



U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE PHOTO ARCHIVE

**AT THE TOP** Then-Commodore Arleigh Burke, right, and Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher were a formidable duo in the leadership of Task Force 58 during the last year of World War II.

## '31-Knot' Burke

By Lieutenant Commander John Gordon Forester Jr., U.S. Naval Reserve (Retired)

**I**n June 1954 I was beginning my first-class year as an NROTC midshipman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For our summer cruise I was sent to Norfolk, Virginia, with orders to report to the

USS *Macon* (CA-132), little knowing that she carried the flag of Cruiser Division 6 and Rear Admiral Arleigh A. Burke as COMCRUDIV 6.

As we got under way on 6 June 1954, the officer in charge of the midshipmen detachment sent for me. He informed me that I was being assigned to Admiral Burke's staff for the duration of the cruise. I would still attend gunnery, navigation, and seamanship classes, but my primary responsibility was to the admiral. A Naval Academy midshipman was also assigned the same duty.

We introduced ourselves to each other then reported to Admiral Burke on the flag bridge. This was a heady experience

for a 21-year-old college student. Admirals were next to God. In fact, I figured that God saluted admirals. I'll never forget our first meeting: the admiral was warm and very pleasant. He asked us about ourselves; where we were from, our parents, siblings, schools, and other personal questions. He made me feel that he was genuinely interested, that he really cared about our answers. In fact, later in the cruise he would call up some fact that I told him at that first meeting.

### Who Was this Sailor?

When I first met him he was 53 years old, but looked younger with his clear blue eyes and blond curls. He earned

his nickname during World War II while commanding a destroyer squadron. En route to a rendezvous before the Battle of Cape St. George, a boiler problem limited his ships' top speed to 30 knots instead of their usual 34 knots. Signaled to make best speed, the group was able to gain an extra knot, fostering Burke's reply, "Proceeding at 31 knots." The fleet commander's response, addressed to "31-knot Burke" was meant as a joke, but it took on a totally different meaning to the press and public who saw it as the mark of an intrepid Sailor. For his actions during the subsequent battle, Captain Burke was awarded the Navy Cross.

A significant change in his career path occurred after his triumphant victory. He was relieved of his destroyer squadron command and assigned as chief of staff to Commander Carrier Division 3, Vice

Admiral Marc A. Mitscher. Burke was devastated. He knew nothing of carrier warfare, having served his entire career on battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. Admiral Mitscher was also nonplussed to have a chief of staff who was not an aviator. Burke applied himself and learned his lessons well. He played a significant role in planning for what became known as the Marianas Turkey Shoot, an important Pacific theater victory that destroyed 400 Japanese planes. This helped Admiral Mitscher realize that then-Commodore Burke was an effective chief of staff, even though he was not a pilot.

### News of the Day

Admiral Burke explained to his midshipmen staff that our duties included reviewing the world news on the teletype and briefing him and his staff at 0600. We would descend into the bowels of the *Macon* at 0530, make notes on everything newsworthy, and then present a Huntley/Brinkley-type summary for the admiral's staff. Only the admiral would ask questions, testing our knowledge. His staff never uttered a word. We soon realized that the admiral had read the news earlier so he could interrogate us. We also learned that in the Navy a junior never tells his senior that he doesn't know the answer to a question. He either gives him the correct answer or replies, "I'll find out, sir."

One morning, there was a news item about the anniversary of the death of Leon Trotsky, the seminal Bolshevik revolutionary and Red Army reformer who was expelled from the Communist Party and Soviet Union for opposing Josef Stalin. I told my fellow midshipman that Admiral Burke would ask us questions about Trotsky, so we applied ourselves to the encyclopedia to find out all the details we could. Sure enough, the admiral asked us if we knew where he was killed.

"Yes sir, in Mexico City."

"How?" he asked.

"With an ice axe, sir."

"Very good, you did your homework."

### Snookered by the Best

During this period negotiators were meeting in Paris to try to agree on the line of demarcation in Korea. The teletype would periodically mention the progress,

or lack thereof, and we would report it. One morning the admiral asked which parallel we thought the truce team would agree on. I suggested the 37th. Burke asked why. I gave him my best pitch and he shot it down. Undaunted, I continued this discussion, while he held out for the 38th parallel. Later during my tenure as admiral's aide, the negotiators agreed on the 38th parallel, and I was prepared to eat my humble pie. When the staff meeting adjourned that day, the admiral asked me to stay. He took me into his office and showed me a stack of top-secret dispatches on the subject of the peace talks. He told me I had defended my position well, but he had the advantage.

