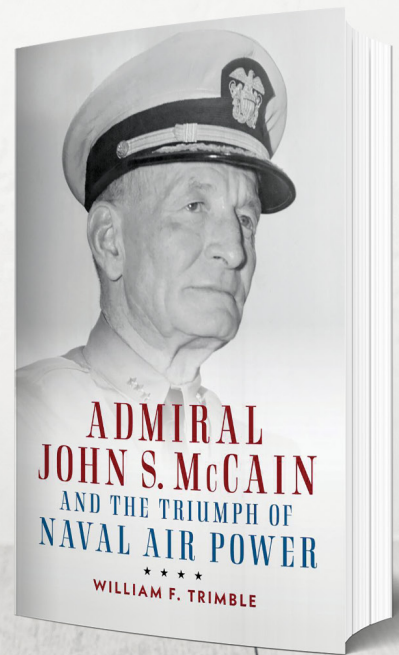


Admiral John S. McCain and the Triumph of Naval Air Power

William F. Trimble, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 2019, 416 pages



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Adm. John S. McCain was a highly accomplished sailor and later an aviator in the Second World War who served directly under Adm. William “Bull” Halsey, Third Fleet commander in the Pacific theater of action. Under the guidance and direction of McCain and many other notable naval flag officers highlighted in *Admiral John S. McCain and the Triumph of Naval Air Power*, “naval air power, organized into multicarrier task forces, evolved from a tactical supplement to the battle fleet dedicated to sea control and protecting sea lines of communication into an independent strategic striking force.”¹

Today, McCain’s story is not well known due to the passage of time and the fact that his grandson, the senior senator from Arizona who first came to the attention of most Americans with his release from the “Hanoi Hilton” at the end of the Vietnam War, eclipsed him in contemporary times. Of course, John McCain (the senator) was also the son of yet another admiral who commanded in the Vietnam War. There are three generations of Naval Academy graduates in the family, two who attained four-star flag rank and the last who attained high political

office and ran for president. Now, having cleared that up for those who may have been confused given the identical names (save the suffixes Sr., Jr., and III), on to William Trimble’s work.

McCain’s early military career coincided with the emergence of America as a global power. As an ensign, he joined the Great White Fleet while it anchored in Manila in 1908, halfway through its fourteen-month global cruise that began at Hampton Roads, Virginia, in December 1907 under the watchful and pride-filled eyes of Theodore Roosevelt. In the ensuing decades, he held a variety of operational and staff positions that allowed him to appreciate the internal workings of the Navy bureaucracy and navigate through it. He became an influential innovator in the evolution of naval aviation later in his career, particularly with regard to long-range

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reconnaissance aircraft, which would be invaluable in the Pacific theater given its expansiveness.

While McCain was not an early airpower advocate, he had witnessed airpower's evolution and could envision a future where it became the heart of the fleet. In 1935, as a captain staring retirement in the face in the not-too-far-off future, he could not see flag rank as a

with more good decisions than poor ones. He was a hero and an open-minded leader during peacetime and wartime; he was respected and liked by those who served under him—though not always an easy task given the plethora of difficult decisions that have to be made in the pressure cooker of compressed timelines, imperfect knowledge, death, and destruction.



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possibility unless he could somehow snag a plumb operational assignment—a battleship, or maybe a carrier. Recognizing the potential efficacy of aircraft within a future naval context and resigned to the fact that without a bold move, continued shore duty postings would torpedo any hope of attaining flag rank, he decided his best odds were within the aviation community; thus, he cast the dice, petitioning for reassignment to Pensacola, Florida, for flight training.² It helped greatly that he knew power brokers in Washington like Adm. William Leahy, who could waive the age limit for him. In training, he was not a great pilot but did “well enough.”³ Despite his late arrival to aviation at age fifty-two in 1936, his hard work and determination paid dividends, earning him the respect of many who later served under him.⁴ It also was essential to his command of the USS *Ranger* in 1937, the Navy's first carrier built for the expressed purpose of launching aircraft from the outset.⁵ In some ways, his advanced age when coming into aviation was a blessing in that his seniority and postings in Washington provided him with ample bureaucratic and political connections to effect innovation and change at a time when aviation was already undergoing significant evolution.

