



'31-Knot'

The man behind the machine

Story by LTJG John M. Wallach

Behind his sparkling blue eyes, now obscured by black-framed spectacles, lies a lifetime of Navy history, experience, knowledge and tradition.

From the United States Naval Academy through his World War II naval conquests in the South Pacific to the office of the Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Arleigh Burke has seen and done it all — or very close to it.

As a World War II destroyerman, his warfighting prowess contributed to the setting of the Rising Sun. As Chief of Naval Operations, a post he held for an unprecedented six years, his foresight into anti-submarine warfare tactics and technology, nuclear power for ships and submarines and strategic deterrence helped shape the future of today's Navy. And on July Fourth of his 90th year, Arleigh Burke received a rare honor when he saw the Navy commission his namesake ship, USS *Arleigh Burke* (DDG 51). It is only fitting that the most capable and survivable warship in the world should bear his distinguished name.

The decorated Navy veteran now walks with the aid of a cane, clutched firmly in his right hand. A modest apartment in Fairfax, Va., serves as his bridge and stateroom, where he and his adoring wife, Bobbie, have lived since 1986. Though his body has aged since his days on the high seas, his mind and spirit have not. With his wife maintaining a vigilant, loving watch over her husband, Burke reflects on his distinguished career

and tells of the simple philosophy he carried with him through his 42 years in the Navy.

"Work," he says firmly. "Work hard. You've got to learn the fundamentals of your job in the Navy to do it well."

Throughout his career, it was this work ethic and his consummate leadership skills which won Burke the respect and admiration of his fellow shipmates, junior and senior alike.

"The difference between a good officer and a poor one is about 10 seconds."

Some might call him a leader's leader; others might call him a visionary. Some might say stubborn and opinionated; others might say dedicated and demanding. All would be right. In fact, it was his unique personality — always determined, never daunted — which prompted one contemporary to say, "You'll either be dead by age 50, or you'll be Chief of Naval Operations." Now 89, the latter was obviously his destiny.

Born to a Colorado farming family in 1901, Arleigh Burke learned early

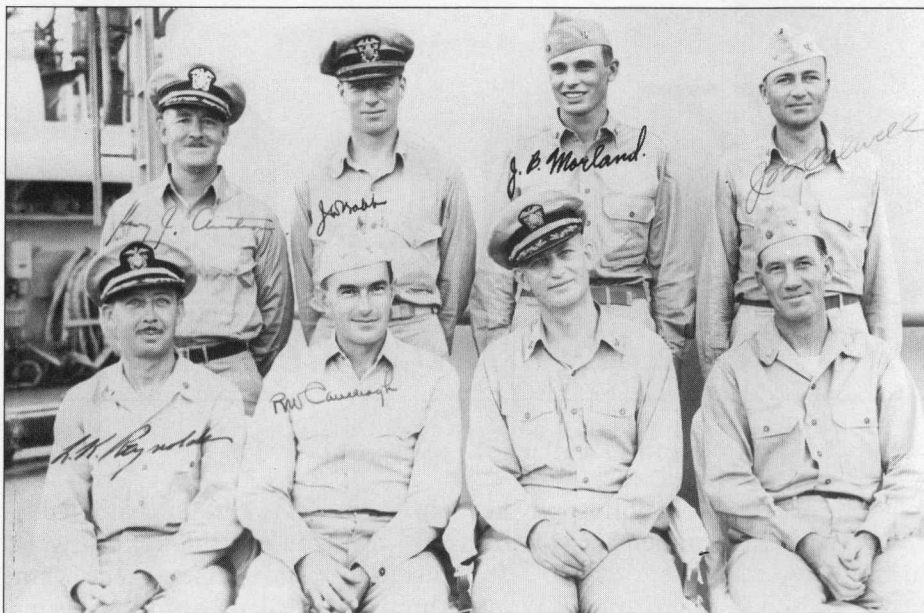
the traditional values he harbored for the rest of his life. Hard work, discipline and perseverance came through necessity. During his austere childhood, Burke rode horseback to school, worked on the family farm and read books — lots of books. His desire for a higher education, his family's financial inability to fund his college tuition and his dislike for farm work combined to steer Burke toward the military academies.

Appointed to Annapolis in 1919 and commissioned four years later, ADM Burke began his journey through the Department of the Navy. His first stop was aboard the battleship USS *Arizona* (BB 39) where, as a junior officer, he learned a valuable lesson, one that would foreshadow his entire career — that the most difficult and demanding jobs are often the most important ones.

