



Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life by Thomas Alexander Hughes.

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In *Admiral Bill Halsey*, historian Thomas Hughes (School of Advanced Air and Space Studies) builds on his earlier paper¹ on William Frederick Halsey Jr. (1882–1959) and the early American destroyer force, using published materials, naval records, and personal papers. He begins with Halsey’s family history, going back to his great-grandparents and outlining his father’s naval career and health issues. He thoroughly debunks the oft-repeated claim that Halsey was a descendant of pirates, a notion Halsey himself was wont to repeat.

After a comfortable childhood, fashioned around his father’s naval postings and his mother’s family’s status, the young Halsey, unsurprisingly, pursued a career in the US Navy. Thanks to his mother’s extensive lobbying, even with President William McKinley, he was admitted to the US Naval Academy in 1900. Though he did not distinguish himself academically as much as athletically (he was a varsity football star), he did form valuable friendships with classmates, including such future luminaries (and admirals) as Ernest King, Chester Nimitz, Raymond Spruance, and Marc Mitscher. Halsey acquired several nicknames at the Academy, “among them Pudge ... and Stud, the last of which was recognition for some vague talent with young ladies” (51). His famous moniker “Bull” was coined by an unknown newsman during the Second World War.²

After graduation (1904), Halsey served on the new battleship USS *Missouri*, where he first witnessed battle-related deaths and destruction, when a flareback from a gun in a turret ignited a powder charge, killing thirty-one officers and men. Several billets later, he served with President Theodore Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet,” which circumnavigated the globe in an American show of force (1907–9). This gave Halsey the chance to learn about cultures and peoples vastly different from his own. After marrying Frances Cooke Grandy in 1909, he began his lengthy involvement with destroyers, initially under the tutelage of (then) Capt. William Sims. In this period, he developed tactics and strategies that influenced the use of the destroyer fleet for decades to come.

During his time with the destroyers, Halsey developed a severe bout of depression that caused him to be removed from the surface fleet and placed under medical care; he came close to being removed from the Navy altogether. After he recovered and at the insistence of his senior officers and mentors, he was fully reinstated, ultimately gaining his captain’s stripes and commanding full squadrons. In the late 1920s, Halsey became interested in aviation and even (mostly by subterfuge and chicanery) gained his aviator wings at the age of fifty-two, making him the oldest naval aviator in the fleet at the time.

Shortly thereafter, he assumed command of the USS *Saratoga*, a newly commissioned aircraft carrier, and began to learn, develop, and perfect tactics that become central to his World War II campaigns. These efforts contributed to the transition from a battleship-centered to a carrier

1. *Journal of Military History* 77 (2013) 71–90.

2. See Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King* (NY: Little, Brown, 2013) 71–90.

group-centered naval philosophy that persists to the present day. In 1941, (then) Vice Admiral Halsey became “Commander Aircraft Battle Force” with additional duty as Commander, Carrier Division 2—in the event, a most fortuitous appointment.

On 7 December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) demonstrated the wisdom of Halsey’s gospel of the critical value of naval aviation. In three short weeks, IJN air forces devastated the US fleet at Pearl Harbor, laid claim to much of Indonesia, the Philippines, and the South Pacific, and captured Wake Island from its American garrison. Urged on by President Franklin Roosevelt, Halsey’s direct superior, Admiral Nimitz, ordered him to “do something” in the Marshall Islands. Halsey’s consequent attacks on three islands incurred (and inflicted) little damage but boosted American morale at a critical moment. Months later, Halsey’s carrier group conveyed Lt. Col. James (“Jimmy”) Doolittle’s bombers to their famous Tokyo raid (18 Apr. 1942), which further boosted US morale while shaking the confidence of the IJN and its commander in chief, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto.

Unfortunately for Halsey, the humid South Pacific weather exacerbated his recurrent dermatitis to the point that he required hospitalization, first at Pearl Harbor, then in Washington, DC. Nimitz reassigned Halsey’s command (and his flagship, USS *Enterprise*) to Adm. Ray Spruance, who thus replaced him in the magnificent victory at the Battle of Midway (4–7 June 1942). Back in the United States, Halsey conferred, went on tours, and reacquainted himself with his family. His wife’s psychiatric problems demanded more and more attention and hospitalizations. Though Halsey never let this affect his command responsibilities, the issues weighed heavily on his mind.

Back in the South Pacific, Halsey became liaison between Nimitz and Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who disliked each other and seldom communicated directly. In that environment, Halsey played as great a role in coordinating Army-Navy interactions and combined operations as any other senior officer. Despite his efforts, however, interservice rivalries reached such a stalemate that President Roosevelt and the Joint Chiefs had to create two sovereign commands (the Southwest and Central Pacific Theaters) to expedite the war effort. This seemingly simple arrangement later caused Halsey difficulties in the Leyte Gulf campaign.

Dispatched by Nimitz to assume control of naval activities at Guadalcanal in the British Solomon Islands (Aug. 1942–Jan. 1943), Halsey’s ships supported the US Marines onshore and conducted naval surface and air operations that drove the Japanese from the strategically vital island, even though the Navy had but one aircraft carrier remaining in the Pacific. Despite their limited experience and knowledge of amphibious operations, Halsey and his command, after stumbling badly at New Georgia, developed and perfected tactics that proved very effective at the battles of Bougainville, Rabaul, and Peleliu.

By late 1944, Halsey had been in combat commands for almost four years and at sea for nearly forty. In the next six months, he endured a major battle at Leyte Gulf (23–26 Oct. 1944) and two typhoons. His poor performance, especially during what came to be called “Halsey’s Typhoon,”³ led to a Navy Court of Inquiry and nearly to his being relieved of command.

[The] deeply troubled court members [ruled that] Halsey’s decisions ... had been “extremely ill-advised.” In its report to higher authorities, the court suggested relieving both Halsey and [Adm. John Sidney] McCain of their commands. Secretary of the Navy [James] Forrestal agreed, however, his [Halsey’s] removal from command, King argued, would rejuvenate enemy morale and harm the

3. Halsey’s decision to remain on station rather than try to avoid the path of Typhoon Cobra cost the Third Fleet 3 destroyers, 802 men, and 146 aircraft—*Wikipedia*, s.v. “William Halsey Jr.”

Navy's shine as it approached its greatest hour. After Forrestal deferred to King's judgment, Halsey stayed at sea in command of the Third Fleet. (390)

Despite the voluminous studies of these debacles,⁴ Hughes devotes a mere forty-eight pages to them.

Worsening health problems cut short Halsey's postwar activities promoting the Navy and then in several civilian positions. His autobiography⁵ was poorly received, especially by senior naval personnel. In 1953, Halsey admitted "it was a mistake to write it" (405). A movie of his life,⁶ starring James Cagney, received mediocre reviews. Out of the public eye and away from his beloved Navy, Halsey succumbed to a heart attack on 16 August 1959.

Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life, though too superficial in some areas, is a richly researched and meticulously annotated biography that deserves a place right next to E.B. Potter's still preeminent work on the subject.⁷

4. See, e.g., Bob Drury and Tom Clavin, *Halsey's Typhoon: The True Story of a Fighting Admiral, an Epic Storm, and an Untold Rescue* (NY: Grove Pr, 2007).

5. William F. Halsey and J. Bryan III, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (1947; rpt. NY: Da Capo, 1976).

6. *The Gallant Hours*, dir. William Montgomery (1960).

7. *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1985; rpt. 2003).