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## Reading Group Guide

# THE ADMIRALS



NIMITZ, HALSEY, LEAHY, and KING—

The Five-Star Admirals

Who Won the War at Sea

**WALTER R. BORNEMAN**

## *History's Lesson: Sea Power Defines a Nation*

Seventy-one years ago, the battles of Coral Sea and Midway set the United States firmly on course to become the world's undisputed naval power. How long it will remain so and whether it matters are questions central to any debate about U.S. military spending. These questions should not be answered lightly. Few lessons from history have remained as incontestable as the importance of sea power to a nation's political and economic standing.

Sea power has been the ultimate measure of global reach and influence since the Greeks stemmed Persia's land conquests with a naval victory at Salamis Bay in 480 BC. Despite having the largest and best-trained army in Europe in the mid-1700s, France lost its overseas empire, including Canada, to Great Britain because France could not support its colonies via the seas. Great Britain held on to a worldwide empire where the "sun never set" throughout the nineteenth century only because of the superiority of the Royal Navy.

By 1898, the United States was flexing its muscles on two oceans. New innovations in iron and steel battleships produced an arms race in dreadnoughts that were capable of ever-increasing speed, range, and firepower. Great Britain fought to maintain its dominance, while Germany, in particular, challenged its naval strength. Ironically, during World War I, Germany poured huge resources into creating a powerful fleet but then used it tentatively before sequestering it in safe ports for the duration. But recognizing how close Germany had come to mastering the seas, Great Britain and its allies, including the United States, made certain that Germany's fleet was confiscated at the war's end.

After this war to end all wars, idealists from the major powers convened in Washington, DC, in November 1921 for the Washington Conference. The results were limits on naval tonnage and capital

ship construction. If navies were kept small, the argument ran, there could be no great clash of arms. Japan, a nominal member of the World War I victors, was only too glad to accept levels below those of Great Britain and the United States, because while these latter countries respected the limits for the better part of fifteen years, Japan ignored them and surged toward parity in naval might.

Only Franklin D. Roosevelt's slow buildup of the American navy during the late 1930s kept Japan from surpassing American naval strength. As devastating as the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was, the American navy had already begun to embrace aircraft carriers and naval aviation—instead of battleships—as the new weapons of naval superiority. Japan's attacks throughout the Pacific in December 1941 were evidence of the effectiveness of these weapons, but the Americans would soon prove it in spades.

In May 1942, just five months after Pearl Harbor, Allied naval forces led by the American carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown* engaged in the first sea battle fought exclusively between aircraft and blunted the Japanese advance at the battle of Coral Sea. The action protected the critical West Coast-to-Australia lifelines and arguably saved Australia from invasion. Less than a month later, American pilots from three carriers near Midway sank four Japanese carriers that Japanese shipyards could not readily replace. The United States, on the other hand, not only replaced the *Lexington*, sunk at Coral Sea, and *Yorktown*'s loss at Midway, but also launched twenty-one other fast carriers over the next three years.

By the time Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz signed the Japanese surrender for the United States aboard the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay in 1945, the United States was the undisputed naval power in the world. Its opponents had been crushed and its allies weakened by the demands of victory. Only the United States had been able to flex its industrial muscle and float new ship construction, after total battle losses, to include the fast carriers, 70 escort carriers, 35 cruisers, 206 destroyers, 361 destroyer escorts, and 120 submarines—most built during a three-year period. Today, the entire American fleet has only 286 ships, about half the number of the Reagan Administration's buildup of the late 1980s.

After World War II, land-based air power became both an essential Cold War capability and a deterrent. Yet it has consistently been sea power, frequently delivered by aircraft carriers, that has maintained America's political and economic leadership. The United States Navy quarantined Cuba during the missile crisis and kept the Strait of Hormuz and other vital waterways open, and has dispatched American aid around the globe in response to military crises and for humanitarian efforts.

How long American naval superiority will last is uncertain, but as to whether or not it matters, history shows the answer to be a resounding yes. China holds approximately \$1.2 trillion of United States debt. In a global economy of friendly competition, many view this as a matter of course. But what if China used \$12 billion of this debt—1 percent—to deploy an aircraft carrier operating off each coast of the United States? The dynamics suddenly change. Whether the threat comes from another country or from machine-gun-toting pirates or suicide terrorists, an international economy requires naval power.