Aboard *Arizona*, ENS Burke approached each task as if it would be his last, satisfied with nothing less than perfection. Because of his proficiency in leading working parties through rigorous inspections and cleanings of the ship's double bottom compartments, arguably one of the most arduous and definitely one of the dirtiest jobs aboard ship, Burke was "rewarded" with the dubious honor of overseeing all double bottom inspections for the entire length of the dreadnought.

Reminded of the occasion, Burke says today, "You only have one job," raising his right index finger to make his point. "Very seldom do you get the job you want. Do the best you can do in the job you have. If it isn't very

Left: Retired ADM Arleigh Burke talks with *All Hands*.



U.S. Navy photo

CAPT Burke (front row, 2nd right) poses with officers of Destroyer Squadron 23 in 1943.

important, do it better. When you do a job well, it makes itself important."

Throughout his career, Burke would be detailed to many assignments he did not want, notwithstanding Chief of Naval Operations.

From *Arizona*, Burke progressed up the rungs of the Navy ladder toward what he considered the apex — command at sea. He attained his goal June 5, 1939, when he took command of the destroyer USS *Mugford* (DD 389) in San Diego. After a little over a year as *Mugford*'s CO and a brief stint at the Washington Navy Yard (then the Naval Gun Factory) it was off to war.

As commander of Destroyer Division (DesDiv) 43, Burke was in his own heaven. From his flagship, the destroyer USS *Waller* (DD 466), he commanded four destroyers under Commander South Pacific ADM "Bull" Halsey, as the U.S. Navy began its climb up the Japanese-occupied Solomon Island chain. It was here that Burke learned another valuable lesson.

Sailing through the Central Solomons, Burke ordered his flagship into the Kula Gulf under cover of darkness. His mission: scout the waters for enemy ships. Minutes later one of Burke's young radar operators reported a contact ahead. Instead of opening fire immediately, Burke was skeptical and questioned the young sailor's judgement. When he finally gave the order to fire torpedoes, U.S.

cruisers had acted on their own radar indications, turning their powerful guns on the Japanese destroyers.

Although both enemy ships were sunk and the U.S. ships escaped without a scratch, Burke knew that he had erred. By not firing his torpedoes at the initial radar contact, he had forced the cruisers to open fire, thus identifying their positions. From that point on, Burke trusted the reports and recommendations of his sailors implicitly. The incident prompted his now-famous quote: "The difference between a good officer and a poor one is about 10 seconds."

After his success with DesDiv 43, Burke was given command of the eight ships of Destroyer Squadron 23, the command for which he is best known. It was with the "Little Beavers" that he was issued his enduring nickname, "31-Knot" Burke.

Dissatisfied that his ships, rated at 35 knots, could make no better than 30 due to inadequate maintenance, Burke ended all transmissions to South Pacific headquarters with, "Proceeding at 30 knots." When on one occasion his "Little Beavers" were ordered to possible action, Burke pushed his ships to their limit and ended his next transmission with, "Proceeding at 31 knots." The reply from Halsey came back addressed to "31-Knot" Burke. Although he had before and would again sail faster, the

moniker stuck.

But Burke was deported from his destroyer paradise in 1944 when he received orders to serve as chief of staff to Commander, Carrier Division 3, VADM Marc Mitscher. As Burke remembers, it was one of those jobs he did not want.

"He [Mitscher] was an aviator; I was not an aviator," he explains. At the time of Burke's transfer, to ensure well-rounded staffs, the Navy made it a policy to assign surface officers to the staffs of aviators and vice versa. "I didn't want to serve under Mitscher, and he didn't want anything to do with me. He wouldn't speak to me."

But what started as a relationship based on disdain and resentment slowly evolved into one of mutual respect. Burke explains how the ice was finally broken between himself and Mitscher — the man he now calls one of his best friends and the most influential person in his Navy career.

"I exceeded my authority on the bridge and gave orders he [Mitscher] really should have given," Burke remembers. "I turned around to him to take my punishment. I thought I was going to at least be called on the carpet real hard. But he just looked at me and said, 'It's about time.' From that time on we were very good friends."

