific, planning to back it up with a single carrier. The US can defeat this force, of course, but at the probable cost of a CV.

If the Allies are defending a Home Area with only a single LBA, you should be reluctant to abandon your patrollers and

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concede a four-POC swing so cheaply; otherwise, avoid attacking Allied LBA with carriers except in Hawaii.

The IJN's main worry on Turn 2 is failure to convert Singapore. The defense of Indonesia must be based on two propositions: (1) the area must be controlled at all costs and (2) it should be defended only with LBA and CVs. Even the capture of Pearl will leave the IJN in a hopeless position if Singapore is not taken, except in those rare cases where Samoa will fall as well. While 100% certainty cannot be achieved, the IJN should make Indonesia so strong that the IJN will win at least 75% of the time; otherwise, the Allies have a good option to attack, figuring that they have more to gain than to lose. Surface ships should not be traded with the British, so unsupported CVs relying on the +2 DRM for "day" may be required. Of course, these will be the Turn 2 reinforcements which would have to speed-roll to reach Hawaii, US Mandates or Coral Sea (which I call the "Allied Home Areas").

Fortunately for the IJN, the Allies must tip their hand by placing their LBA *before* the IJN must decide how many to commit, since the IJN will always use at least three of their own. Even with no US CVs in Australia and no Allied LBA in Indonesia, it is too risky to defend Indonesia with only two LBA. To establish a framework for estimating the chances of Allied success, I rolled out a few battles. The IJN won 13 of 20 trials (65%) with all six LBA and the I-Boat against three British carriers, three LBA and three US CVs. With only five LBA and the I-Boat, the IJN won only 8 of 20 trials against the same Allied force. Pretty scary, eh? What this tells us is that if 2 or 3 US CVs make it to Australia on Turn 1, all your LBA and a CVL or two may be going to Indonesia. You then have to use your excess ships not needed for the Hawaii attack to ensure that you break Allied control of the Marshalls. I suggest using Akagi, Kaga, Hosho, some BBs and the I-Boat for this mission. Hopefully this will scare the Allies off and you can just beat up on the patrolling cruisers. If not, you simply have to hope that with all your ships other than the Hosho having armor factors of at least "4" your losses will be minimal. If you lose all three of these carriers, you will need some LBA to take Pearl next turn, but you don't have a lot of choice.

Later

On Turns 3, 4 and 5, assuming Pearl has fallen, your main goal is to stabilize Indonesia and the South Pacific. You definitely need to take Lae and retain the Philippines, and may need to take Guadalcanal as well. Surprisingly, Midway is not all that important if Pearl has fallen because any US forces basing there will have only one opportunity to gain POC before returning to the edge of the board. The same argument applies to Attu and, to a lesser degree, Dutch Harbor.

Sometimes it is necessary to give up Indonesia on Turn 3, but if Lae is still in Allied hands this makes Turn 4 a real nail-biter as you face Allied LBA in Indonesia. Taking Pearl only to lose Saigon and Singapore on Turn 4 is devastating. The usual remedy is to send a big force into South Pacific with a couple of SNLF to take Lae on Turn 4, resolving combat in the South Pacific before Indonesia to neutralize the Allied LBA in Indonesia. This doesn't always work, however, and you should avoid relying on it. Life is much easier if you stay focused on the big issues and, if Lae has not fallen, make a major LBA commitment to Indonesia on Turn 3, using any leftovers in Hawaii.

Japanese LBA in Hawaii on Turn 3 are not much of a bargain because if the first round is "day", you will have to waste a large number of air shots on the first round attacking the US Marines. However, if you have lost more than one or two carriers on Turn 2, you need them. As for South Pacific and Marshalls, these have to wait until Turn 4 or 5. Japan and Marianas can go without LBA if you can spare the POC.

If on Turn 5 you have taken Pearl but are too weak to guarantee control of all of the Front Four you should give the Marshalls the weakest defense. Even with the Marshalls open, you are still guaranteed to gain POC on Turn 6 by putting your entire fleet and some of your air force in Hawaii. You need only single ships to control Japan and the North Pacific, and only a few LBA to defend Indonesia against any Allied carriers remaining from Turns 1-5. With South Pacific controlled by the IJN, the Turn 6 US reinforcements can't reach Indonesia. This setup gives you 9 POC and limits the Allies to a maximum of 7

(Mandates, Coral, Bengal, Marshalls, South Pacific). If you are weaker still and can control only two of the Front Four, they should be Hawaii and South Pacific. This is because if you control South Pacific on Turn 5, you are just about guaranteed Indonesia on Turn 6 because the US reinforcements cannot reach it.

In the latter stages of the game, it should be pretty clear that if you continue to hold Hawaii you are almost certain to win. Some players play the IJN as though the Allies are somehow entitled to recapture Pearl in the latter part of the game, but not me -- it's a higher priority even than Indonesia. If you hold only Hawaii, Indonesia and Japan and the Allies have no bases in the Northeast, they cannot gain any POC! Even if the USN fights your main fleet (or LBA) in Hawaii on Turn 6 and wins, it will probably have to base out of range of Japan for Turn 7. If possible, you want to control Hawaii *every turn*, not only for the POC but so that the US Marines can't recapture Johnston Island.

USN Tactics

Turn 1

The Australia and Canberra, as "everyone" knows, should patrol the Coral Sea and US Mandates. I had one highly skilled opponent who would not make this move, believing that the IJN is misguided to respond by placing the I-Boat in the US Mandates rather than Hawaii. I remain unconvinced, however. The I-Boat is more than twice as likely to break Allied control of the US Mandates as to sink a US carrier in Hawaii.

