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Ask the casual naval historian to describe the most important World War II American admirals and his list would probably include the names of King, Nimitz, Spruance, Halsey, Kinkaid, Mitscher, and Turner. Rarely would the name of Frank Jack Fletcher appear, except in smaller print with large caveats. This is an exceptional omission given the circumstances surrounding the early months of World War II and Fletcher's accomplishments during that period. Admiral Fletcher was the tactical commander at the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, and also at the Eastern Solomons. These were the first three carrier battles in World War II and, it might be added, they represented 50 percent of all carrier battles ever fought.

Too often, when studying the naval operations of World War II, we think only of overwhelming American numerical superiority in the years of 1944 and 1945 which brought us victory. However, there was a much more depressing war fought between December 1941 and September 1942. It was one of numerical and qualitative inferiority, logistical inadequacy, strategic naiveté, and tactical blunders made because of inexperience. For example the Japanese Zero and its pilots were comparatively rated as among the very best in the early stages of the war.[1] Our TBD torpedo planes were inadequate and the F4F-4 fighter was markedly inferior to the Zero in design. Lack of satisfactory aircrew training impinged on early war operations, as operational training had not commenced at shore schools.[2] Most of such training was accomplished after deployment through the conduct of underway fire practices and attack drills, a very odd task for an operational commander.

The proficiency of our personnel did not reach the level desired until shore schools and training devices, under development at the beginning of the war, became operational early in 1943. While these were turbulent days of defeat and embarrassment for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the period has been little

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studied by naval officers of today. Yet, it has more to offer in dealing with future conflicts than any other period in World War II: how to recover from a first strike and accept the losses of ships, aircraft, men—and faith—and sail forward to engage the enemy.

After the loss of Wake, Guam, Southeast Asia, and the writing off of our Philippine garrisons, the United States was forced to pull back to Pearl Harbor and Australia in order to gather strength and regroup. Some valid historical analogies of this transition period through May 1942 were the Russian withdrawals to Moscow before the forces of Napoleon in 1812, and the forces of Hitler in 1941.

Frank Jack Fletcher entered World War II as an authentic naval warrior, tested in battle and accustomed to command at sea. He had commanded four destroyers, a submarine tender, and the submarine base at Cavite. He was a graduate of both the Naval War College and the Army War College. In the rank of captain he had been Chief of Staff, U.S. Asiatic Fleet; aide to the Secretary of the Navy; commanding officer of the battleship *New Mexico*; and Assistant Chief, Bureau of Navigation. After being promoted to rear admiral, he was first assigned to the Pacific Fleet as Commander Cruiser Division 3 and then as Commander Cruiser Division 6, the post he held at the outbreak of war. Rear Admiral Fletcher was the only flag or general officer then on active duty whose decorations included the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross; an acclaimed hero in two previous wars. He had been awarded the Medal of Honor for rescuing 350 refugees from the interior of Mexico during the U.S. landing at Vera Cruz in 1914. His Navy Cross was awarded for convoy escort and antisubmarine duty in British and French waters in 1918 while captain of the destroyer *Benham*.

Pearl Harbor changed naval warfare in ways not fully comprehended in 1942. There had never been a carrier vs carrier engagement in history and, therefore, there was no experience and no doctrine. While fleet exercises provided some insights, it was a period of learning as task force commanders improvised as they went along. The navy that first mastered this new warfare would prevail. Admiral Fletcher has been severely criticized for his decisions during the Wake Island relief effort, at the battles of Coral Sea, and Midway, and off Guadalcanal. But first, those who would leap to criticize should realize that he was not an aviator (even Halsey had only five years' experience in that role). Fletcher, like his famous uncle, Frank Friday Fletcher, was a sailor whose main experience had been in battleships and cruisers. Just as Spruance and Kinkaid, the tactical commanders for two other carrier battles of that day, his experience was afloat, not aloft.

In the eyes of many naval aviators, who believed that only their kind should command carrier task forces, this was a grievous shortcoming. This led to his being accused of timidity or, at the very least, of being ultraconservative or

obsessive in the priority he gave to refueling his destroyers. (In contrast, Halsey, a destroyerman for 22 years before he became an aviator, once delayed too long in refueling his destroyers and lost three of them to a typhoon.)

