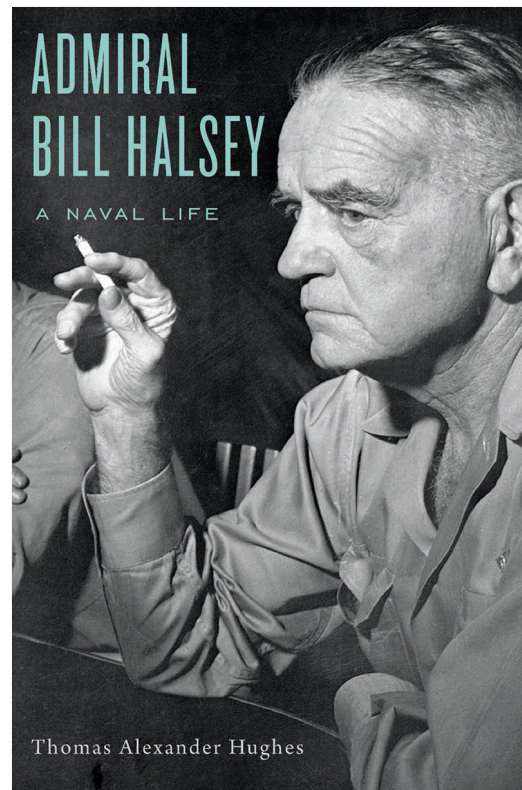


Admiral Bill Halsey

A Naval Life

Thomas Alexander Hughes, Harvard University Press,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016, 544 pages



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What do most of us know about Fleet Adm. William “Bull” Halsey? Generally, very little. While there is no shortage of works about celebrated World War II figures like Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and Gen. George Patton, there is surprisingly little about Halsey. It is surprising because he was arguably the most famous naval officer of World War II and was sometimes called the “Patton of the Pacific.”¹ But here, author Thomas Alexander Hughes gives us *Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life*, which is a wonderful exposé about a naval figure who, until now, was more caricature than real. It is quite amazing how much of an enigma Halsey remains.

Hughes’s writing is crisp and immensely satisfying to read. He paints a captivating portrait, covering the entirety of Halsey’s life—from his earliest days in New Jersey to his tranquil but lonely death at Fishers Island, New York; from Annapolis to his splash-into-active service with the Great White Fleet; and from where he struggled to find himself outside the Navy life to which

he had been accustomed to his contentious and ruinous attempts to amend his legacy, which led to his increasing obscurity. Near the end of his life, Halsey was honestly “a fish out of water” without the stability that Navy life had always given him and without the full embrace the Navy had, until relatively recently, afforded him.

Hughes’s research is first-rate, offering vivid details. In some ways, the setting of Halsey’s death is emblematic of his life; or rather, his life outside the glare of the four years covering World War II that were both a capstone and façade.

Hughes begins the book at the end of Halsey’s life, with the now elderly man relaxing where he was most at ease, Fishers Island. It was his regular vacation haunt; it was a sleepy little island near Connecticut with not much to attract big crowds, but it was just right—surrounded by the sea. Halsey would die of a heart attack, alone in his room, at age seventy-six.

The ensuing eulogies captured the myth of the man much more than they did the complicated

man that lay somewhere beneath the image he and others had crafted during the war. To some, he was “a sailor’s sailor.” To others, a skillful operator whose formula for winning was as blunt as it was simple—“Kill Japs, kill Japs, and kill more Japs.”² And still, others saw him, as the *Washington Post* described, “A seadog of the old school. Known since his football days at Annapolis as ‘Bull,’ he was square of jaw, pungent of speech, audacious in combat, and original in his approach to naval tactics.”³

Halsey was not a Navy intellectual, but he was a “fighting admiral without peer.”⁴ While that may be true, it may also obscure reality. Consider Halsey’s frequent comparisons to Adm. Raymond Spruance. In those comparisons, Halsey is regularly portrayed as more daring, while Spruance is more tentative; however, at times, the opposite was true. It is safe to say that “Halsey was a better thinker and Spruance more of a fighter than their respective reputations allowed.”⁵

