Mastering the Single Naval Battle

ADM Raymond Spruance's lessons for Naval leaders

by BGen William J. Bowers & Williamson Murray

The past can prove enormously useful because it suggests how to best analyze the problems we will confront in the future. LtCol Wayne Sinclair once noted in a *Marine Corps Gazette* article,

> The greatest challenges and most far reaching opportunities of the MAGTF commander [will] lie in his ability to orchestrate and synchronize the efforts of numerous, diverse entities along a single path toward an overarching campaign objective.[1]

In another influential article, ADM John C. Harvey and Col Phillip J. Ridderhof further describe the logic of a "single naval battle:"

> [The single naval battle] is a framework, or lens, for thinking, planning, and executing naval operations: *Everything* that occurs in the maritime battlespace affects *everything else* in that battlespace—so *every* aspect of Navy and Marine Corps doctrine and operations must take into account the impact *across the whole naval force*.[2]

In an era of great power competition, the American military needs to rediscover and re-invigorate maritime strategic thought and, knowing how to envision the "single naval battle" is a significant part of that. No other practitioner of operational art mastered the ability to orchestrate a single naval battle in the Second World War better than ADM Raymond Spruance. ADM Spruance's intellectual preparation and conduct of key battles during the Second World War demonstrates that he truly grasped the single naval battle, underscoring both the qualities which won the war and which commanders of naval expeditionary forces will require

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LEADERS ON GUAM----Marine and Naval leaders as they met at Marine Major General, now Lieutenant General, Roy S. Geiger's headquarters on Guam. Left to right are: General Geiger, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Lieutenant General, Holland M. Smith, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and Lieutenant General, now General, Alexander A. Vandegrift, Commandant of the Marines.

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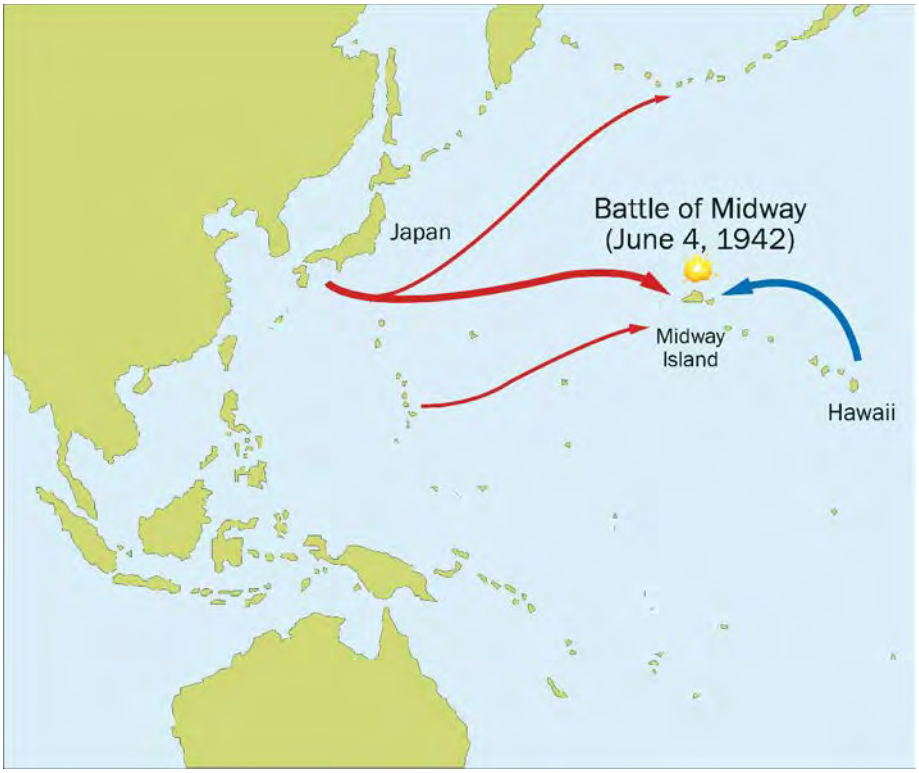
in large measure in the coming decades of the 21st century.

