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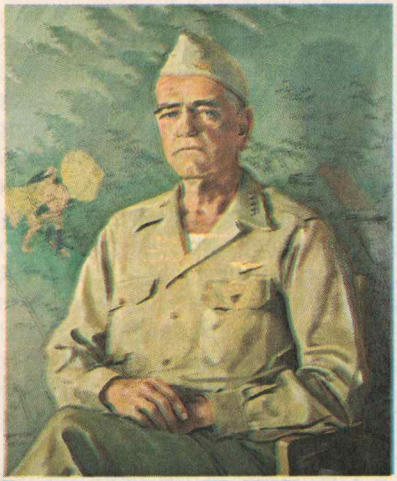
Unforgettable "Bull" Halsey



He was tough, tenacious, unyielding—and his sailors would have followed him anywhere on this earth, or beyond

By Admiral Arleigh Burke, USN (Ret.)
Chief of U.S. Naval Operations, 1955-1961

The first time I came face to face with Bull Halsey, I was literally shaking in my boots. He was the most famous admiral in the world, and I was in deep trouble. He sat behind his desk, the three stars of a vice admiral on his collar, shoulders squared, piercing eyes stabbing through me. For all the heat outside, the room grew very cold.

These were the desperate days of 1942, when the Japanese controlled both air and sea throughout the South Pacific. U.S. Marines had landed on Guadalcanal in August, but were holding on by their fingernails against an enemy who wanted this key to the Solomon Islands as a staging point for the conquest of Australia. If the U.S. Navy had owned a fleet of battleships and carriers, it would have sent them to help. Instead, it sent Vice Adm. William F. Halsey, Jr.

I joined Halsey down there as a commander in charge of Destroyer Division 43. My ships had been fighting some tough battles without major maintenance, and were in rough shape; just about everything that could go wrong with them already had. For weeks, I had bombarded Halsey's office with letters, raising hell because we weren't get-

PORTRAIT BY COMBAT ARTIST WILLIAM F. DRAPER AT SOUTH PACIFIC HEADQUARTERS, OCTOBER 1943. COURTESY U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY MUSEUM

ting what we needed. I didn't know it then, but Halsey had no choice in the matter. He had nothing to give anybody, and was only too aware that one thin line of gray ships was all that stood between our boys on Guadalcanal and disaster.

Every night we were out fighting the Japanese as they came "down the slot," through the Solomons toward Guadalcanal. Our ships took severe damage and became less and less effective. Morale suffered, and to make matters worse, our battle-weary men had no beer, no whiskey, no recreation. In desperation, I drew up orders sending the destroyers to Sydney for repairs, and radioed Halsey that they were leaving. Back came the reply: "Keep them in the Solomons." It happened once. It happened again.

One boiler of the destroyer *Saufley* was in such bad shape that I finally decided to send her to Sydney without telling Halsey. We scraped together every cent in the squadron and gave it to *Saufley's* captain. While the ship's boiler was being repaired, he would buy beer and whiskey for us. Only when *Saufley* was on her way did I tell Halsey what I had done.

I expected a kickback and, sure enough, a message soon arrived, asking me to drop in on Halsey next time I happened to be around Nouméa, New Caledonia, where the command ship *Argonne* was anchored. I knew what *that* meant, and immediately set out.

When I marched into Halsey's office, I found him seated with his back to the door, staring at the bulkhead. After what seemed an eternity, he turned around and glanced at me. "Oh, Burke," he said. He looked down at some scribbled notes on his desk. *"Saufley,"* he muttered. Suddenly he sat bolt upright and peered at me.

"Why in God's name did you take it in your own hands to send *Saufley* to Sydney?"

My heart sank into my freshly shined shoes. I knew that my whole career was in that room with us.

"Sir," I began. "My boys haven't had any beer or whiskey for months. . . ."