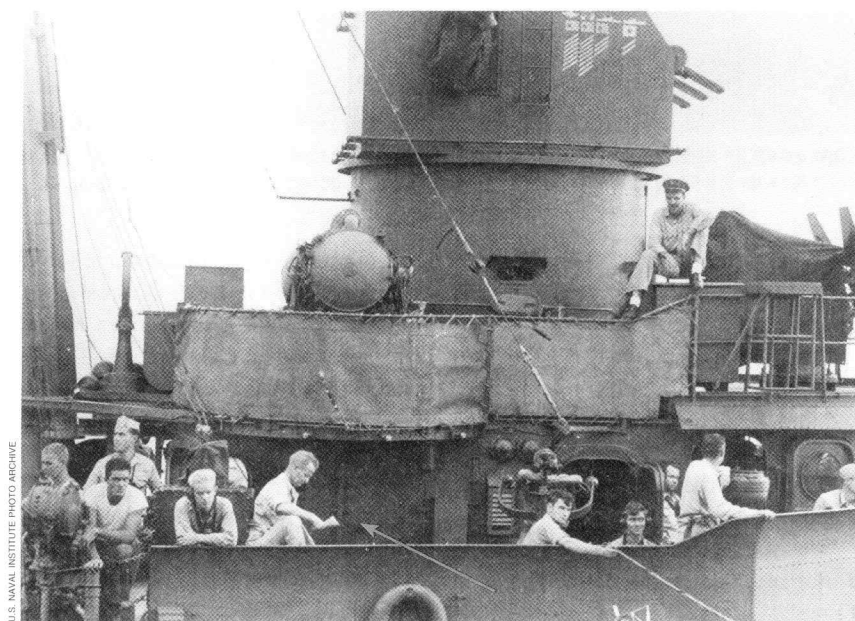
I learned many years later from E. B. Potter's definitive biography, *Admiral Arleigh Burke* (Naval Institute Press, 1990), that the admiral was a member of the first negotiating team for the United Nations and, further, in August 1951 he was part of a two-man team assigned to negotiate with two communist counterparts, to de-

to accompany him and his staff. After the receiving line we were served 80-year-old sherry and tapas. Thus began my lifelong affection for Spanish food. I had never had sherry, much less the old stuff, but it was delicious. After a bit, pictures were taken and Admiral Burke invited me to pose with him and his lovely wife, Bobbie. As I turned to face the camera the admiral held up a hand and stopped the proceedings. He then asked me to step aside with him.

What had I done? I was embarrassed without knowing why. Out of earshot of others, Admiral Burke told me that I must never permit my picture to be taken with a drink in my hand. It can show up at the worst possible times. I apologized and thanked him and to this day, 53 years later, I have never had my picture taken with a drink in my hand.

### Mark of the Leader

On the first Saturday in port there was a personnel inspection. The admiral, the



**WITH HIS LOVE** As commander of Destroyer Squadron 23, then-Captain Burke, shown in profile reading at left, led the "Little Beavers" from his flagship, the *Charles Ausburne* (DD-570).

cide on the dividing line between North and South Korea. He never mentioned this assignment when I was trying to convince him that I knew where the line would be drawn. Did he ever have the advantage!

Our first port during the *Macon's* cruise was Cadiz, Spain. The admiral was invited to a reception by the mayor and asked me

*Macon's* captain, and others proceeded down the rows of sailors in gleaming whites. I tagged along behind the admiral with a clipboard in my hand. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with the clipboard, but I was ready. Admiral Burke came to a sudden stop before a second-class petty officer.



**KOREAN FIELD NEGOTIATOR** Outside his tent at an advanced camp in Munsan-ni, Korea, then-Rear Admiral Burke reads during a break in cease-fire talks with the North Koreans. He was serving as a U.N. delegate to the talks at Kaesong.

"What is that ribbon?" he asked in a severe tone, pointing to the first ribbon on his chest.

"That is the Medal of Honor," replied the sailor.

"And where did you receive the medal?"

"I was awarded the medal in Korea, Admiral."

"For your information, young man, no Sailor received the Medal of Honor in Korea."

"I was in the Army in Korea," replied the Sailor, not flinching in the least.

The admiral was flabbergasted. He turned to the ship's captain and asked why he had not been informed that the medal recipient was on board. I don't recall the captain's answer, but it was not persuasive. Later I learned that the admiral ordered the captain to bring the man's service record to his office, where he reviewed it, blistered the captain, and ordered that

henceforth the quarterdeck would sound bells whenever the Sailor departed or returned to the ship. That night, the admiral and the Medal of Honor recipient dined alone in the admiral's cabin.

### My Prediction

Arleigh Burke was a consummate teacher. It seemed his mission was to make midshipmen into better officers. He gave me a lot of advice, all of it sound and practical. He told me once that on commissioning the Naval Academy graduate would be a better officer, at least for the first two years, because of his better technical training in navigation, gunnery, engineering, and seamanship, but thereafter the NROTC officer should surpass him because of his broader education. Another time he told me that when I became a junior division officer I would have to meet with wives of the enlisted men on occasion, to discuss their marital problems, financial needs, and even

children. I should never meet with them in a closed room, always keep the door open. The reason was obvious.

Toward the end of the cruise, I wrote a letter to my cousin who had served in the Navy in Korea. I told him about Admiral Burke and described some of his actions, concluding with the prediction that one day he would be Chief of Naval Operations. Little did I know that in ten months he would be nominated over 99 admirals to be CNO. He remained in this position for six years, the longest of any man in history.

Arleigh Burke was a Sailor. The blood coursing through his veins was blue and gold. He loved his country, the Navy, its ships, and the men who served under him. We are stronger today because of 31-Knot Burke, and I will never forget him. ⚓

Lieutenant Commander Forester served on active duty from 1955 to 1958.