As Hughes points out, “The Halsey of history is a cartoon, but there, in the South Pacific, he was a man.”⁶ Not surprisingly, the caricature Halsey (and several all-too-chummy members of his personal staff) created and embellished over time became the popular image of him in both life and death. But “[t]here was so much more to him. Halsey never spent a day outside the cocoon of the American military, a trait he shared only with General Douglas MacArthur out of all the officers in the nation’s history.”⁷

Without a present father to guide him, the Navy became, very early on, Halsey’s de facto family, if not his surrogate father. He would prove to be a bold and inspiring leader to his men, who met the operational hurdles presented by war at sea against Japan by delivering successes when almost no other commanders in the Pacific were able to do so. Yet, Hughes compellingly argues that Halsey’s “greatest contribution to the Allied victory was as commander of the combined sea, air, and land forces in the South Pacific during the long slog up the Solomon Islands chain ... turn[ing] a bruising slugfest with the Japanese Navy into a rout.”⁸ He also does not receive due credit for his able management of the constant bickering between Army and Navy leaders—personified by the clash of egos between MacArthur and Fleet Adm. Chester Nimitz. Somewhat inexplicably, he could get along and thrive while working for the

super ambitious, self-promoting, prickly MacArthur when seemingly no one else could, while simultaneously juggling his responsibilities to Nimitz and Fleet Adm. Ernest King.

But no discussion of the man can escape delving into his irrepressible zeal, once back at sea as commander of Third Fleet to scratch more Japanese flattops at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944 and to the detriment of other considerations.⁹ His subsequent abandonment of the then-exposed invasion force on the beaches mars an otherwise mostly splendid naval career.

Nimitz, Halsey’s boss, was keen to leave operational fighting to his commanders afloat. As such, he often pitched horseshoes to occupy his mind as battles raged over the horizon. But as communiqués from the Leyte operations began flooding into his headquarters, particularly the pleas for help from Adm. Thomas Kinkaid to Halsey, Nimitz became increasingly alarmed by the unfolding situation. With no communications from Halsey, he exasperatingly radioed Halsey himself: “Where is Task Force 34? The World Wonders.”¹⁰ At the time, Nimitz meant this as more of a prompt, but Halsey took it as a genuine swipe at his leadership. After the war he remembered, “I was stunned as if I had been struck in the face.”¹¹ In the heat of the moment, on the deck of his flagship, he threw his cap down and swore, “What right does Chester [Nimitz] have to send me a God-damned message like that?”¹² At that point, one of his trusted confidantes grabbed him and said, “Stop it. What the hell’s the matter with you? Pull yourself together!”¹³ Once the overall situation at Leyte became clearer, Halsey grudgingly took much of his force back south to alleviate the emerging crisis; however, he was quite far away by then. He was agitated by that necessity and later exclaimed, “It was not my job to protect the Seventh Fleet. My job was offensive, to strike with the Third Fleet.”¹⁴ In a moment of reflection, he mumbled to no one in particular, “When I get my teeth into something, I hate to let go.”¹⁵

In the after-action reflective period, many came to believe Halsey had been baited and

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fooled by the enemy, subsequently imperiling the American landings at Leyte Gulf. In the estimation of many in the know, it was only the unexpected retreat of the Japanese force that had come through the straits to savage the landings and “the definite partiality of Almighty God,” which saved the day for the United States. Hughes does a stellar job of teasing out the details of this near disaster turned epic success.¹⁶ His sage analysis illuminates the various story lines and perspectives. Convincingly, he uses Halsey’s own well-worn maxims concerning violating rules and doing the unexpected to seize and maintain the initiative to show that Halsey essentially violated his own credo at this battle. He concludes that Halsey’s basic mistake at Leyte was rooted not in audacity but orthodoxy. He could have protected the invasion force and gone after Vice Adm. Jisaburo Ozawa’s decoy fleet by splitting his enormous naval force. However, he rigidly clung to the notion of concentration despite the overall strategic context and overwhelming operational imbalance of forces favoring the United States by late 1944. Despite his mistakes, his bosses (Nimitz at Pearl Harbor and King in Washington) were willing to overlook the incident in light of all his other accomplishments in the end. They also came to realize the near debacle had many fathers, not just Halsey. And that might have been the end of it, if not for Halsey’s retelling of the story after the war in a way that incited antagonisms by attempting to shift blame.