"You mean," Halsey interrupted, shaking his head as if he could not believe it, ". . . you mean you sent that ship down there for *booze?"*

I was about to tell my sad tale about *Saufley's* boiler, but something—it must have been the look on the admiral's face—held me back.

"Yes, sir, the captain did pick up a lot of liquor," I began again. "But . . ."

Halsey's face relaxed. "All right, Burke," he said. "You win. Your boys have been doing a great job, and I can't condemn you for going out on a limb for them. But don't do it again." He leveled a gnarled brown finger at me. "If you had told me that you sent *Saufley* for *repairs,* I'd have had your hide."

Behind the Bulldog. That's when I knew I would follow Admiral William Halsey anywhere in this

world, or beyond. And so would thousands of other sailors, from the lowliest apprentice right on up the line. After the Japanese bombed and torpedoed Pearl Harbor, Halsey had led a task force to attack the Gilbert and Marshall islands and carry Jimmy Doolittle's Tokyo Raiders on their historic mission to bomb the Japanese capital. Months later, a pair of sailors were on the second deck of Halsey's flagship one day, speculating on where Halsey might be taking them this time. "I don't care where we're going," one said. "I'd go to hell for that old s.o.b."

Someone rapped the bluejacket on the shoulder. The sailor turned to see Halsey himself standing there. "Not so old, son," said the admiral, a big grin on his bulldog face. "Not so old."

During the attack against the Marshalls, Halsey saucily took the carrier *Enterprise* in just offshore so his boys in the fighters and bombers would have plenty of gas to attack and get back to the ship. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a Japanese plane swung toward the *Enterprise*. On the bridge, everybody flattened to the deck, with several men flinging themselves across the admiral to protect him. The plane missed, and Halsey sat up, struggling to recover his balance and decorum. He saw one laughing face: a yeoman had watched the undignified descent of his superiors and was now unsuccessfully trying to control his mirth.

"Who's that man?" shouted Halsey at the duty officer.

"That's Bowman, admiral. Yeoman Ira Bowman."

"*Chief* Yeoman Ira Bowman, you mean," said Halsey. "Anybody who can laugh when my knees are shaking is somebody who deserves to be promoted."

Hardtack Tough. When Halsey came to Guadalcanal that grim October of 1942, the Marines were as close to being beaten as they had ever been. Yet from the very first his orders were: "Attack repeat ATTACK," and he paid no attention to complaints that his men did not have the planes and ships to do so. Suddenly, the tide in the Solomons began to change.

"It was as if they had handed us two carriers," said one grimy leatherneck on Guadalcanal.

"No," corrected his companion. "Two carriers and a battleship."

When I say that Halsey was loved, I do not mean that he was soft in any way; on the contrary, he was tough as hardtack. His nickname—"Bull"—was coined by a war correspondent in honor of his charge-ahead spirit. The crucial naval battle for Guadalcanal came one night in November, when the Japanese sent their strongest force, led by the battleship *Hiei,* to shell the island's airfield and pave the way for a new landing. All Halsey could throw into the breach was a force of cruisers and destroyers—obviously no match for the enemy. But throw them in he did, muttering, "You can't make omelets without breaking eggs."

Halsey sat in the loneliness of his office that long night, pretending to read a magazine as he waited for word. The first news was bad. Two cruisers and six destroyers had been lost, and with them Rear Admirals Daniel J. Callaghan and Norman Scott, both old friends of Halsey's. But there was good news, too: the Japanese landing was scuttled, the airfield had not been shelled, and the *Hiei* was badly damaged (it would fall victim to American bombers hours later). The price had been high, but we had won a victory.

Minutes after the U.S. triumph was confirmed, Halsey sent a message to every unit in his command. The word went out by radio, by signal blinker, by hand courier, to all the men who served under him: "YOUR NAMES HAVE BEEN WRITTEN IN GOLDEN LETTERS ON THE PAGES OF HISTORY, AND YOU HAVE WON THE EVERLASTING GRATITUDE OF YOUR COUNTRYMEN. MY PRIDE IN YOU IS BEYOND EXPRESSION."