Intellectual Preparation

During the interwar period, Spruance served in a Navy that possessed an extraordinary culture in which experimentation and innovation occurred at an extraordinary pace.[3] Spruance served in several engineering billets, including as the Assistant Engineer Officer at the New York Naval Shipyard, and was highly regarded for his knowledge of technologies which served him well as he helped exploit radar and the value of the new combat information center in his carriers and cruisers. The first table war games at Newport in the early 1920s provided crucial insights into how best to employ air power at a time when the United States Navy did not possess a single aircraft carrier. The first carrier, the USS *Langley* (CV-1), was commanded by CAPT Joseph Reeves, straight from the Naval War College faculty. With the knowledge Reeves gained there, he created the concept of deck parks and crash barriers while developing ways to shorten the takeoff and recovery times for carriers.

Combined with Newport's wargaming and educational efforts came the fleet exercises to test and evaluate new concepts while analyzing present and future capabilities. Significantly, the "Flexes" were ruthlessly critiqued by those who participated, and reports on what had transpired were distributed widely throughout the Service—even though the participating admirals may have made errors. The pre-World War II U.S. Navy took education incredibly seriously; by June 1941, 83 of the Navy's 84 admirals had graduated from the Naval War College.[4] ADM Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief Pacific during the Pacific War, was indeed right when he commented after the war that the Navy had foreseen everything that was to come in the Pacific during the interwar years, except for the Kamikazes.



Battle of Midway. *(Map provided by Marine Corps History Division.)*

It was this Navy, with the intellectual rigor emanating from Newport, where Raymond Spruance spent his time during the interwar period. Along with the years he spent at sea learning the technologies of air and surface warfare, Spruance spent one year as a student at the Naval War College and *two tours* on the faculty at Newport. These were not wasted years because Spruance spent his time in serious study and preparation for a war he hoped would not come—but did. Spruance also displayed a streak of intellectual independence and moral courage at Newport by disagreeing with the college president, RADM Edward C. Kalbfus, on a tactics manual that Kalbfus himself had personally written.[5]

The Battle of Midway

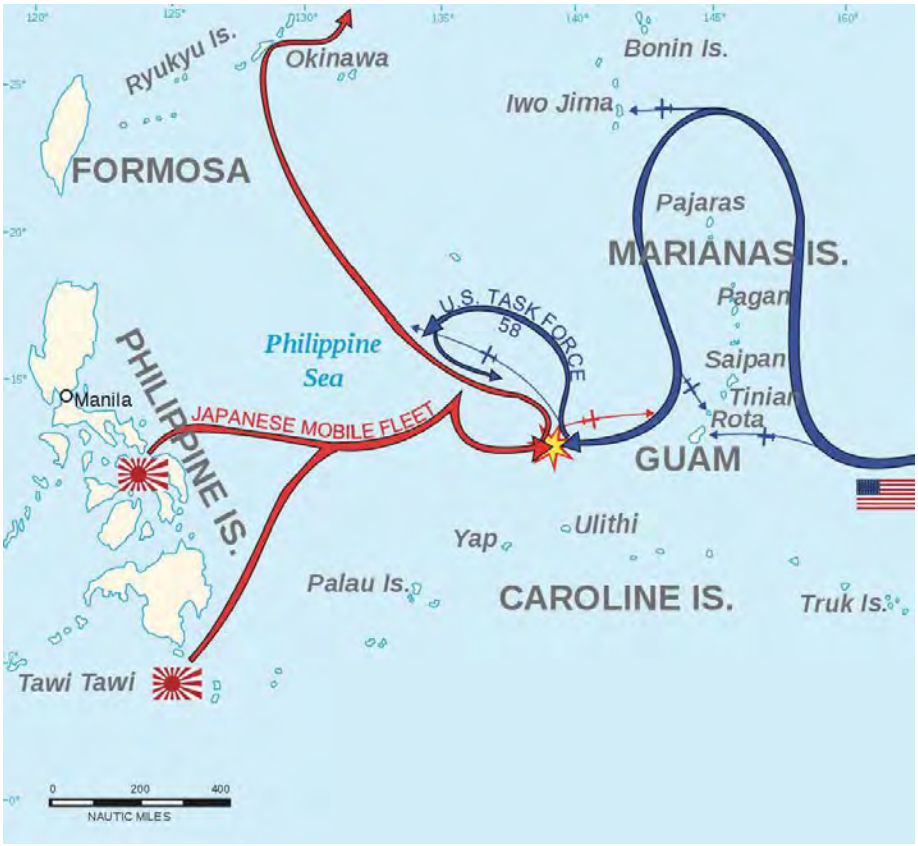
The war provided Spruance with the venue to showcase his talents and intellectual preparation. As the Japanese forces were already on the move to attack Midway in late May 1942, ADM "Bull" Halsey arrived back in Pearl Harbor with his task force, but had become so seriously ill that he needed to be hospitalized. Spruance was the choice of both Nimitz and Halsey to take over the latter's position. The actual battle of Midway was a mixture of Japanese hubris, American luck, and outstanding leadership by Spruance. With the foresight that the breaking of the Japanese code provided the Americans, Nimitz ordered Spruance and RADM Jack Fletcher to position their separate carrier task forces to the northeast of Midway and waited to pounce on the Japanese. Fletcher's task force, built around the *Yorktown* (CV-5), was soon out of operation because of Japanese strikes. But the initial American attacks from the carriers had already mortally wounded three of the Japanese carriers while strikes in the late afternoon mortally wounded the last of the Japanese carriers in the invasion force: the *Hiryu*.