Those who say that threats have diminished do not understand history. With 70 percent of the globe covered by water, the country that wields naval power most effectively has always maintained a position of political and economic leadership. The dominance of the United States Navy must be maintained if America is serious about continuing its role as a global leader in the twenty-first century. There is no substitute for sea power, and history has proven that if the United States doesn't exercise it, some other nation will.

“History’s Lesson: Sea Power Defines a Nation” by Walter R. Borneman originally appeared on Time.com.

## One Veteran's Story

One afternoon six months after I turned in the manuscript for this book, I was at the post office in my little mountain town and I noticed an elderly gentleman behind me in line. He wore a battered green cap with the words "*Lexington*, CV-2" emblazoned on the front. It didn't seem possible, but I had to ask: "Were you on the original *Lexington*?"

"Yes," he answered proudly, "but it was sunk."

"I know," I replied, "at Coral Sea in 1942."

That exchange made eighty-nine-year-old Bill Dye and me quick friends. Dye had enlisted in the navy right out of high school. After basic training and electrician school, he reported aboard the *Lexington* at San Diego in October 1941. After Pearl Harbor, Dye was promoted to Electrician's Mate, Third Class, the inside joke being that he was now qualified to screw in a light bulb without stripping the threads.

May 8, 1942, proved the fatal day. From his station in E Division, Bill Dye felt the *Lexington* shudder as two torpedoes slammed into the carrier's portside. These were followed by three bomb hits along the flight deck. The ship listed to port with its engineering spaces partially flooded and fires raging. The crew fought back, counter-flooded some compartments, and soon had the ship making twenty-five knots. Then vapors from spilled aviation gas ignited. Dye and his shipmates scrambled topside as the order was given to abandon ship.

Afterward, it was the little things Dye remembered the best: The neat line of shoes along the edge of the flight deck as sailors took them off and went over the side. The ice cream—usually a rationed treat—that appeared as if by magic and was devoured by greasy hands. The twenty-six dollars Dye left in his wallet in his locker below.

Out of a complement of 2,951 on board *Lexington* that morning, only 137 were killed. That was due, Dye says, to the fact that “not one man on that ship got out of line.” Dye was put on a transport and shipped back to San Diego. From there he served on the submarine chaser PC-626 off North Africa and in the invasions of Sicily and Italy. By the time he finally got to New York City on leave, Dye remembers, “there wasn’t a bad-looking woman in the world.”

Bill Dye is one of the few remaining members of the greatest generation who sailed into harm’s way as fresh-faced teenagers. He once admitted to me that he couldn’t remember what he had for breakfast, but his memories of the *Lexington*, he said, were crystal clear.

## *In-the-Field Research*

I have always appreciated and tried to emphasize the strong link between history and geography. It is difficult for me to write about events without having experienced their physical locations. Admittedly, with this book the vast stage of the seas played a large role, but that did not stop me from visiting the shore locations central to this story. Among them were the United States Naval Academy; Pearl Harbor; the Washington Navy Yard and Arlington National Cemetery; Hyde Park, New York; Newport, Rhode Island; and the Nimitz family home in Fredericksburg, Texas. Standing before the graves of my subjects always provokes a slight shiver.

As far as physical visits to the sea locations, the best alternative is to visit the ships on which these men sailed. All four *Iowa*-class battleships have been preserved and are open as museums in Los Angeles (*Iowa*), Camden (*New Jersey*), Pearl Harbor (*Missouri*), and Norfolk (*Wisconsin*). King's old flagship from the Atlantic squadron, the battleship *Texas*, is a memorial at San Jacinto, Texas. Sadly, the aircraft carriers that Halsey commanded and that stemmed the Japanese tide in 1942 were all sunk or later scrapped, including the venerable *Enterprise*. But the second *Yorktown* and the *Intrepid* are memorials at Charleston, South Carolina, and New York City, respectively.

