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THE NAVY COMMAND FIGHTS FOR HEADLINES

BY COLONEL HUGH J. KNERR

THE men in the United States Navy are fighting heroically for victory. But the “desk admirals” in Washington are fighting a desperate rear-guard action for prestige and control—a battle which at best is short-sighted and at worst may be delaying our triumph.

The Navy Command, flanked by platoons of alleged public relations experts, is constantly conveying a false and exaggerated impression of

naval activity. The picture of crucial events is being distorted and touched up to save face over the discrediting of the battleship; to sell a navy’s-eye view of the lessons of the war; and to divert money, materials and energy to aircraft carriers which logically should go into long-range, land-based aviation.

The crowning result of this naval “paper war” for the headlines has

IN THE JUNE MERCURY, Colonel Knerr revealed a dangerous division of authority in our war command. His plea for genuine unity of command on all fronts was applauded by American and British newspapers. In this article, Colonel Knerr continues his analysis of war developments from the angle of air power. He is a former Chief of Staff of the Headquarters Air Force, one of the originators of the Flying Fortress type of aircraft, and among the foremost advocates of true, autonomous air power.

NOTE: *The views expressed in this article are the author’s and not necessarily those of the War Department.*

been the decision of a well-meaning but misinformed and bewildered Congress to build five hundred thousand tons of aircraft carriers which, by the time they are completed, will be as useless to us as battleships are today. Far more serious than the waste of resources and labor involved is the implied acceptance of the fallacious idea that the carrier has supplanted the battleship as the "backbone" of the Navy. The notion that the Navy has a backbone again and hence is able again to become the mainstay of our war effort can only perpetuate outmoded strategy and bring another crop of disasters.

The naval publicity juggling is fairly obvious. All you need to do to spot it is to go over the front pages of the newspapers for a week or a month. Note the extent to which alleged naval triumphs are overplayed and the solid accomplishments of land-based Army aviation glossed over. Compare the first news releases on important engagements with the air-power facts that leak out piecemeal in the following days or weeks and you get some inkling of the dangerous game being played, with the American public in the role of sucker. The original news sources are responsible, not the press.

Let's examine the record. We

won't go back to Pearl Harbor, where warships are still buried in mud because orthodox naval men wouldn't acknowledge the striking power of aircraft. We'll begin with the Coral Sea battle. For five days during that historic engagement, the American public was given to understand that a great "naval" battle was raging. The Navy was issuing all the communiqués. We could visualize our great naval guns belching broadsides and blasting the Jap fleet.

Then the truth began to leak out. And the truth didn't discredit our gallant sailors or our Navy flyers who cooperated so effectively with our heavy, land-based aviation. The truth discredited only the mentality of those who were giving out the information. In actuality, not a single Navy surface ship fired one of its guns usefully except its anti-aircraft guns. In actuality, our heavy Army bombers were engaging the Japanese long before the Navy came into the fight in that area; and because of the tragic division in our command, the Army flyers were actually surprised when the Navy flyers arrived to join in the fracas.

At Coral Sea, our bombers sank at least two Jap aircraft carriers and the Japs, in turn, sank the *Lexington*, a 36,000-ton floating air-

field which carried sixty or more of her planes with her to the bottom of the sea. Factual data at this writing seem to indicate that, while the Japs lost more naval units, the United Nations lost more tonnage and planes.

And note this point: the Coral Sea battle was presented to the American people not only as a great naval victory, but as an argument for building more aircraft carriers!

Then came the long, running Battle of Midway. It figured as another great *naval* battle on the front pages until the Army flyers suddenly realized that, unless they wanted to be the forgotten men of this war, they had better start issuing a few communiqués of their own. That was when our able corps of foreign correspondents began to send through a series of thrilling interviews with pilots and bombardiers and we learned some startling facts. We had not repeated the Pearl Harbor mistake. Our heavy, far-ranging bombers were ready at Midway. They found the Japs and began bombing them while they were hundreds of miles away. Our Navy and Marine flyers joined in and our combined flying forces gave the enemy the worst licking he has yet suffered.

