

Admiral William Frederick Halsey

by **Ruben Pang**



Fleet Admiral William Frederick Halsey

INTRODUCTION

Fleet Admiral William Frederick Halsey (30 October 1882 – 16 August 1959) was a United States Navy (USN) officer who served in both the First and Second World Wars (WWI and WWII). He was commander of the South Pacific Area during the early years of the Pacific War against Japan and became commander of the Third Fleet for the remainder of the war, during which he supported General Douglas MacArthur's advance on the Philippines in 1944. Over the course of war, Halsey earned the reputation of being one of America's most aggressive fighting admirals, often driven by instinct over intellect. However, his record also includes unnecessary losses at Leyte Gulf and damage to his Third Fleet during the Typhoon of 1944 or "Hasley's Typhoon," the violent tempest that sank three destroyers and swept away 146 naval aircraft. Today, Admiral Halsey is remembered as a "first to last" combatant of WWII.¹ He led raids on Japanese bases at the Gilbert, Marshall and Wake islands in response to the Pearl Harbor attack and was also present at the Japanese surrender aboard his flagship, *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, where hostilities were brought to an end.²

EARLY YEARS

Halsey was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey to a family of naval tradition. His father was a captain in the USN. Halsey naturally followed in his footsteps, enrolling in the United States (US) Naval Academy in 1900.³ As a cadet, he held several extracurricular positions. He played full-back for the football team, became president of the Athletic Association, and as First Classman "had his name engraved on the Thompson Trophy Cup as the Midshipman who had done most during the year for the promotion of athletics."⁴

From 1907 to 1909, he gained substantial maritime experience while sailing with the "Great White Fleet" in a global circumnavigation.⁵ In 1909, Halsey received instruction in torpedoes with the Reserve Torpedo Flotilla in Charleston, Carolina and commenced his service aboard his first torpedo boat, *USS Du Pont*.⁶

FIRST WORLD WAR

During WWI, Halsey served with the Destroyer Force in Queenstown, Ireland. He temporarily served aboard *USS Duncan* before assuming command of the *USS Benham* (February 1918) and *USS Shaw*

(May 1918). For his courageous leadership in commanding both destroyers through treacherous waters, Halsey was awarded the Navy Cross with the following citation:

For distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the *USS Benham* and the *USS Shaw*, engaged in the important, exacting, and hazardous duty of patrolling the waters infested with enemy submarines and mines, in escorting and protecting vitally important convoy of troops and supplies through these waters, and in offensive and defensive action, vigorously and unremittingly prosecuted against all forms of enemy naval activity.⁷

INTERWAR YEARS

During the interwar years, he represented the US Navy briefly as an attaché in Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden.⁸ By 1932, Hasley had been the captain of twelve different torpedo boats and destroyers, commanded three destroyer divisions, and served as the Executive Officer of the *USS Wyoming*.⁹

In 1934, responding to the shortage of naval aviator-qualified commanders, Hasley attended a condensed naval aviation course catered to senior officers in Pensacola, Florida, at the age of 51.¹⁰ With the aid of a waiver allowing him to fly bespectacled, he strived

for the highest qualification possible, opting for the twelve-week pilot course instead of the abridged Aviation Observer program. Upon graduation from the course in May 1935, Halsey's new aviator wings and command experience opened new doors.¹¹ He went on to take command of the carrier *USS Saratoga*. Soon, in 1937, Halsey returned to shore and assumed position as the commander of Naval Air Station, Pensacola.¹² By this time, he had made a name for himself as one of the leading aircraft carrier commanders and was awarded the rank of rear admiral on March 1, 1938, effectively proving his worth to those who had initially doubted his ability to convert to naval aviation.¹³



USS Gambier Bay and her escorts amidst a smoke screen off Samar



A view from *USS Cowpens* around the time Typhoon Cobra hit the Third Fleet on 18 December 1944

SECOND WORLD WAR

Pearl Harbor

After stints leading two carrier divisions, Carrier Division Two aboard *USS Yorktown* and Carrier Division One aboard *USS Saratoga*, Halsey received his third star in June 1940, commanding Aircraft, Battle Force, Pacific Fleet aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Enterprise*. He was on this carrier, returning to Pearl Harbor after delivering marine fighter planes to Wake Island, when the Japanese attacked on the morning of 7 December 1941.¹⁴ While bad weather delayed the *Enterprise's* arrival at Pearl Harbor, sparing her from a disastrous fate,

several scout aircraft which the carrier dispatched were caught in the middle of the attack and shot down.¹⁵ When Halsey witnessed the scale of destruction upon returning to Pearl Harbor, true to his nature, he promised, "Before we're through with them, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell."¹⁶

Doolittle Raid

In the demoralizing months after Pearl Harbor, Halsey successfully led Task Force 16 within 800 miles of Japan to launch the famed Doolittle Raid on 18 April 1942.¹⁷ The audacious raid was the first American retaliation to reach

the Japanese soil after Pearl Harbor. In a one-way trip, the bombing raiders fanned out, successfully hitting "ten targets in Tokyo, two in Yokohama, and one each in Kobe, Osaka, Nagoya, and Yokosuka."¹⁸ The aggressive raid substantially raised American morale and also pressured the Japanese into redirecting fighter planes to defend their home islands.¹⁹ With this successful mission, Halsey spurred his men on with his slogan "Hit hard, hit fast, hit often."²⁰

Guadalcanal Campaign

On 18 November, Halsey was promoted to Admiral after replacing Admiral Robert

Ghormley as Commander South Pacific Forces and South Pacific Area, “contemporary explanations for Ghormley’s replacement share the common theme that he lacked aggressiveness, but this was really a symptom of defeatism, a disease that had become rampant at his headquarters.”²¹ Hasley’s ready-to-fight reputation and instinct was the remedy that the South Pacific Fleet needed.