The failure to relieve Wake Island still stirs the passions of many Americans, especially coming, as it did, immediately after Pearl Harbor when things were going so badly throughout the Pacific. America desperately needed a victory and Adm. Husband E. Kimmel, still CINCPAC, was determined to win that victory with what remained of the Pacific Fleet. He dispatched Fletcher with a one-carrier task force to evacuate the civilians from Wake Island and to reinforce the defenders with additional troops and a Marine fighter squadron.

The mission was plagued with problems. First, Fletcher's carrier, the *Saratoga*, had a fueling delay because of saltwater contamination of her fuel tanks. Second, the only oiler available to the task force was the old 12-knot *Neches*.[3] Her speed fixed the task force speed and finally, on 21 December, the weather went sour.

Much criticism has been leveled at Fletcher for his decision to refuel his destroyers on the 21st, rather than pressing on to attack the Japanese and relieve Wake. After all, as Morison states, "It is clear that there was no immediate danger of the destroyers going dry unless the force tanker was sunk."[4] That, indeed, is what soon happened to the *Neches* when she was torpedoed and sunk in the very same waters by a Japanese submarine on 23 January 1942. The loss of the *Neches* meant that a raid on Wake, by then a captive island, by the *Lexington*, 4 cruisers, and 10 destroyers had to be abandoned.[5] Coincidentally, less than a year beforehand in the Atlantic, the lack of fuel nearly led the Royal Navy to give up the chase for the German battleship *Bismarck*.

It was for such reasons that Fletcher frequently refueled his ships.[6] In fact, it was a CINCPAC message that both ordered him to refuel where he did and to await the arrival of a second task force, built around the *Lexington*.[7]

Clearly, the Wake Island relief operation was not solely in the hands of the tactical commander. It was managed at the highest level by Adm. Ernest J. King—from his headquarters in Washington, D.C.—and from Pearl Harbor by Vice Adm. William S. Pye, who was the caretaker CINCPAC between the relief of Kimmel and the arrival from Washington of his successor, Rear Admiral Nimitz. Pye, whose battle force had just been devastated, was greatly concerned about the possibility of losing more ships, particularly since he would have to deal with the new CINCPAC for any such losses.

The effort to relieve Wake Island was Kimmel's idea; Pye felt only a limited responsibility for its success. King, believing Wake was, and long would be, a liability, authorized its evacuation. Pye decided evacuation would be extremely hazardous considering that the Japanese had two carriers, the *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, in the general area.

For Admiral Pye, the real issue was whether he should chance the loss of one of the Pacific Fleet's three carrier groups by challenging the enemy in what was now his own back yard. He, not Fletcher, ordered the withdrawal of both the *Saratoga* and the *Lexington* forces, thus dooming Wake to capture. That decision so inflamed the carrier's crew that Admiral Fletcher had to leave his bridge in order not to hear the mutinous talk.[8] In his account of this expedition, Morison leaves little room for doubt that he would have preferred Fletcher to have turned a blind eye to the withdrawal signal, as Lord Nelson had at Copenhagen. But the reality of Fletcher's situation was that, unsure as he was of the enemy's position and now having been directed to retire, he would have been foolhardy to have pressed on.

From January to May Fletcher, now commanding Task Force 17, was involved in several raids, including one that was to have little effect on the war but a lasting one on his reputation. The raid on the Japanese-held Gilberts in February resulted in minor damage to the enemy, but Fletcher's new flagship, the carrier *Yorktown*, just arriving from the Atlantic, lost three airmen. The air group commander, Capt. J.J. "Jocko" Clark, complained to senior aviators that Fletcher had abandoned the downed airmen in their rafts. Captain Clark had wanted Fletcher to detach two destroyers to search for them, but Fletcher stated that the risk of losing two ships and 700 men was too great to justify the attempt to rescue three men. Clark related the story to both King and Rear Adm. John Towers in Washington,[9] with a considerable slant against the risks involved and toward the callousness of the decision.

Several other "damaging" incidents occurred in the period leading up to the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942. King continually encouraged Nimitz to be aggressive, to hit the Japanese at every opportunity. But Nimitz cautioned his admirals at sea to be conservative. On 30 March, King assumed that Fletcher was near Rabaul, New Britain, where Japanese transports were gathering for another thrust southward. Then he discovered that Fletcher was 300 miles away, headed for Nouméa, New Caledonia, for fuel. King was furious. It seemed to him that Fletcher was fleeing the advancing enemy. From that day onward King mistrusted Fletcher.[10] Primarily as a result of poor plotting information and slow communications, King began to believe that one of his task force commanders was not suited to a combat assignment.