As the title of the book implies, this is a story about John S. McCain and the advancement—and eventual triumph—of naval aviation against Japan. In that sense, this is not a full-fledged biography but rather the story of a prominent Navy admiral against the backdrop of momentous events. His leadership stints were, arguably, a mixed bag, not quite as spectacular or error-free as some other titans, but solid,

As is so often said, “Timing is everything.” While McCain's timing was propitious in many respects, it was off in one notable instance. By March 1942, there were only three operational flattops in the Pacific—*Lexington*, *Enterprise*, and *Yorktown*—each the centerpiece of a numbered task force. Fortunately, the newly constructed *Hornet* (CV 8), completing its trials, would soon be available to augment Adm. Chester Nimitz's carrier force. It was, at the time, under Adm. Marc Mitscher's Task Force 18. As luck would have it, McCain, then commanding an aircraft scouting force in San Diego, had recently spoken with Nimitz, who was impressed enough that he planned to have McCain take over the fledgling Task Group forming on *Hornet*, though he had not informed McCain of his decision yet. Nimitz duly informed Adm. Ernest King, chief of naval operations, about this, only to be informed the next day (13 March) that the *Hornet* and Mitscher were set to rendezvous with Halsey and *Enterprise* to form a combined Task Force 16. At a loss as to the purpose of this, Nimitz would only learn, almost a week later, that both the *Hornet* and *Enterprise* were critical to a highly risky and secret plan to strike Japan with Army B-25 bombers. In all likelihood, McCain never knew how close he had come to getting a carrier task force command in 1942.⁶

By the end of March 1942, Roosevelt had approved a plan to divide the Pacific into two separate commands with Gen. Douglas MacArthur in charge of the Southwest Pacific and Nimitz overseeing the “Pacific Ocean Areas.” As it became apparent that Japan's next move would likely be in MacArthur's

area of operations, King and Nimitz looked to leverage McCain's aggressiveness and experience to corral the chaotic collection of planes, ships, and bases in the region. He would have to do so on a very under-resourced basis, since the European theater would get priority; operations such as the Battle of Midway would only exacerbate his austere situation.⁷ To make matters worse, his long-range reconnaissance assets, despite new technology like radar and access to ULTRA intercepts, depended on adequately trained operators, which were in short supply. Intelligence gleaned from ULTRA, while illuminating the strategic situation, often had far less value in terms of immediate operational concerns. McCain later expressed his frustration saying, "In the late spring of 1942, there was, literally, no intelligence worthy of the name."⁸ When the dust settled, despite hiccups, McCain's time in the Southwest Pacific was praised, and he was deemed worthy of consideration for future task force command at sea, but Washington called first, specifically the Bureau of Aeronautics (BuAer), in October 1942.

With a mind-boggling budget of \$1 billion in 1942, BuAer was an important entity in the global fight, but it struggled to loosen itself from a peacetime Navy culture, according to a damning report prepared by an external consulting firm. What was needed, per the report, "were experts who knew how to run large organizations, more often than not executives recruited from the business world."⁹ McCain was dropped into this situation. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that as the war went on, production requirements grew. For example, eleven more fast carriers and at least seventy more escort carriers than previously estimated were produced and needed to be outfitted not only with aircraft but also trained pilots.¹⁰ BuAer had to manage all this. Additionally, spare parts, reliability, and modification (based on frontline experience) issues plagued the Navy, reliant as it was on commercial companies like Grumman. Oversight (or the lack thereof, actually) had become a major problem. "Not only did McCain have to do a juggling act to adapt aircraft production to constantly evolving combat requirements, but he also had to make decisions about ... entirely new weapon system[s] that, while promising, could divert much-needed resources and personnel from existing programs."¹¹ In August 1943, McCain became chief

of naval operations for air where he would serve for a year, though all the while he longed to be in the action.