Burke served as Mitscher's chief of staff through the rest of the war. Together with his boss and friend, he fought some of the most famous World War II naval battles, including the Battle of the Philippine Sea and the Battle for Leyte Gulf. He supported the Marine assault on Iwo Jima and saw his fleet come under suicide attack by Japanese *Kamikaze* pilots. And while serving aboard Mitscher's flagship USS *Bunker Hill* (CV 17) near Okinawa May 11, 1945, Burke became a true hero.

Two *Kamikazes*, loaded with fuel

and explosives, slammed into the flagship, sending burning fuel and debris across the flight deck. Burke, noticing that the flames had reached the radio room, raced to save his shipmates. Armed with only a handkerchief, which he held over his nose and mouth, Burke and another officer, dragged the trapped radiomen out of the fiery, smoke-filled room and up a ladder to safety.

After the war, Burke was assigned to desk duty in Washington. He then served with Mitscher one last time in a hastily-created 8th Fleet before going back to sea in the cruiser USS *Huntington* (CL 107), where he continued his quality approach to leadership. A firm believer that a well-informed sailor was a harder-working, happier sailor, Burke made a regular practice of assembling his men to brief them on the ship's mission, upcoming port visits or answer any questions they might have.

From *Huntington*, Burke was again summoned to Washington, this time by the Chief of Naval Operations to head the CNO's organizational research and policy section. But when aggression once again reared its ugly head, this time on the Korean peninsula, Burke, a seasoned combat veteran, was dispatched to Tokyo to help prepare for war.

In the summer of 1951, after U.N. forces under Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur established a line of defense south of the 38th parallel, Burke was summoned to Korea as a peacemaker. As part of the U.N. delegation, he took his place at the negotiation table at Kaesong. He would return to Washington in December, angry and frustrated at the progress of the talks. The armistice treaty was finally signed in Panmunjom July 27, 1953.

For Burke, his return to Washington meant more duty behind a desk instead of on a bridge, this time as director of the Navy Department's strategic plans division. The job was demanding, as Burke was in charge of

planning how the Navy would fight its next war. After more than two years of shore duty, he was again sent to sea.

Burke spent less than a year in command of Cruiser Division 6 in the Mediterranean before receiving what he now calls one of his most enjoyable tours in the Navy — Commander Destroyer Force Atlantic (ComDesLant) Fleet. Now the legendary destroyerman was in charge of all of the tin cans in the Atlantic. It was from this treasured billet that he received the greatest surprise of his career.

It came in 1955 when Secretary of the Navy Charles Thomas posed the question, "Do you know of any reason why you should not be CNO?" Burke held several answers back. He was deliriously happy as ComDesLant; he was not eager to take over the post held by his old friend, ADM Robert B. Carney; and he had misgivings about the possible adverse political effects of being selected over more than 92 admirals senior to him. But, as history and destiny would have it, Burke was sworn in as CNO Aug. 17, 1955, at the tender age of 54.

At the Navy's helm, Burke focused

ADM Burke as Chief of Naval Operations, 1955.



U.S. Navy photo

his efforts on the future of the modern Navy. He made anti-submarine warfare technology and tactics his number one priority and ordered the study of nuclear power for use in surface combatants. But arguably his most important contribution as CNO was his support for the beginning of the Navy's fleet ballistic missile program. Burke pushed for development of what eventually became the *Polaris* missile, forerunner of the *Poseidon* and *Trident* missiles of today.

Burke went on to serve two additional terms as the Navy's top officer and gracefully declined President John F. Kennedy's offer of a fourth, opting to retire instead after more than four decades of service.

Today, sitting next to Bobbie on a sofa adorned appropriately with a USS *Arleigh Burke* afghan, he is justifiably proud of his accomplishments, but he will not dwell on them. Instead he chooses to deflect credit to those who served with him, the many nameless, faceless people behind the scenes whose efforts he says helped him achieve greatness.

"There is no rule that will ensure success," he states with a knowing smile. "The philosophy you have to have in the Navy, is you've got to do the best you can do with what you've got. It's too bad if you don't have all the things you think you need. Do the very best you can do, and expect your shipmates to do the same thing."

Today, Arleigh Burke lives ashore with his beloved Bobbie. Occasionally, he ventures into the public eye — most recently at the commissioning of his namesake destroyer. As he relaxes in his twilight years, the great warrior can take comfort in knowing that he has left a positive, lasting impression on the service he loves so much. In USS *Arleigh Burke*, his name, his legend and his spirit will sail on. □

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