

1987

## In My View

G. M. Day  
*Canadian Forces Maritime*

David R. Mets  
*U.S. Air Force (Ret.)*

James Tritten  
*U.S. Navy*

Elias B. Mott  
*U.S. Navy (Ret.)*

J. E. Greenbacker  
*U.S. Navy (Ret.)*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Day, G. M.; Mets, David R.; Tritten, James; Mott, Elias B.; Greenbacker, J. E.; and Rubin, Alfred P. (1987) "In My View," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 40 : No. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol40/iss2/11>

This Additional Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

---

## In My View

### **Authors**

G. M. Day, David R. Mets, James Tritten, Elias B. Mott, J. E. Greenbacker, and Alfred P. Rubin

# IN MY VIEW . . .



Ion Oliver

## Convoying: Strategic and Tactical Realities

Sir,

I read with interest the article "Four Iron Laws of Merchant Shipping" in your May-June issue and the subsequent letter, "Iron Laws at Work," in the *Autumn Review*. As excellent as the original article is, the observations offered by Lieutenant Commander Boyer are persuasive. However, there are elements of both strategic and tactical reality to which both authors may not have given full credit.

With regard to Commander Williams, perhaps one might suggest a fifth law—the strategic importance of convoying is directly proportional to the length of the war. In his final section, "The 'Iron Laws' and the U.S. Navy Today," Commander Williams cites the "come as you are" concept to argue that the major arsenals of either side cannot be rebuilt over night. This truth compels the current drives to pre-positioning of equipment, smart weapons and highly trained professional regular forces, as these will surely be the type of factors critical in a short war. The total force of the "Iron Laws" argument is felt when the war lengthens and nuclear stalemate prevails. The Soviet Navy can then shed its combined arms, defence of the motherland and strategic deterrent role, releasing a gradually increasing flood of maritime assets. The Soviets can then adopt their potentially most effective maritime strategy in the protracted, conventional "guerre de course," thereby slowly strangling NATO and draining its will to resist. It is beyond my capacity to predict whether the next war will be short or long, but I will observe that the prudent Navy should be prepared for either case.

With regard to Lieutenant Commander Boyer's observations on the Iron Laws which are more tactical in nature, he offers the idea that present nuclear submarines and their long-range weapons are free from the limiting lines of submerged approach problem. Nuclear submarines trade covertness and speed inversely; those who wish to survive will trade cautiously as well. Speed is therefore bought at the cost of the detection opportunity offered. The Soviet submarine, which frequently exploits its speed capability, is in all probability destined for "early retirement." Further

submarine weapons, no matter how smart, are not infallible, therefore with all weapon systems there is a point blank range (most submariners will reluctantly agree it's closer than you think). Submarines that kill effectively do so from point-blank range regardless of the weapon used (vide *Belgrano*). These two practical factors mean that the limiting lines problem still applies to nuclear submarines (albeit with expanded lines due to increases in technical capability).

The example of the air attacks off Norway in WWII is intriguing but probably misleading. The submarine cannot reattack with impunity because it leaves a datum. Whereas an aircraft datum's usefulness decays very quickly at an exit speed of several hundred knots, a submarine, even at noisy maximum speed or more particularly at silent slow speed, leaves a datum that can be either evaded or prosecuted for some time thereafter. Because of the new generation of long-range ASW sensors and reactive vehicles (especially aircraft) any submarine (postattack) should be subjected to a vigorous counterattack (once again, regardless of the weapon system being used by that submarine). I therefore suggest that because of the total combination of the problems prior to attack (i.e., counterattack) potential that NATO possesses, the prospects for Soviet submarine SLOC interdiction still resemble most closely that traditional submarine problem rather than the paradigm change suggested by Lieutenant Commander Boyer.

In the section of his article "Why Convoying Works," Commander Williams most accurately identifies the principles of war that support convoying: Concentration of Force, Economy of Force and Bringing the Enemy to Decisive Action. Commander Williams then goes on to identify the different but mutually supportive roles that the close escort and other support groups will find themselves in. This situation bears further analysis because here is, possibly, the new dimension that puts an apparently novel form to old substance. For example, current land operations consider vastly enhanced sizes of battlefield. The traditional forward and reserve echelon definitions begin to blur (i.e., FOFA, etc.) and the entire TVD becomes an attack or defense zone in current Soviet thinking. Maritime strategy must absorb, comprehend and articulate this change in dimensional scale. The battle area becomes an entire ocean area and the convoy transiting the Central Atlantic becomes an integral part in the strategic and *tactical* plan in the North Norwegian Sea (for instance by employing an overt Emcon to lure attack effort away from battle groups in distant parts of the ocean or vice versa).

The key to this entire oceanic patchwork quilt of operations is positional intelligence. With superior positional intelligence, all units of the Soviet Fleet, whether air, surface, or subsurface, can be brought to battle under favourable conditions. As Sun Tsu said "Therefore those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle and are not brought there by him." The vast scale of surveillance systems and speed of modern communications can allow us to dominate entire ocean areas and then choose our most favourable means of engagement. The principles of war outlined by Commander Williams still hold good and therefore with the aid of our strategic surveillance systems (e.g., SOSUS and satellites) we can turn the convoy problem from a potential liability into a potential asset.

G.M. Day  
 Lieutenant Commander  
 Canadian Forces Maritime

## High Seas Interdiction

Sir,

In a letter published in the Winter 1987 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, Lieutenant Commander J.G. Simpson, USCG points out correctly that the Coast Guard does routinely interdict foreign flag suspected smugglers far outside of any protective zone generally recognized in international law. He acknowledges that there are certain legal intricacies involved in firing on another country's vessels and suggests that drug interdiction be added to the discussion of the use of force at sea.