We learned that once again not a single American surface ship fired

a shot at Midway except from its anti-aircraft guns! The navies did not even make contact. Their main units were often days apart. Our naval surface forces, to put the matter succinctly, were only in the way — vulnerable targets that needed to be protected from overhead. And we learned, most important of all, that although our bombers had sunk a number of Jap carriers, our own carriers did not dare press the pursuit within reach of the enemy's aircraft based on the various Pacific islands.

Yet the result of the Midway engagement, too, was presented as an exclusive naval achievement and an argument for constructing *more* American aircraft carriers!

In the fighting around the Aleutian Islands, the story was approximately the same, though not all the facts are available at this writing. The moment the Japs came within range of our land-based aviation, our bombers put them out of commission. By the time we got to the Alaska fight, General Arnold of the Air Corps had at last become aroused to the point of issuing his own roundabout communiqués in the form of congratulatory wires to the plane manufacturers. That was the first intimation John Q. Public had that the northern engagement was not a regulation naval show.

It seems to me that the true significance of these Pacific experiences, as well as of the pattern of the Navy's publicity war to save face and control, should be apparent even to the casual reader. This is no time to spare feelings at the risk of endangering our victory.

Less than a year ago, the Navy Command was insisting on pouring billions of dollars and man-hours of production and thousands of tons of precious materials into battleships which had already proved useless. Aviation men warned against it but were ignored.¹ What shall we do now with the carcasses of half-completed battleships lying on our ways? Shall we finish them anyhow, at a terrible cost to our rubber stocks, steel stocks, labor stocks? Or shall we scrap them?

And now the same disheartening story is being repeated. The same people who led us down the battleship back alley are telling Congress that we must have five hundred thousand tons of aircraft carriers — because of the lessons of the Pacific battles! This half-million tons is only the first installment, if we may judge by the carrier ballyhoo being put on by the naval publicity.

¹ See "The Twilight of Sea Power," by Major Alexander P. de Seversky, in the *MERCURY* for June 1941, in which he wrote that the naval construction program would be completed "just in time to have all of its battleships scrapped." — ED.

Yet the true lesson of the Pacific battles, from Coral Sea to the Aleutians, is that the aircraft carrier is even more of a liability than the battleship.

II

Originally, the aircraft carrier was conceived as a means for the high seas fleet to carry with it wheelborne aviation, as differentiated from catapult types which required floats to land on the sea and be picked up by the launching ship. These wheelborne craft are far superior to catapult planes. They serve their purpose well as long — *but only as long* — as they and their carrier "airfield" remain beyond the range of enemy land-based air power.

The carrier must stay beyond that range for two excellent reasons. First, the carrier itself is a perfect target for the bombing plane; not only is the big "flat-top" an open invitation to a bomb, but the carrier is potentially a floating torch because it is loaded with thousands of gallons of gasoline and tons of bombs. Second, the carrier planes are of necessity inferior to land-based craft because every engineering attribute of an airplane must be compromised in order for it to operate off a carrier. The result is a

plane that is hopelessly outclassed in the presence of land-based aviation.

Consider this tragic picture. While the *Lexington* was in her death throes, her planes had to come back and land on her decks in order to rescue the flying personnel. The land-based bombers had plenty of range to fly back to land, but the carrier planes didn't and had to be sacrificed when their "base" was destroyed under them. You can't sink an island!²

Since it can't be taken within striking distance of shore-based airplanes, the carrier can have only one reason for being. That reason is to carry aviation into "blind spots" on the oceans which cannot yet be reached by planes operating from land bases. There are very few of these blind spots left in the world today and the planes with sufficient range to eliminate the last of these spots are already being manufactured in the United States. It will be at least twenty-two months before any of these proposed new carriers can be put into service. Long before they can be finished, both we and our enemies will have so extended the reach of land-based aircraft that a car-

rier, already useless as an offensive weapon, will be well-nigh useless as an auxiliary.