Befitting his performances in Washington, McCain got the nod for what he craved: task force command. However, taking command was not that simple. McCain had come to understand he would assume command of Fast Carrier Task Force Pacific in August 1944, Mitscher's billet with Fifth Fleet. When Fifth Fleet transitioned to Third Fleet under Halsey, King had decided to split the carrier task force command. Mitscher would stay on as the commander of the newly established First Fast Carrier Task Force Pacific and McCain became commander of the Second Fast Carrier Task Force Pacific, both part of Task Force 38 in Halsey's Third Fleet.¹² Essentially, McCain would get more hands-on experience, temporarily commanding Task Group 38.1 under Mitscher. McCain chafed under this arrangement; he was senior to Mitscher but subordinate to him in this operational environment. He was convinced Mitscher had orchestrated this development and was upset about it, but despite a plea to Nimitz, he could do nothing about the arrangement. Mitscher would retain carrier task force command through the Marianas Campaign and the beginning of the next phase in the Pacific offensive.¹³ Interestingly, McCain, in trying to confer with Mitscher about the new arrangement and his mentorship of sorts, was bluntly thwarted by the latter, evidently dismissed by Mitscher as a usurper.¹⁴

As he settled into command, albeit not exactly the one he had envisaged, McCain became more proficient and comfortable. But before long, things were to get much more intense. The chief of naval operations had eventually agreed that Luzon was better than Formosa as the next objective in the march to Tokyo. As such, in preparation for the Leyte invasion, Nimitz directed Halsey to provide cover for the landings but also included the charge "in case of opportunity for destruction of major portion of the enemy fleet is offered or can be created, such destruction becomes the primary task," to which Halsey replied, "My goal is the same as yours—to completely annihilate the Jap fleet if the opportunity offers."¹⁵ This would be infamously remembered as a nuanced but critical misunderstanding between the two. This was exacerbated by the fact that, due to split commands (MacArthur and Nimitz), all direct communications

had to be routed through Nimitz and MacArthur, delaying responsiveness. While the Battle of Leyte Gulf went down as the largest sea battle of the entire war and a tremendous American naval victory, it was also the setting for a debacle that could have ended with a huge disaster at the amphibious landing zones where Halsey's forces had largely vacated the area in pursuit of a decoy fleet. Having sprinted north in pursuit of a Japanese deception, Halsey received a chilling but also infuriating message from Nimitz: "Where is Task Force 34? The world wonders."¹⁶ Halsey raced back south but was not able to close in time. Fortunately, Adm. Thomas Kinkaid's force of escort carriers, "tin cans," and such managed, against all odds, to stave off defeat.¹⁷ In contrast to Halsey, McCain received significant praise for his actions, especially in the Battle of Formosa (Taiwan).

Later, there would be real errors in judgment, primarily on Halsey's part, in avoiding (or trying to

avoid) two different storms that wreaked havoc on Third Fleet with significant damage to ships and loss of life, for which McCain would take some serious heat and blame as one of his senior commanders. Even McCain's detractors conceded he "had a creative mind," and noted he was "more of an adaptive and tenacious puzzle-solver seeking practical solutions to immediate problems."¹⁸ He also embraced "jointness" long before it became so highly valued in military circles.

In a tragic twist of fate for someone who had labored so hard to defeat the enemy and enjoy the fruits of victory, McCain would ultimately be at the signing of the armistice in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945, only to die one day after arriving home in the United States.

While so much of McCain's storied career must be synthesized (or skipped) here, the details await the reader's discovery in this well-written text, filled with wonderful pictures and useful maps. The book is well worth the reader's time investment. ■

Notes

1. William F. Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain and the Triumph of Naval Air Power* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 3.
2. Regulations required that anyone seeking to command an aircraft carrier had to first earn their wings, or at least go through a less-rigorous aviation observer course.
3. Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain*, 30.
4. He was just six months younger than William "Bull" Halsey who had earlier earned his wings and become the oldest officer to do so at Pensacola.
5. Previous carriers had been something else (or designed as something else) prior to conversion.
6. Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain*, 54–55.
7. At least in the short term; later, though, following the United States' victory at Midway, this would actually ease resource constrictions given the removal of any threat to Hawaii or the West Coast.
8. Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain*, 63.

9. *Ibid.*, 107.
10. *Ibid.*, 114.
11. *Ibid.*, 117.
12. Whether Third Fleet under Halsey, or Fifth Fleet under Spruance, the ships and most of the personnel remained the same; this rotation basically took place every six months.
13. Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain*, 154–55.
14. Per Trimble, Mitscher remained in his sea cabin and did not greet McCain when he arrived onboard, a very unprofessional and demeaning thing to do that reflected poorly on his legacy.
15. Adm. Chester Nimitz, as recorded in Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain*, 164.
16. *Ibid.*, 177–78.
17. Affectionate name sailors bestowed upon destroyers—thinly armored and lightly gunned but fast.
18. Trimble, *Admiral John S. McCain*, 288.