Now, the question that Spruance confronted was what to do as dusk settled; he could pursue the Japanese in search of more targets or pull back to the east beyond the reach of the enemy. To Spruance the answer was clear. His mission was to inflict the maximum damage the Japanese carrier force and *to protect Midway* and its land-based aviation capability. At the same time, Nimitz made clear he was not to take

undue risks because America's Pacific fleet was still inferior to that of the Imperial Japanese Navy, not only in terms of numbers but in its training as well: a reality that the Battle of Savo Island in the littorals of Guadalcanal proved two months later.

Astonishingly, as the dust settled, VADM William Pye—the Naval War College's president who failed to relieve the Marines at Wake Island in December 1941 after his beloved battleships had been sunk in Pearl Harbor, and who retained the outlook of a classic "Battleship Admiral"—issued a stinging critique of the Midway Battle. Pye was highly critical of Spruance's failure to pursue a beaten Japanese fleet after U.S. aircraft had sunk the fourth Japanese carrier. What Monday-morning quarterbacks like Pye failed to see, but Spruance saw, was that Midway had bloodied the Japanese, but the Imperial Japanese Navy remained an extraordinarily dangerous opponent. The Americans had already taken great risks to win the Battle of Midway; they did not need to take any more by risking a night battle against an adversary who was both more numerous in surface ships and better trained for fighting at night. Spruance saw the single naval battle. Consequently, Spruance took this criticism with a grain of salt and did not dignify his critics with a response. Nor did this criticism influence his decisions when in command of greater forces later in the war. It was not the last time those who had not stood on the bridge to face the terrible conundrums that battle presents would critique the admiral who truly grasped the single naval battle.

However, ADMs King and Nimitz were in charge, and they at least understood the tough decisions that Spruance had addressed so well. For the immediate future after Midway, Spruance found himself pulled back to Pearl Harbor to serve as Nimitz's chief of staff, while Halsey—now recovered—went back to sea to command the carriers he temporarily lent to Spruance. The latter hated being Nimitz's chief of staff as he much preferred to be at sea. But in the desperate days after Midway, as Nimitz struggled to patch together naval forces sufficient to supply and protect the Marines thrown ashore at Guadalcanal against the formidable Imperial Japanese Navy, Spruance proved to be an invaluable chief of staff, counselor, adviser, and supporter to his chief.



Battle of the Philippine Sea. *(Map courtesy of Creative Common Attribution-Share Alike 3.0.)*

The Battle of the Philippine Sea

Slightly more than a year later, Spruance went back to sea. With American industry beginning to hit full stride, an increasing number of ships began arriving at Pearl Harbor.[6] The need was now for a command to control the naval side of what would become King and Nimitz's island-hopping command. Spruance received that position of what was initially called the Central Pacific Force and renamed as the Fifth Fleet in April 1944. The first strike came in the Gilberts with the landings on Tarawa and Makin. Spruance and his subordinate naval commander (and former subordinate instructor at Newport), ADM Richmond Kelly Turner, cleared the way by a series of fierce attacks on Japanese air bases in the northern Gilberts. But Tarawa proved that the advance to Japan was not going to be an easy one with the well-prepared Japanese defenders badly bloodying the 2d Marine Division.