During the 26 October 1942 Battle of Santa Cruz, Halsey led two aircraft carriers, one battleship (the *USS South Dakota*) and a few cruisers and destroyers against Vice Admiral Kondo Nobutake, who had four carriers, four battleships and several cruisers and destroyers.²² Although the aircraft carrier *USS Hornet* was sunk, leaving the USN with only the badly damaged *USS Enterprise* as their sole aircraft carrier in the Pacific, Halsey inflicted crippling damage on the Japanese naval aviation force—which lost approximately 150 aircrews, including nearly every squadron and flight leader they dispatched. As it would take several months for the Japanese to replace their pilots, this meant that the Americans had air superiority in following engagements.

Third Fleet

After successfully leading his fleet to victory in the Guadalcanal Campaign, Halsey led the US Third Fleet in Admiral Nimitz’s “island hopping” campaign. In September 1944,

he provided cover for the amphibious assault on Peleliu before moving on to support Vice Admiral Thomas Kinkaid’s Seventh Fleet in the Leyte Gulf.²³

The Japanese Combined Fleet’s commander, Admiral Toyoda, planned to counter the US invasion of the Philippines by using his remaining carriers, rendered combat ineffective due to lack of sufficient pilots and aircraft, under Vice Admiral Ozawa as bait.²⁴ The plan was for them to draw US attention away from Leyte, while he summoned his remaining ships to attack the landing force—and it worked.²⁵

Believing that the Japanese forces were retreating after victories over attacking Japanese surface ships on 23 and 24 October, Halsey chased these carriers north without properly communicating his intentions to Nimitz or Kinkaid.²⁶ Although he was successful in pursuing and destroying Ozawa’s carrier force, Halsey found himself too far away from the US invasion fleet and landing forces to provide support.²⁷ This led to the Battle off Samar, one of the few major battles where American forces found themselves unprepared against a more powerful opposing force, led by Vice Admiral Kurita. The American forces only had escort carriers and destroyers against the Japanese’s four battleships, six cruisers and ten destroyers.²⁸

During the Battle off Samar, the outgunned American forces managed to sink three cruisers

and dealt just enough damage to cause Vice Admiral Kurita to retreat—he feared and anticipated a aerial raid from Halsey’s carriers to follow.²⁹ Halsey realized his mistake and raced his ships back towards Leyte, however his failure to clearly communicate his intentions had left the invasion fleet vulnerable, severely affecting his reputation.³⁰

The Storms

On 17 December 1944, Hasley once again found himself caught off-guard—this time by Mother Nature. Although worsening weather had started to cause problems for his refueling fleet, he chose to remain in position, ignoring warnings.³¹ The next day, the storm had become a fully-formed typhoon, bringing 90-knot winds and forceful waves. Only then did Halsey order his fleet to steer away from the storm. However, it was too late: 790 men were lost along with three destroyers and 146 aircraft.³²

On 5 June 1945, Halsey steered his fleet into another typhoon. This storm formed around 1 June north of Palau and was being tracked on 4 June as Halsey was refueling. Halsey refused to believe that the storm could speed across the sea fast enough to cross paths with his fleet. As with the earlier storm, it was a terrible misjudgment and he sailed part of his fleet directly into its path.³³ In this encounter, *USS Pittsburgh’s* bow was ripped off.³⁴ Thankfully, the crew were at battle stations and no lives

were lost. Two other cruisers, a destroyer and four carriers incurred damage: six sailors and 76 aircraft were lost.³⁵ This second blunder almost ended his career as the subsequent court of inquiry recommended that “serious consideration” be given to assigning him to other duties and the Secretary of the Navy wanted to retire him.³⁶ Luckily for Halsey, arguments that this would boost Japanese morale and the strong public image that he had built up over the early years of the war kept him in service.

Post War Years

After the war, on 11 December 1945, Halsey was promoted to Fleet Admiral, and made a goodwill circuit through Central and South America, covering nearly 28,000 miles and 11 nations.³⁷ He also worked special duty within the Office of the Secretary of the Navy before retiring in March 1947, becoming a board member of the International Telephone and Telegraph Company and the American Cable and Radio Corporation.³⁸ When asked for a comment on his war experience and role in defending the US, Halsey said, “there are no great men, just great challenges which ordinary men, out of necessity, are forced by circumstances to meet.”³⁹

Looking back at the war, men whom Halsey commanded remain divided in their opinion of him. Memories of Leyte Gulf and “Halsey’s Typhoon” evoke disapproval at best. Halsey’s promotion to Fleet Admiral,

a five-star rank, was strongly objected to by the survivors of the Battle off Samar.⁴⁰ However, there is no denying the many successes that Admiral Halsey achieved over the course of WWII. When receiving his Fourth Distinguished Service Medal, he was praised for his characteristic aggressiveness, precision and persistence—for being the one who first engaged and finally finished off the “remnants of the once mighty Japanese Fleet.”⁴¹ 🗣️

ENDNOTES

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