Some Allied players like to leave the Houston trapped in Manila at the end of Turn 1 so it can threaten the Marianas on Turn 2. This is a reasonable play, as it will either tie up a (superior) IJN ship on Turn 2 or give you a decent chance to break IJN control of the Marianas, saving the Philippines.

At the end of the turn, all non-British ships go to New Hebrides or Samoa. If you send BBs anywhere else, they cannot defend all three of Coral, US Mandates and Hawaii on Turn 2, giving the IJN more flexibility. All US carriers which arrived on Turn 1 and survived go to Australia, unless all five are in play, in which case one can go to Samoa.

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Putting pressure on Indonesia is much more important than threatening Central Pacific or the North Pacific. The British should retreat to Singapore so they can patrol Indonesia on Turn 2 without a speed roll. Also, the Hermes then does not need to patrol to guarantee reaching Indonesia in the raid phase. Hermes need not sail if the IJN LBA defense is too strong, as it will "teleport" to Ceylon at the end of the turn anyway if Singapore falls. Any IJN CVs which come into Indonesia *could* raid the Hermes, but the Allies should welcome this development. By not patrolling Indonesia with cruisers on Turn 2, the British offer only hard-to-sink targets if they are retreating from a superior air defense.

Turn 2

Not much to add here to the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Patrol the Marshalls and the North Pacific (and maybe the South Pacific). If the IJN force at Hawaii is too strong to resist (that is, at least 5 CVs and enough surface ships to deny you a shot at every CV in a night action) you have the options described above under "Strategy". Don't patrol home areas with surface ships; this just reduces the number of raiders the IJN needs in Hawaii and creates more carnage. You want to kill Japanese CVs wherever they are in small groups. It can be disheartening to trade three of your 4-factor CVs for three smaller Japanese ones, but if it leads to saving Pearl it's often worth it. Besides, sometimes you roll "night." If the IJN splits its main force into two groups, you should have enough stuff to beat one group and should try it unless you have an easy alternative like controlling the Marshalls.

Generally speaking, you need to *either* save Pearl *or* save some advanced bases. The trouble with attacking Indonesia on Turn 2 is that you will probably do neither if you fail. Not only will you have allowed numerous base conversions because your CVs were all in Indonesia, but you might lose 2 or 3 LBA in Indonesia as well, making the defense of Pearl impossible. Don't make a bunch of raids into the IJN-controlled perimeter areas without adequate CV support unless you feel lucky. If you lose repeated day-night rolls you will suffer gruesome attrition with nothing to show for it.

An all-out defense of Pearl on Turn 3 can be a viable strategy if a few conditions are met: you saved the northern bases and Lae on Turn 2, you are down 15 POC or less, and you will definitely win the battle. You hope that when the dust settles, you still have some advanced bases to use on Turns 4 and 5. If you lose all your carriers on Turn 3, you will still probably be facing a full perimeter at the end of Turn 5, so you had better hold the IJN below 25 POC.

Later

Just some random thoughts:

Don't forget to leave your Turn 3 Marines in port if you are conceding Hawaii. The IJN is no lock to kill them via air raids, as 5 hits are required on each under the 2nd Edition rules. If the IJN goes for them, your three Turn 3 BBs may survive to "teleport" away at the end of the turn.


Keep an eye on the surface attrition. This is one lesson I have learned recently. You need to have a solid surface advantage in the latter half of the game. Disregarding the British, you start with only 26 surface ships to the IJN's 30, and you immediately lose seven or so at Pearl. Your last-move advantage combined with your reinforcements should allow you to reach at least parity by Turn 5 if you are careful. Unlike the IJN, you cannot afford to make patrols that will not be supported by raiders, because your ships are weaker and slower than those of the IJN. You need to rely on numerical superiority. Therefore, don't over-patrol! Early in the game, a defeated IJN patrol is worth more to you than an unmolested Allied patrol, even if the POC result is the same. This is because you have protected your freedom of movement, gained favorable attrition and possibly saved a base from conversion through surrounding. The IJN will not allow you to patrol anything that is important, so don't bother to try.

Once you get into the habit of making heavy British patrols into Indonesia, it's easy to forget that this can be suicidal if Singapore has fallen and the IJN is going to have a few spare carriers for the turn. He can raid into the Bay of Bengal, resolve combat in Indonesia first, forcing the bulk of the British navy to retreat to

Ceylon, and then air-raid you after brushing aside the Bay of Bengal defenders. If the Japanese do this right, the British will be completely eliminated after the Turn 5 BB withdrawals and your task will be much more difficult.

The best weapon the Allies have in this game is the rule that limits the IJN high-water mark to 29 POC. It is often possible to permit the IJN to gain POC at will while you protect your strategic position and roar back on the last three turns to win, particularly if you have received a handicap. By the end of Turn 3 you should be able to tell whether you can hold the IJN below 29 and plan accordingly.

One additional specific situation that comes up a lot is the US Turn 6 reinforcements against all six IJN LBA. This is usually an easy win for the IJN. Before trying this, remember that the LBA will be back on Turn 8.

The astute reader will note that the bulk of the advice presented above relates to the IJN. I find myself playing the IJN more than 90% of the time in tournaments because I am willing to bid higher than most players for the privilege. For the future, I look forward to playing the Allies with what I consider an adequate handicap. Any takers? 

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