## *A Conversation with Walter Borneman*

*How did you get interested in history?*

I was in third grade and it was the beginning of the centennial of the Civil War. That was more than fifty years ago, but I found the stories of generals and battles quite exciting. I think that it helped my interest that as a child I got to visit places like Gettysburg and Yorktown. Later, it was mountains, railroads, and mining towns that intrigued me in Colorado. This country is a wonderful mosaic of the experiences of many different people, and it is fascinating to watch the development of the American nation through those collective experiences.

*Why did you decide to write about these admirals and the United States Navy?*

Navies and sea power are major themes in two of my earlier books. It was the power of the Royal Navy that controlled the seas and won Great Britain a global empire during the French and Indian War. The War of 1812 is filled with stories of ship-to-ship battles on the high seas and, far more important to the outcome of the war, naval battles on the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain. In some respects, *The Admirals* is a continuation of those themes of national expansion and sea power. As Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King were graduating from Annapolis, the United States was stepping onto the world stage as a global power. Forty years later at the end of World War II, it had become the most dominant sea power in the history of the world.

*Who are some of your heroes in this book?*

Actually, since its publication, the men and women who have written me about their experiences in World War II have become my heroes.



All were very young at the time, but they went where they were ordered and served our country an ocean or two away from home. For many, their service became the defining period of their lives. I recall in particular Richard E. Bennink, who was a 1938 NROTC graduate of Harvard. Bennink commanded three waves of Higgins boats landing a battalion of marines on the tiny island of Gavutu just north of Guadalcanal in early August 1942. He repeatedly went ashore under heavy fire to make certain that his disembarked troops could hold their positions and to evacuate their wounded.

*What is the most important contribution that The Admirals makes to the history of World War II?*

To my thinking, it is the largely overlooked role of William D. Leahy. I have stopped short of calling him “acting president” in the final year of Franklin Roosevelt’s life, but he was very close to it. And because of Leahy’s self-effacing personality, most of the country knew almost nothing about him. It goes beyond the scope of this book, but the equally amazing thing about Leahy is that he went on to give the same service to Harry Truman for the first four years of Truman’s presidency. I challenge you to name another person who performed so close and important an adviser role, not to just one but to two presidents.

*What are you working on next?*

Up next is *American Spring*, a book on the first six months of the American Revolution. It fills a void between my earlier work on the French and Indian War, which in many respects created the climate that fostered revolution, and the War of 1812, which is the defining moment that proves the United States will not only survive as an independent nation but also expand across the continent. Those early months of 1775 are a tense tangle of emotions on all sides and they ignite a powder keg that burns for another six years, until the British surrender at Yorktown.

## *Questions and Topics for Discussion*

1. What role did the United States Naval Academy play in the careers of these four men?
2. How was the career of each man entwined with new developments in submarines and carrier aviation?
3. Contrast the differing leadership styles of Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King.
4. Why didn't King initially succeed Leahy as Chief of Naval Operations, and what series of events gave him a second chance at the job?
5. Why was the relationship between the U.S. Navy and General Douglas MacArthur so confrontational? Were there times when the relationship was less fraught?
6. Discuss King and Nimitz's relationship, particularly King's role in crafting global strategy and the extent to which Nimitz was given rein to implement it in the Pacific.
7. How did King interact with Army Chief of Staff George Marshall and with their counterparts on the British General Staff?
8. Did Halsey's prior operational commands prepare him to command the Third Fleet? How did that experience, or lack of it,

affect his decisions at the Battle of Leyte Gulf and in the subsequent typhoons?

9. Who was more deserving of the final set of five stars — William Halsey or Raymond Spruance?
10. Why has Leahy's role in FDR's White House been overlooked? Did FDR plan such a role, or did it evolve with the circumstances?

## Suggested Reading

The individual biographies of these four admirals and their contemporaries are listed in the bibliography. I particularly recommend Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), and John B. Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral: Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006).

More recent titles of note include James D. Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York: Bantam, 2011), a gripping saga of the full Guadalcanal campaign; Craig L. Symonds, *The Battle of Midway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), which is a powerful narrative of the first six months of the war; and Barrett Tillman, *Enterprise: America's Fightingest Ship and the Men Who Helped Win World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), a gritty tale of the "Big E."

Other classics include Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941–1945* (New York: Harper, 2009); Evan Thomas, *Sea of Thunder: Four Commanders and the Last Great Naval Campaign, 1941–1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); and Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: Penguin, 1991).