Lessons in Command. Bull Halsey was the son of a Naval officer and had lived with discipline all his life, from his days at Pingry School in Elizabeth, N.J., through the Naval Academy at Annapolis, where he was a football star, right on up through the ranks in destroyers and later in the Navy's air arm. He was past 50 years old when he learned to fly. Because he was going to command a carrier, he felt he first ought to learn how to take orders about flying. He never was much of a pilot, although his instructors admitted that, for some reason, the worse the weather, the better Halsey flew. I know why that was: he regarded the weather as just another obstacle to be overcome.

What I learned from Halsey in the war—the lessons of command, the characteristics of leadership—has served me well in all the years that followed, years in which I held a variety of posts throughout the Navy. For example:

Confidence. Bull Halsey possessed to a magnificent degree the intuition that let him know just how to get the best out of his people under any conditions. After the *Saufley* affair, we kept our destroyers going and fought the Japanese as hard as we could. The admiral sensed that, and never bothered us with unnecessary instructions. One night early in 1943, he warned me that a number of Japanese destroyers were coming our way. "Proceed. You know what to do," was all his message said.

We did proceed, at 31 knots, a creditable speed considering the condition of our destroyers' boilers. We found the Japanese force and smashed it. Back at headquarters, Halsey grinned proudly and gave me a nickname: "Thirty-One-Knot Burke." My destroyer squadron had proved what he knew: give men the incentive, the opportunity and the information, and they will excel themselves as we had done that night, fighting for a commander whom we respected and loved.

Self-Control. When Halsey's son, young Lt. Bill Halsey, was reported

missing from a carrier in the South Pacific, a member of the admiral's staff brought him the news and waited for special orders for the search. "Get the planes out," said Halsey. "But search for him exactly as you would search for any other father's son in the Pacific."

Not that Halsey didn't worry. He nearly cried when word came that Bill was safe. I remember, too, that when I saw him in Nouméa he was not long recovered from a serious case of shingles, brought on by concern for his wife, Fan, who had fallen ill while he was aboard the *Enterprise*. Halsey had fought on, controlling his illness, until called back to Pearl Harbor on the eve of the Battle of Midway. He would have led his task force at Midway except that the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Adm. Chester Nimitz, had taken one look at him and put him in the hospital.

Responsibility. Although quick to delegate authority, Halsey always accepted full responsibility. A lot of Naval officers are convinced that he made one of the war's great mistakes at the Battle of Leyte Gulf, when he went off on a wild-goose chase after the Japanese carriers, allowing their surface fleet to attack our landing forces. "It was a hell of a mistake," he said later. "But, given the information I had that night, I would do it again."

Final Touch. I rather lost track of Admiral Halsey after the war. He had quickly retired from the Navy, feeling that his usefulness was over. When he died, in 1959, I offered a few words at the funeral. But, being a tongue-tied Swede, could not say what I really felt: that I loved him and had learned the great lessons of my life from him.

One of those lessons I put into action that very year. When Fidel Castro brought his revolution down out of Cuba's Sierra Maestra, we had word in Washington from a number of American citizens living in Nicaro who feared for their lives. As Chief of Naval Operations, I had the job of getting them out. The only American ship anywhere near the area was a small Navy transport commanded by a very junior reserve officer. I sent him orders to get in and "protect American lives and property." He radioed for further orders. "Your replacement will bring them," I radioed back.

It was all the incentive he needed. He moved his ship in, sent an armed shore party onto the beach and pulled those people out as neatly as if he had been doing it all his life. I chuckled to myself when I got the word. Bull Halsey would have been proud of that youngster.

Hearing Aid. Little sounds in libraries have the same job that crickets do on soft summer nights. They let you hear the silence better.

—John Keasler, McNaught Syndicate