I note that the public and Congress are being led to believe that if the Navy only had plenty of carriers it would attack the Japanese islands. This fallacy is dangerous nonsense. If the Navy possessed dozens of new carriers today, it would not dare risk one of them within the operating radius of land-based Japanese aviation. If it did, the Japs would send the carrier to the bottom just as easily as they sent the *Lexington*, just as easily as our own Army bombers dispatched the Jap carriers that ventured within our range.

When a sustained attack is launched on Japan, it will not be a carrier-borne attack. It will be an attack by planes based on the Pacific islands, China, or Siberia. The bulk of the vast sums which the Navy proposes to spend on aircraft carriers should be spent instead on a system of air bases supported by air transport which can facilitate such a land-based attack.

III

The development of air transport is being impeded by the same reluctant minds which are planning for more aircraft carriers. We are get-

² For more detailed analysis of the extreme vulnerability of carrier aviation, see *Victory Through Air Power*, by Major Seversky, pp. 131-36, 161-65.

ting ready to begin air assaults on the Axis. Unless we want to spend five years fighting this war, we should launch these attacks quickly and sustain them, and to do this, we shall need air transport. Fortunately, plans for air transport were made more than ten years ago. For years, the Army Air Corps has been carrying a greater tonnage than all the airlines of the world combined. It needs only expansion to sustain an air force in action within a thousand miles of any base.

The quickest way to ease our transport problem at this juncture would be to let our bombers double as cargo carriers. Only a few months away, however, are developments in air transport which will make such stopgaps unnecessary. The *glider method* for moving air freight is of particular importance; as an immediate procedure it is more feasible than the plans which envision four-hundred-ton airplanes.

When designing freight carriers, one of the first problems is how to accelerate the ship to flying speed. It is possible to accelerate the relatively small planes now in use because there is a reasonable ratio between the total weight of the plane and the horsepower available in existing power plants. But when the problem is a two-hundred-ton

plane, the designer runs up against the question of how to get his ship rolling fast enough to leave the ground before it runs out of runway; the braking apparatus required to stop it when it reaches the ground constitutes another problem.

By using gliders, the tractive effort is concentrated in an airplane whose sole function is to carry power plant, crew and fuel. The plane doesn't *carry* freight; it only gets the freight into the air and then *pulls* it along. A designer can then build into his tow-plane a high-lift wing, great fuel capacity, and the types of propellers which can set a train of gliders rolling at a great rate of speed in a very short space. Propellers of large diameter can be used and these will greatly increase tractive efficiency.

Such a "tractor" airplane, pulling several trailer gliders, can get off the ground in a much shorter space than the same weight wrapped up in one airplane. Once in the air, advantages of the air freight train are apparent. It is quite feasible to operate these freight trailers without a pilot in them. Automatic instrumentation and control devices, now perfected, are adequate and currently developed laboratory technique insures a continuous improvement in these devices.

The tow cable lends itself to transmission of power and control signals. It is feasible to land these trailers automatically, by means of a short-wave glide path and by remote control from airdrome installation. Such devices are already in use. Long-distance hauls can be handled either by refueling the tow plane or by having a fresh tow plane pick up the tow cable in the air and release the exhausted tow plane at the relief airdrome.

I believe that after the war we will have vast commercial air freight systems, fully able to meet the competition of land and waterborne systems. But for the moment, our interests are military and air transport is our one immediate hope for successful and sustained attacks on the Axis. We must lift transport off the water, beyond surface and undersea dangers.

Almost automatically, naval men have reacted unfavorably to air transport proposals. Whatever their expressed reasons for opposition, under them lurks the unexpressed feeling that once transport is lifted into the skies, the last justification for colossal navies will be removed.