Neither did the Coral Sea, the first American victory against the Japanese, serve to improve King's opinion of Fletcher. Losing the *Lexington*—King's former command and a ship he loved—was neither a victory nor a reason to reward Fletcher.[11] A major contributor to the loss of the carrier was inadequate damage control, not poor strategy or tactics, but it marred seriously what otherwise was a major success in halting the Japanese advance southward. All things considered, this admiral, supported by a cruiser division staff, and handicapped by inadequate reconnaissance, did quite well.

(The problem with reconnaissance stemmed from two causes. First, responsibility for it was split between the commander of the carrier forces and Commander Southwest Pacific and, second, the aircrews were not adequately trained for the work.) Reporting errors by aviators at Coral Sea led to incorrect battle assessments and subsequent maldeployment of forces.

The Battle of Coral Sea produced some useful lessons that could have been highly beneficial three weeks later at Midway, had they been published. These lessons included:

- The need for a strike commander on each combat mission;
- the need to preposition combat-loaded aircraft on the flight decks in order to have a coordinated strike ready at short notice; and
- the need to retain a ready reserve of fighters to meet any threats which might develop after the initial strike had been launched.

People have criticized Fletcher for not attacking the enemy formations with his destroyers during the Battle of the Coral Sea. For example, King said, "I must express my feeling that destroyers might have been used in night attacks on the enemy." Nimitz, however, pointed out that Fletcher had barely enough destroyers for screening duty; that, lacking radar, they had little chance of finding fast carriers in the darkness; and that the difficulty of fueling at night prevented high-speed night operations. He recommended that Fletcher be promoted to the rank of vice admiral and be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. King refused both.[12]

After the war there was further criticism. In his studies at the Naval War College, Richard W. Bates attacked Fletcher because he had detached a surface action group to attack the Port Moresby invasion force. Bates' logic was that it was a mistake for Fletcher to attempt any surface actions because they reduced his antiaircraft defenses of the carriers.[13] What one must realize is that there were neither prescribed methods for employing carriers in action nor realistic scenarios to assist a tactical commander in the proper use of his forces. At Coral Sea the opposing forces were neither within sight, nor even within surface radar range of one another. Nothing such as this had ever happened before.

Fletcher's next trial by fire came early in June at Midway. Credit for the victory at Midway has been given to Adm. Raymond A. Spruance, a credit richly deserved. But the victory was initially a result of the efforts of Admiral Fletcher. The Japanese Combined Fleet had sailed against Midway with a striking force of 4 fast carriers to cover the 300-ship invasion force. Nimitz responded with all 3 carriers he had available, the *Yorktown* (Fletcher's flagship), the *Enterprise* (Spruance's flagship), and the *Hornet* (part of Spruance's TF 16). Though Fletcher was senior to Spruance, he arrived late on 3 June because of the need for repairs to the *Yorktown*.

After receiving the initial contact report on two enemy carriers at 0808 on 4 June, Fletcher ordered Spruance's TF 16 to proceed westward and engage

the enemy as soon as their carriers had definitely been located.[14] Some people believe this to be a curious order, but one has only to review the events at the Coral Sea to realize that an incorrect aircraft reconnaissance report had caused Fletcher to launch all his aircraft at the wrong targets, missing the important Japanese carriers. His confidence in aircraft reconnaissance had been greatly shaken by that miscalculation. He has also been criticized for holding in reserve part of his strike group aboard *Yorktown*. But that was another sensible precaution, particularly since only two of a possible five carriers had been located. As it so often does in war, fog closed in on Fletcher's command and his staff. Though no additional intelligence reports had been received at 1038, fearing he might be caught with all planes on board he decided to launch half his bombers and all of his torpedoplanes, escorted by six fighters, to attack the same formation as Spruance's Task Force 16 was attacking.[15] Even though launched more than 90 minutes after Task Force 16's aircraft had been, the *Yorktown*'s aircraft arrived over the Japanese carriers at about the same time as the *Enterprise*'s and the two carriers' dive bombers made almost simultaneous attacks. They damaged three Japanese carriers fatally.

