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The Fighting Admiral
William F. Halsey in peace and war.
by Joseph F. Callo

Where do we get such people?” That’s a question generally posed when we are witness to astonishing military skill and courage. The question is often intended to be rhetorical, and that’s a mistake. With military heroism, we are dealing with emotionally charged, life-and-death matters, and they should not be treated superficially.

Which makes it imperative to get past the “what” of the story when examining our military heroes. The “what” of the narrative involves the drama and has to do with celebrity; in contrast, the “why” and the “how” involve the more weighty elements of military heroism, and that’s where the intellectual wealth of the narrative lies.

Admiral William F. (Bull) Halsey (1882-1959) is a case in point. He was one of the best-known military leaders of the war against the Axis powers. He has been the subject of many books and newspaper and magazine articles, and he received countless civic honors. Many consider him to be one of the great heroes of World War II. On the other hand, there are skeptics quick to point out that they believe Halsey made serious mistakes in his signature actions at the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

In this new biography, Thomas Alexander Hughes begins with adjectives such as “inspiring,” “bold,” “audacious,” and “original” to describe his subject. But the words “debacle” and “blunder” eventually appear in his Halsey narrative, too. What happened between those favorable and unfavorable adjectives is a complex, thought-provoking, and profoundly illuminating story. What came between them involves the “how” and “why” of a career that challenges quick and shallow conclusions.

Halsey’s father was a Naval Academy graduate who served in what was, in his time, a “naval aristocracy.” His military record was honorable but not epic. He commanded ships’ crews with skill, understood the concept of military honor, was a skilled mariner, and retired as a captain. His navy was relatively small and not particularly innovative. All of those things were part of Bull Halsey’s cultural inheritance when he entered the Naval Academy in 1904.

Halsey was not a brilliant student, but he was a standout athlete. That latter interest was an early clue to a proactive personality. Hughes also points out that Halsey’s Annapolis yearbook identified him as “everyone’s friend,” a sobriquet that would have brought a wry smile to the faces of those who worked for, and with, him in the Pacific theater—and confusion to those who met him there as an enemy.

An important factor in the Navy in which Halsey first served was technological change, particularly the rate of that change. In specific terms, the rise of naval aviation as the premier force of war at sea was the most noteworthy of all the changes to naval warfare in the early and mid-20th century. When Halsey began his career, the battleship squadron with destroyer escorts was the ultimate naval force; when he retired, the aircraft carrier task force was preeminent. The destructive energy of big-gun slugfests and hit-and-run torpedo actions was geometrically amplified by fast-moving and far-reaching carrier attacks on both maritime and land targets.

During the early stages of his career, however, Halsey’s focus was on destroyers, and he became imbued with the destroyerman’s mentality. Hughes refers to the permanence of that imprint: “in temperament and outlook, he never really left the tin cans.” Thus it was in destroyers where Halsey became infused with the central element of his combat doctrine: attack.

It should be noted that the combat doctrine that became the overriding core of Halsey’s persona wasn’t linked, in any way, to reckless abandon. It was, in fact, a throwback to an essential part of Lord Nelson’s combat doctrine, which Nelson articulated while on his way to the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801: “The boldest measures are the safest.” Halsey’s version of Nelson’s attitude was “Arrive first with the most.”

It was relatively late in his career when Halsey established a direct link with naval aviation. In 1935 he took command of the USS Saratoga, one of the Navy’s earliest, hardest-working, most storied aircraft carriers. There was a problem, however. The Navy’s aircraft carriers had been commanded by naval aviators, but Halsey was at an advanced age for flight training—and it had been determined earlier in his
career that his eyesight was not up to flight-school standards. Through masterful administrative choreography, however, Halsey achieved the status of “flight observer”—at age 51.

Hughes handles Halsey’s credentials as an aviator with a wry smile and records one of the more lurid details of his entrance into aviation: “He won the Flying Jackass award… when in the spring of 1935 he jumped a plane across a taxiway… destroying runway lights and wreaking havoc.” But if Halsey’s eyesight and age limited his basic flying skills, they had no negative impact on his understanding of how carrier strike forces could be used against the Japanese in the Pacific, and as the tide of war was turning at Guadalcanal (1942), he came into his own.

Halsey’s carrier strikes during the naval actions moving ever closer to Japan were masterful applications of his forward-leaning combat doctrine. And Hughes does not hold back on the public view of the results of Halsey’s combat doctrine:

A Detroit Free Press article proclaimed Halsey “the country’s new naval hero, whose name will be remembered in naval annals along with those of John Paul Jones, David Farragut, and George Dewey.” … Halsey was eclipsed only by Douglas MacArthur as the commander at the fighting front, at sea or in the field.

Notwithstanding General MacArthur’s skill in absorbing the limelight, there was a Halsey intangible that seemed to put him somewhere ahead of other senior naval officers—until the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf involved multiple fleets on both sides and has been described as the largest naval action in history. It was also marked by confusion on both sides. At a key point, Halsey took a major portion of U.S. forces to attack a Japanese carrier strike group, north of the action, led by Vice-Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa. Halsey wiped out the Ozawa force, but the landing beaches at Luzon in the Philippines were left with dangerously limited naval protection, and in the battle’s aftermath, Halsey was criti-