IV

As we prepare to launch our American air attack on Germany, the

effort is still being made to disparage the effect of air bombardment on cities and industrial concentrations. We still hear that the Germans failed to do much damage to England, and that the British raids on Cologne, Essen and Bremen have fallen short of expectations. The skeptics, however, do not appreciate that the occasional raid, destructive as it may be, is only a preliminary for the true strategic assault, for sustained mass bombardment of the scientific precision variety.

What is more, we cannot correctly evaluate the effectiveness of air war on Germany until our American planes begin to attack in force. We, of course, have more planes and a far greater capacity for producing bombs and bombers. But, in addition, there is the matter of the complementary aviation theories of Britain and the United States, which operate to give an American-British combination devastating potentialities.

With the fall of France, Britain was forced to concentrate on the fighter plane for protection. British bombardment aviation was of secondary importance to the fighter plane. The British lacked precision sights and related equipment, and even with equipment furnished by us, they had no time to train crews

in its proper use. A fighter pilot can be trained much quicker than it is possible to train a *nine-man crew* to handle a Flying Fortress and fly it intelligently in a complex bomber formation. So the British had to throw their bombers together out of the materials and crews at hand. Hence their prodigal bombing at chimney-top levels, with great loss of life and matériel. For the same reasons, they have had to confine their mass raids to darkness, with a resultant loss in effectiveness.

In this country, we have proceeded differently. Since we were spared the immediate defense problem, we have concentrated on the development of the big bombardment plane. We have had time to train our crews. We have designed and built our bombardment equipment primarily *for daylight use*. Our engineers have given us the finest precision bombsight in the world, the finest system of defensive fire control, the best sighting equipment for defensive guns, and the highest speeds. In addition, we have spent years working out closely co-ordinated formations so that our bombers can attack by day and each bomber will get the full benefit of the mutual fire power of the formation.

What good is a highly developed

bombsight at night? What good is an intricate fire-control system for defense at night? What good is a computing sight on a .50 calibre machine-gun designed to shoot down enemy fighters at a thousand yards, when it is used at night? Why should we have spent years developing self-protecting formation flights if we expected to attack in blind, hit-or-miss, single-ship operations under cover of darkness?

The British Sterling and Halifax bombers are built for night operations. The British crews are trained chiefly for night operations. But the whole American bombardment concept — the planes, equipment, crews, formation tactics — presumes that the proper time to attack is in the light of day. And now that the shock of the war has partially released air-minded men from the obstructionism of the Old Guarders, we are able to build the types of planes which fit into this American concept of attack.

American bombers have been doing all right against the Japs in the daytime and I believe we can do all right against the Germans. There should be little hit-or-miss bombing by American planes over Germany. Our ships will attack in the daytime, taking the risks and reaping the advantages of real combat strategy. They will pro-

ceed to their targets and attack with precision equipment from such altitudes as may be necessary. Their formations and their superior defensive equipment will enable them to shoot down the fighter planes which rise to challenge them. They will make full use of clouds and altitude to hold down their anti-aircraft losses and they'll return to fight again the next day, just as they have been doing all along.

Until such precision attacks are launched against Germany — and they will be launched presently — neither we nor the Germans can realize fully the destructiveness of air war.

One more point. The British so far have found the German searchlight and anti-aircraft defenses comparatively ineffective in mass raids. By presenting a vast number of targets simultaneously to the German gunners, the British have confused the enemy and held their losses to less than four per cent. The damage they have sustained has been due to flying into bargages, and not to aimed fire.

By sheer weight of numbers and the ensuing confusion among the defenders, the combined American and British attackers can pass from the night stage into the day stage. Nothing comparable on such a scale

has yet been attempted, so that skepticism, insofar as it is based on past experience, is inadmissible. When the strategic assault begins in earnest, we will know that the Second Front has really opened, and that it won't be long before armies can land successfully in Europe to follow up the victory scored by air power.

Navies — whether they consider battleships or carriers as their “backbone” — will serve, at most, as an auxiliary to air power.