The next major decision made by Fletcher was to dispatch a group to search the sector 280°-020° out to a distance of 200 miles. The purpose was to locate additional enemy carriers, particularly since no new intelligence had been received as to the location of those surviving. The launch was completed at 1350.[16] It was this reconnaissance which located the final Japanese carrier and led to her destruction by aircraft from the *Yorktown* and *Enterprise*.

Between 1352 and 1641 the *Yorktown* herself was twice attacked by aircraft from that last surviving carrier, the *Hiryu*.[17] The *Yorktown* was abandoned at 1714 but she continued to float and the following morning, 5 June, the old minesweeper *Vireo* took her under tow. Though there was a screen of destroyers around the slowly moving tug and tow, on the 6th the Japanese submarine *I-168* managed to torpedo the *Yorktown*, which sank the next day. Again, Fletcher had lost a carrier in battle. But it was the hand of fate that placed him and his flagship between the *Hiryu* and Task Force 16 on two successive enemy bombing attacks.

After the Japanese striking power had been destroyed, Fletcher sent a message to Spruance, "I will conform to your movements."[18] He accepted that his Task Force 17 could no longer strike the enemy, while TF 16 was still able to do so. This decision was one that his opponent, Vice Adm. Chuichi Nagumo, did not have the moral courage to make. If, after his flagship and two other carriers had been lost, Nagumo had transferred command to Rear Adm. Tamon Yamaguchi in the surviving *Hiryu*, he might have prevented confusion in his force. For the Japanese, confusion ran its full course—the *Hiryu* was sunk by the Americans[19] and Admiral Yamaguchi died with her.

The final fleet operation of Admiral Fletcher's career began with apparent deficiencies in almost everything—men, plans, intelligence, ships, aircraft, and supporting equipment. Correctly called by its participants "Operation Shoestring," it was to become the struggle for Guadalcanal. The command structure at Guadalcanal was a major problem. Initially Vice Adm. Robert L. Ghormley, Commander South Pacific, was ordered by Admiral King to assume personal command of this operation. Nimitz wanted a combat-tested commander and once again a struggle began between Nimitz and King over a Fletcher promotion to the rank of vice admiral.

On 21 June 1942, Nimitz recommended to King that Fletcher be promoted. On 28 June he repeated this recommendation and added that Fletcher should be given the Expeditionary Force Command. He renewed his recommendation personally when he met King on 4 July in San Francisco. As late as 14 July, with his carrier task groups all at sea and headed for a rendezvous north of the Fijis, Nimitz was still trying to get approval for his request that "Rear Admiral F.J. Fletcher be authorized to wear the uniform and assume the rank of vice admiral."[20]

The operation began with Rear Adm. Leigh Noyes as the senior carrier commander. Admirals Fletcher and Thomas C. Kinkaid were carrier element commanders junior to Noyes. On the 15th, King yielded to Nimitz' entreaties and Fletcher was promoted to vice admiral, with a 26 June date of rank. He