The next island chain to be confronted were the Marshalls in mid-February, three months earlier than originally planned. The earlier than anticipated timing as well as the islands chosen for the assault—Kwajalein and Roi-Namur on the northern end of the Marshalls—caught the Japanese by surprise. Land-based and American carrier air power again succeeded in destroying Japanese air power throughout the island chain while a major air attack took the Japanese base at Truk out of the picture. In March, Nimitz—still haunted by Tarawa—had second thoughts about a major offensive against the Marianas. King immediately set him straight. *There would be* a major offensive against the Marianas in early June. Here, the desire of the Army Air Forces to bring the new B-29s into play, by using the Marianas as bases to attack Japan, undoubtedly influenced the

Joint Chiefs of Staff. King also ordered Halsey assume command of Spruance's forces with a new headquarters, Third Fleet, after Fifth Fleet had completed the conquest of the Marianas.

The Marianas underlined Spruance's ability to match aggressiveness with caution while still envisioning the single naval battle. His overall mission was to protect the landing force and to destroy the Imperial Japanese Navy if it came out to challenge the landing. What Spruance understood, and which his Monday-morning critics again did not, was the *landing force* was his primary obligation. Any ability of the Japanese to get at the landing forces would represent a severe blow to American morale and put a stain on the Navy's reputation. Having cleared up a substantial portion of Japanese air throughout the Marianas and Bonin Islands, Fifth Fleet and its amphibious forces landed the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions on Saipan.

As the American gunfire support for the landings on Saipan began, ADM Ozawa weighted anchor with the main Japanese fleet. Spruance was quickly appraised by U.S. submarines that the Japanese fleet was on the way. As a precaution, he ordered the amphibious forces that were about to land on Guam to pull back while the land battle on Saipan continued. Fifth Fleet remained in the neighborhood to protect the transports and supply ships that were making the landings.

Because the Japanese possessed aircraft with substantially longer range, they were able to launch their strikes first, but their inexperienced pilots became tired on the long legs and launching first did them little good. Their pilots simply did not receive the extensive training that had once marked the Japanese air forces and which American pilots were now receiving. Because he had no need to launch an attack, Spruance could concentrate all his fighters for defense. Consequently, nearly all of the Imperial Japanese Navy attackers were slaughtered in what became known as the "Marianas' Turkey Shoot." Altogether, the Japanese lost more than 350 aircraft; American losses were only 20 Hellcats.

Spruance kept the Fifth Fleet to the east near Saipan and Tinian to *protect the landing force*. That night he turned west when he was sure there was no threat to the forces battling around Saipan. Fifth Fleet did not catch up until late the next day with the Japanese barely in striking range. Spruance's strike managed to sink one light carrier and damage six other ships, but most of the Japanese fleet escaped to fight another day. Spruance again, almost immediately, came under intense criticism from the aviators, criticism that has echoed down to the present. But he had weighed the risk and chose correctly. As his biographer noted,

> Until he knew the locations of all the major elements of the Japanese fleet, he felt that he could not leave Saipan unprotected either to attack or search for the enemy.[7]

... a man's judgment is best when he can forget himself and any reputation he may have acquired, and can concentrate wholly on making the right decisions ...

The protection of the amphibious landing was his primary purpose. The landing force was *not bait* to draw out the Japanese fleet to be destroyed. Once again, Spruance's ability to see the single naval battle contributed to the greatest air-to-air combat victory in U.S. and naval history.

Operations in the Information Environment

At the conclusion of the Marianas campaign, Spruance and his Fifth Fleet relinquished command of the great offensive fleet the United States had built to Halsey and his Third Fleet. What then transpired was to underline the wisdom of Spruance's command decision making, and perhaps more impressively, his understanding of what we now call operations in the information environment. In command of the invasion of the Philippines, Halsey's instructions were much the same as those of Spruance: to protect the landings on Leyte and destroy the Japanese fleet.