V

In presenting these facts, I want to reiterate that I have no feud with the Navy Command. The men who compose it are patriotic Americans, honestly doing their best within the limitations of their special training and experience. My statements are motivated by only one consideration. As I read the lessons of this war from the vantage point of an airman who has also had Navy and Army experience, I can see one thing clearly — namely, that we have a weapon with which to smash our enemies quickly and prevent the long war and the possible stalemate which we all fear. My one purpose is to help break through the prejudices, prestige fixations and circumscribed

viewpoints *which hamper the full use of that weapon.*

That weapon is the American bombing plane. It is a weapon we Americans know how to build and how to use better than any other people on earth. It is a weapon with which we can launch sustained attacks on our enemies *immediately*. It only needs advance bases and air transports with which to supply those bases. In the British Isles, Africa, India, China we have such bases. Perhaps we shall soon have them also in Siberia. All that remains to be arranged is rapid transport for supply.

I believe that this is the way we can win the war quickly, and therefore shall oppose every effort which seems to obstruct this program or to misinterpret the facts for our people. The headline battle fought by the Navy Command adds up to obstruction in a mischievous form. It blurs the facts about land-based aviation, ties our hopes to the most vulnerable vessel afloat, diverts materials and energies from the proper weapon and tends to obscure the essential air-power character of the present conflict.

It must be recognized, too, that a large part of the apparent change

of heart on the part of Navy leaders in switching their faith from the battleship to the carrier springs from a natural determination to seize control of land-based aviation from the Army — to tie it to the tail of their carrier aviation kite. If they succeed, it would be literally a disaster for the United Nations war effort.

For victory in a minimum length of time, our air forces must be handled by men of demonstrated aviation ability, familiar through long years of training and thinking with the proven principles of air power as a primary strategic weapon of offensive warfare. The job simply cannot be done by men who have tolerated the airplane as a necessary nuisance in an auxiliary role and insist on believing — or just feeling in their bones — that the Navy, despite everything, must come out on top.

American aviation today has men capable of leading it in the spirit and the techniques essential to aerial victory. They need only the chance to use their land-based weapons free of the inhibitions of an outmoded tradition. Given that chance, they can save us years of bitter trial and error.

DEMOCRACY works by force of habit, dictatorship by the habit of force.

► *A candid close-up of
Huey Long's best pupil:*

GERALD SMITH'S BID FOR POWER

BY WILLIAM BRADFORD HUIE

GERALD LYMAN KENNETH SMITH is "the gustiest and goriest, the loudest and lustiest, the deadliest and damndest orator ever heard on this or any other earth. He is the champion boob-bumper of allepochs." So runs H. L. Mencken's appraisal of this Mark Antony of the canebrake; and indeed no man's observations of Americana can be complete until he has watched Gerald L. K. Smith in action. The man has the passion of Billy Sunday. He has the fire of Adolf Hitler. Words gush from him like water from Moses' rock. He is possessed of a fierce religio-patriotic fanaticism — not all of it synthetic — and he hates Roosevelt as he hates the Devil. He is the stuff of which Führers are made.

Since that hot September day in 1935 when he delivered his Mark Antony speech over Huey Long's bier, Gerald Smith has lived off His People. For the last three years he has headquartered in Detroit, where he speaks each Sunday night over a powerful radio station. He

publishes a paper called *The Cross and The Flag*. His income now is about \$1500 a week. It has been as high as \$4000 a week and it may reach \$5000 a week before November 1, because Smith is making his first bid for political office. He is a candidate for the Republican nomination to the United States Senate in Michigan and, if successful in the September primary, he will oppose Prentiss Brown, the Democratic incumbent, in the general election.

"My candidacy has only three possible results!" Smith is roaring to Michiganders. "I will be assassinated; I will be imprisoned; or I will go to the United States Senate!"

I have carefully reviewed Gerald Smith's turbulent career. I have waded through heavy dossiers prepared by organizations that consider him a full-fledged totalitarian menace. I have visited Smith in his comfortable, middle-class Detroit home; I've had dinner with him and his very gracious and intelligent wife, propped my feet on his desk and questioned him for hours.