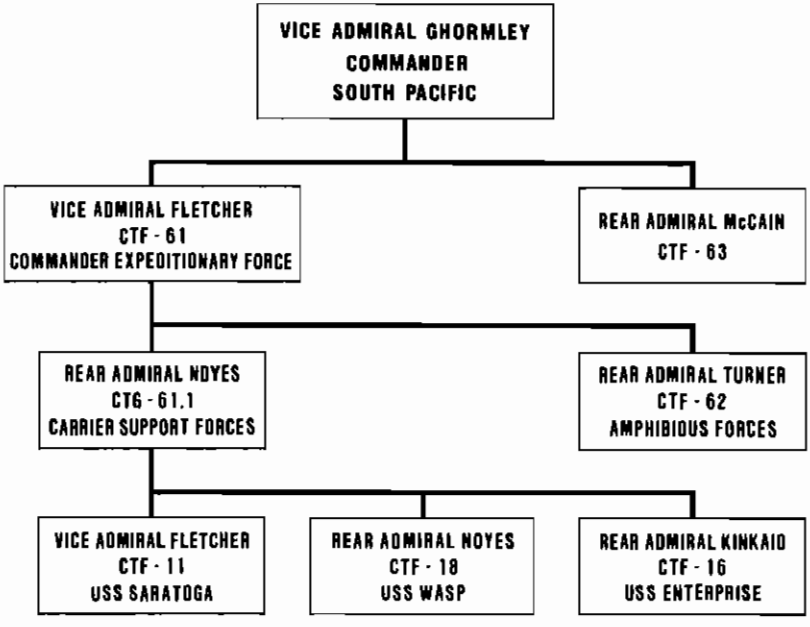

Figure 1 : Actual Command Structure for Operation Watchtower

was also named as the Expeditionary Force Commander. The fleet was already at sea, only three weeks remaining until D-day and the command structure was changed. Admiral Noyes was named as air support commander, under Fletcher. Curiously, Admiral Fletcher was still assigned as a carrier element commander, reporting to his subordinate, Noyes, for carrier operations.[21] (See figure 1.)

Fletcher was further constrained by his orders which included the statement that, "You will be governed by the principle of calculated risk which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of your force to attack by superior force without good prospect of inflicting, as a result of such exposure, greater damage to the enemy. This applies to a landing phase as well as during preliminary air strikes."[22] The orders coupled with the convoluted command structure tended to emphasize the primacy of carrier survivability under all conditions.

The struggle for Guadalcanal began with an amphibious landing on 7 August; the next day Fletcher made a fateful decision—he requested permission to withdraw his carriers, stating: "Fighter plane strength reduced from 99 to 78. In view of large number of enemy torpedoplanes and bombers in this area, I recommend the immediate withdrawal of my carriers. Request tankers be sent forward immediately as fuel running low."[23] Fletcher's reasons for withdrawal were given as follows:

- Overall U.S. carrier strength in the Pacific was four ships;
- no replacements for sunken or damaged carriers were in sight for another nine months;
- the Japanese Navy could put more carriers in the Guadalcanal area than Fletcher could (four vs three);
- Japanese land-based air (high-level bombers, dive bombers and torpedoplanes) was present and offensively active;
- his instructions from CINCPAC were positive and limiting in regard to risking the carriers; and
- enemy subs were on the move to attack Tulagi occupation forces in the Guadalcanal area.[24]

The American pilots—Navy and Army Air Force—in the Pacific still held the Japanese Zero in awe and, with a 20 percent loss in their fighter strength after only one day of operations, it seemed reasonable that the U.S. carriers were in peril from land-based air attacks. But it was upon the second part of Fletcher's message that COMSOPAC focused. In Ghormley's dispatch to Nimitz, he did not mention either the 20 percent loss of fighters or the presence of large numbers of land-based enemy aircraft around the carriers. He said only that Fletcher's carriers were short of fuel and needed to withdraw: "Carriers short of fuel; proceeding to fueling rendezvous." This dispatch brought unwarranted censure on Admiral Fletcher, because it assigned an erroneous or at least incomplete reason for the withdrawal.[25]

Fletcher's request was granted by Ghormley, who defined the issue this way: "I wish to emphasize that the basic problem is the protection of surface ships against land-based aircraft during the approach, the landing attack, and the unloading."[26] Admiral Kinkaid, when asked about Fletcher's decision to withdraw the carriers, said that it was "A valid decision at the time, but would not have been valid a year later in the war."[27] Later in the war the United States possessed improved fighters and bombers and the ratio of U.S. to Japanese carriers had risen greatly; also, the attrition of seasoned Japanese pilots and experienced seamen changed the balance of forces in the favor of the U.S. Navy.

In the absence of Fletcher's carriers came the disastrous night Battle of Savo Island. It was an American defeat that could not have been influenced by the carriers, however, if the carriers had remained nearby perhaps retribution could have been exacted the following morning. Years afterwards Vice Adm. George S. Dyer said of this action, "Later, Nimitz revealed that he had ordered Fletcher to keep his ships in such a position that the enemy could never do more damage to him than he could do to the enemy. In the condition of carrier operations in the summer of 1942, the American carriers were incapable of effective night operations, and so carriers within range of the enemy would be targets that must be defended, and could not be used offensively during the night. Nimitz' order, in other words, told Fletcher to do precisely what he did."[28]

The Marine Corps was and still is upset by Fletcher's withdrawal from the Guadalcanal area. They look upon this action as another example of the unwillingness of the Navy to provide close air support when Marines are on the beach. The argument deals with a very basic precept of an amphibious landing—lack of air superiority and sea control. If those two conditions are not met at the outset of an operation, the Marines on the beach should expect to be in dire straits, for the Navy will not be able to support them properly. However, in Washington the decision had been made that Guadalcanal would be taken and held.