As the British General James Wolfe remarked during the campaign against French Canada in 1759, "War is an option of difficulties." When American aircraft finally identified the Japanese carriers to the north of the Philippines, Halsey—believing that Japanese surface ships no longer represented a threat—headed north with virtually all of the carriers and fast battleships. He left the landing force with a hodgepodge of destroyers and escort carriers for protection. While Halsey was far away, what was left of the Japanese battle fleet slipped through the San Bernadino Straits and headed straight for the Allies' amphibious landings. Only the grossest incompetence by the Japanese commander, ADM Kurita, and the extraordinary bravery of the tin-can Sailors and escort carrier pilots saved the Americans from very serious losses. Kurita's decision to turn away at the last moment also saved Halsey's reputation.

Months afterward, as the Iwo Jima battle raged, Spruance likely had Halsey (who had favorably courted and created a fighting persona in the media) in mind when remarked to a friend,

> Personal publicity in war can be a drawback because it can affect a man's thinking … a man's judgment is best when he can forget himself and any reputation he may have acquired, and can concentrate wholly on making the right decisions … to keep himself impersonal and realistic in his thinking.[8]

Years later, Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who had two four-star officers resign their commands on his watch (ADM William J. Fallon and GEN Stanley McChrystal), similarly reflected in his memoirs,

> [I] never understood why top admirals and generals felt compelled to go on Facebook, to tweet and blog, usually about their daily schedule and activi-

ties … [this activity] diminishes their aura of rank and authority [and that] the military is different, or at least should be.9

Conclusion

What are we to learn from the career and performance of an admiral who served 75 years ago in the midst of a great world war where there was little resemblance between the technology of its time and our present revolution in technology? Spruance was a consummate military professional in war and peace. In peacetime he was a student of history; he read widely; he studied the technologies of the present and thought about their potential in the future; he carefully measured the framework within which the Navy would operate in peacetime as in war; he demonstrated independence and moral courage. However, he always kept his ego in check. As a faculty member at the Naval War College, he won the admiration of the students and his colleagues. As a battle commander in three of the most important naval battles of the Pacific War, he displayed cool, calculated reasoning and kept the main mission in his mind. If the opportunity occurred, he was more than happy to tangle with the Imperial Japanese Navy, but only on his own terms and with full consideration of what the larger purpose of the operation was, and within the context of a single naval battle.

In every respect, ADM Spruance was among the few great military figures of the war. When the war was over, Spruance—who could have had virtually any command in the Navy—chose to return to the Naval War College as its president, a clear indication of his priorities and entirely consistent with the Secretary of the Navy's recent observation that, "The intellectual development of our naval leaders is the most critical warfighting capability for our national security."10

Notes

1. LtCol Wayne A. Sinclair, "In Search of the Single Battle," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2007).

2. ADM John C. Harvey and Col Phillip J. Ridderhof, "Keeping Our Amphibious Edge," *USNI Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: July 2012).

3. Over the past two decades a revolution in our understanding of the Navy in the interwar period has overturned the false narrative that posited a brave set of aviators being suppressed by the battleship admirals. Among a number of studies see Alfred F. Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems*, (Newport, RI: Military Bookshop, 2010); Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange, The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1987-1945*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991); John T. Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet that Defeated the Japanese Navy*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008); and Thomas Hone, Mark David Mandeles, and Norman Friedman, *American and British Aircraft Carrier Development, 1919-1941*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999).

4. Trent Hone, *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898-1945*, (Annapolis, MD: USNI Press, 2018).

5. Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Raymond A. Spruance*, (Annapolis, MD: USNI Press, 1987).

6. Beginning in July 1943 an Essex class carrier began arriving in the Pacific every month with its crew and air complement fully trained.

7. *The Quiet Warrior, A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance.*

8. Ibid.

9. Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf: 2014).

10. The Honorable Richard V. Spencer, Secretary of the Navy, *Memorandum on Education for Seapower Decisions and Immediate Actions*, (Washington, DC: February 2019).