Hughes also sheds light on other command blemishes in the wake of the Leyte Gulf incident, such as Halsey’s ill-fated decisions, on two separate occasions, to try and either outrun or to circumnavigate huge storms at sea. Those poor decisions wreaked havoc, causing tremendous damage and significant loss of life—arguably much more than the Japanese were capable of inflicting.

The first weather-related incident proved “an inglorious hour for our admiral.”¹⁷ To some who knew Halsey well, his mistakes laid bare “just plain goddam stubbornness and stupidity.”¹⁸ Underscoring that sentiment, Hughes concludes “throughout the force, rumblings of a bumbling admiral wafted from bluejacket corridors where before mostly admiration had reigned.”¹⁹ In the aftermath, a court of inquiry convened to review the matter. It found Halsey largely responsible for the disaster, but the court ultimately

gave the widely respected admiral a pass, citing the fickleness of weather forecasting and the inexperience of many destroyer skippers.

Roughly six months later, the weather struck Halsey’s fleet again. This time, possibly remembering the unreliable weather forecasting from six months earlier, Halsey dismissed the forecast and turned abruptly into the direction of the approaching storm; his fleet paid dearly. This time, the board of inquiry, confronted with Halsey’s “combative, contradictory, and evasive” testimony, was not inclined to forgive him.²⁰ It concluded Halsey was primarily responsible for the disaster. The similarities between the two incidents deeply troubled the court, which recommended relieving him of command. In this finding, the secretary of the Navy agreed. But Halsey’s status as a national hero gave him a layer of protection. Eventually, it was decided that he should remain at his post as the war was ending, and it would not play well at home or do any favors for the Navy. Through these events, one can clearly see that Halsey’s judgment was sometimes dubious at best, possibly a result of being at sea too long.

At war’s end, Halsey struggled to settle into retirement. It was an alien existence for him. And, of course, he was no spring chicken by then. Undeniably, Halsey was a powerful and effective leader. But after dissecting his career, it is easy to see that his time as fleet admiral overshadows all else. He served in the role for a mere two years, and those two years leading a battle fleet represented less than half his total service time in World War II. Outside of that time frame, Hughes believes that “he was hesitant in his judgments and uncertain in his relationships.”²¹ His celebrated audacity was a professional skill practiced over decades at sea, which could be summoned in that military environment; however, it was not a personal trait he could tap into outside that semicontrolled environment. This explains much about his strained family relationships, strained Navy relationships after the war, and strained relationships with book authors and filmmakers. In short, his “signature” audacity was situationally dependent, rather than an instinctual attribute he could effortlessly tap into in any circumstance.

Hughes deserves high marks for this overdue profile, for the quality of the research and for his astute insights into the man’s complicated persona. This is a wonderful addition to the field of military history and ranks as possibly the finest Halsey biography available today. ■

Notes

1. Thomas Alexander Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), jacket.
2. *Ibid.*, 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. James Merrill, *A Sailor's Admiral: A Biography of William F. Halsey* (Springfield, OH: Crowell, 1976), as quoted in Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 381.
6. *Ibid.*, 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 4.
8. *Ibid.*, jacket.
9. *Ibid.*, 328. When Halsey was in charge of the operational Pacific Fleet, it was named Third Fleet; once handed over to Adm. Raymond Spruance for a six-month rotating interval, essentially the same fleet was then called the Fifth Fleet; in effect, the commander and some of the staff changed, but the ships were the same. It was, as Halsey explained, "a sort of pony express in reverse, where the riders and not the horses changed at predetermined moments."
10. Thomas Cutler, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 249, quoted in Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 370.
11. William Halsey and Joseph Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 220; Carl Solberg, *Decision and Dissent: With Halsey at Leyte Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 154; Thomas Cutler, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 251, quoted in Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 370.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 368–69.
15. Solberg, *Decision and Dissent*, 70, quoted in Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 369.
16. *Ibid.*, 372–73.
17. *Ibid.*, 383.
18. E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 1985), 35; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Liberation of the Philippines, Luzon, Mindanao, and the Visayas, 1944-1945* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), 63; Gerald Bogan, interview by Etta-Belle Kitchen, *Oral History* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1970), 125–26; Bob Drury and Tom Clavin, *Halsey's Typhoon* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 270-271, quoted in Hughes, *Admiral Bill Halsey*, 384.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 389.
21. *Ibid.*, 6.

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