The final battle of Fletcher's career began on 23 August with the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. The Japanese entered action with two large fast carriers and one light carrier. This was an all-out attempt to retake Guadalcanal; it was Yamamoto's second attempt to destroy the U.S. Navy's carriers. Nimitz summed up the battle this way: "On 23 to 25 August, U.S. Naval Forces in the Southern Pacific, supported by Marine aircraft operating from the new field at Guadalcanal, and Army aircraft operating from the new field at Espíritu Santo, successfully turned back a large-scale Japanese attempt to recapture Guadalcanal-Tulagi. This major victory, second only to Midway in forces involved, permitted the continued consolidation of our position in the Solomons."[29]

The Japanese Fleet lost their light carrier and one of the fast carriers was damaged. More importantly, for the third time in four months the Japanese Fleet had failed to accomplish its mission; for the second time in three months Admiral Yamamoto's plans to destroy the American carriers had been foiled. Shortly after this action in which Admiral Fletcher was wounded, his flagship, the *Saratoga*, was torpedoed by a submarine south of Guadalcanal on 31 August 1942. The *Saratoga* was forced to return to Pearl Harbor for repairs and Fletcher returned with her. After reporting to Nimitz, he was sent on leave.

The aftermath of Fletcher's departure was confused by the fourth carrier duel of the war, the Battle of Santa Cruz. With Halsey as the new COMSOPAC and Kinkaid as his carrier commander, the battle was forged on 26 October. In his final attempt to destroy the American carriers, Yamamoto deployed four carriers and four battleships. The United States answered with all it had available, two carriers and one battleship. The outcome was a tactical defeat for the U.S. Navy; while no Japanese carrier was lost, the *Hornet* was sunk and the *Enterprise* damaged.

Strategically it turned into another American victory; our forces remained off Guadalcanal while the Japanese withdrew. The loss in American carrier power, however, brought about a series of surface duels, all in the fabled Iron Bottom Sound, hardly the improvement in the tactical situation King had anticipated with the departure of Fletcher. King had felt that the removal of Fletcher and the replacement of Ghormley, by the aggressive fighting Halsey, would bring about an immediate change in the tactical situation in the Guadalcanal/Tulagi area. Such was not to be.

In summary, despite criticisms grounded in professional rivalries, personal dislikes, failures to understand the influence of logistics, differing tactical emphasis, etc., all three of Fletcher's carrier battles resulted in strategic victories in the Pacific at a time when the Japanese appeared to be invincible and the U.S. naval strength was at its lowest ebb. Despite being removed from operational command by Admiral King, Fletcher retained the respect of Admiral Nimitz, who attempted to have him returned to a combat command throughout 1942-1943. But King refused.

Admiral King seemed to harbor an animosity for Admiral Fletcher that no substantive action on Fletcher's part could shake. There was no room for maneuvering in this conflict; so the only plausible ending occurred, the junior was removed. After the war, when King had been relieved as CNO by Nimitz, Frank Jack Fletcher was finally promoted to admiral and retired.

Perhaps the lessons a naval officer can take away from the study of Admiral Fletcher's career are these:

- The effective exploitation of technology in warfare requires costly trial and error methods;

- decisions made by naval commanders under fire and while shrouded in the fog of war will be criticized thereafter by both seniors and juniors—men benefiting from 20/20 hindsight, full knowledge of the facts and a quiet, feet-up environment ashore; and
- in war, truth is the first casualty; honor the second.

In retrospect, with little or no aviation experience, a few admirals, experienced chiefly in an old way of war, took a new technology, applied it as best they could and won control of the Pacific Ocean. Let we who now presume to judge Admiral Fletcher hope that we can perform as well, should we be so tested at the onset of a war for national survival.

Notes

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25. *Ibid.*, p. 393.
26. Msg. from COMSOPAC to COMINCH dtd 112000 July 1942.
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29. CINCPACFLT ltr A16-3/SO2, ser. 02827, 27 September 1942, p. 1.