In fact, drug interdiction and the interception of illegal immigrants, like liquor interdiction during the 1920s, does create potentially major legal, and therefore political problems. In the main these have been solved, where feasible, by treaty. Occasionally, where an interdiction has occurred without a treaty to support the action against a foreign flag vessel, diplomatic correspondence has smoothed things over. Occasionally it has not. A recent case in which an interdiction unauthorized by treaty was upheld, makes it clear that the courts, in construing the Act of Congress that seems to authorize action to enforce our laws on foreign flag vessels outside American waters, will construe the Act with an eye to the diplomatic situation. In *United States v. Gonzalez* (U.S. Ct. App., 11th Cir.) 776 F.2d 931 (1985), it was a telephoned permission from Honduran officials that seemed to be the key to upholding the legality of the seizure, and one of the appeals court judges indicated that he thought this the outer limit of the authority given the Coast Guard in the *Marijuana on the High Seas Act*. The Act itself requires that any interdiction on the "high seas" be permitted by a treaty or "arrangement" (apparently a telephone call will suffice in at least some cases) between American authorities and the officials of the foreign country involved. Thus, the interdictions are considered valid by U.S. law and by international law as interpreted by the American courts.

A word of warning is still appropriate: If the foreign government involved does not agree with our interpretation of international law, no amount of American legislation or American court action will save the United States from considerable embarrassment. Our evaluation of the importance of the antismuggling effort and the moral value of our interdiction is not binding on foreign statesmen, as their evaluations are not binding on us. Disagreements about it are settled by diplomatic means and can involve tensions that are far worse than the interdiction was worth.

Alfred P. Rubin  
Professor of International Law  
The Fletcher School of Law  
and Diplomacy

## Hard Times

Sir,

I was sorry to read that the *Naval War College Review* publishing schedule has been reduced to that of a quarterly. I have enjoyed the *Review* for a long time and

frequently have used it in my various research efforts and to keep up with the new literature on national security. I know that it can be of little consolation to you, but the *Air University Review* has fallen on even harder times. It appears to me that we are moving in exactly the opposite direction from where we ought to be going. As military power in the most simple terms is made up of men, material and ideas, and as the budgetary constraints are limiting the numbers of the first two, then we can only sustain our power for peace and security through the stimulation of new ideas. We ought to be building up our professional journals, not tearing them down!

David R. Mets  
Lieutenant Colonel  
U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

### New Directions

Sir,

Having been a reader of and contributor to the *Review* for years, I am pleased at the attention that maritime strategy (especially in regional context) is getting on your pages. We use many of the articles, comments, and book reviews in the development of curricula here at the Naval Postgraduate School.

The Secretary of the Navy has recently instructed the School to implement a new series of courses for all Navy and Marine Corps officers who attend. These courses will include: military history, maritime strategy, defense organization, and recent developments in naval warfare. We expect the first of these courses, history, to be offered in the summer of 1987 and maritime strategy in the fall.

I thought your readership would be interested in the new tact being taken at the Naval Postgraduate School. This new departure, stressing maritime affairs/naval warfare, will require additional faculty for the Department of National Security Affairs—those with strong academic credentials in areas that demonstrate relevance and service to the Navy.

Commander James Tritten, U.S. Navy, Chairman  
Department of National Security Affairs  
Naval Postgraduate School  
Monterey, California

### Gross Sinner?

Sir,

This commentary will be confined mostly to my eyewitness knowledge of Admiral Fletcher's actions and inactions at the Invasion of Guadalcanal and the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. It is the events which were omitted by Lieutenant Commander Butcher that tarnish Admiral Fletcher's record in these actions.

I have no quarrel with Commander Butcher's account of Admiral Fletcher in earlier actions. However, Butcher says that Fletcher was battle-tested. I know of no battle our Navy fought in World War I. I noted that Admiral Fletcher was a Medal of Honor winner and was impressed until I read a list of Medal of Honor winners. There were an inordinate number (24) of junior naval officers who won the Medal of Honor in the Vera Cruz operation. One wonders if Admiral Nimitz' affinity for him arose when Fletcher was Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. Admiral Nimitz was Chief of that Bureau (later the Bureau of Personnel).

I should mention that I was, at the outbreak of the war, the Assistant Gunnery and Anti-Aircraft Officer of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. We, too, were in the vicinity of Wake Island when it fell. Just before the war, *Enterprise*, with three cruisers, nine destroyers and no tanker, took 12 fighter planes to Wake and returned on Pearl Harbor day. We fueled the small boys going and coming from the heavy ships and went into Pearl for fuel on December 8th. Why didn't Admiral Fletcher attack Wake and fuel afterward? If commanders are going to fail to attack because a tanker *might* be sunk, battle might never be joined.

I must say that Admiral Fletcher had an obsession about fueling. It always seemed that when action was imminent, he was either fueling or searching for fuel. There were those unkind enough to say that he would rather fuel than fight. In the Invasion of Guadalcanal and particularly in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, this obsession caused unnecessary and damaging results that greatly changed the outcome of the operation. I will expand on this later.

Admiral Fletcher was the first to command a carrier task force in the carrier-to-carrier duel in the Coral Sea. Certainly the *Lexington* was sunk from whatever cause and *Yorktown* was damaged. But the Japanese lost the light carrier *Shoho*, the *Shokaku* was badly damaged, and the Japanese had to withdraw. It is fair to conclude that we had not only won a strategic victory but the Japanese offensive in the Southwest Pacific was stopped. As to the claim of Richard W. Bates at the War College that the detachment of the surface action force to attack Port Moresby was wrong because it reduced the anti-aircraft defenses of the carriers, I find it almost laughable. Ships on the screen in most cases contributed very little to the defense of the carriers in a dive-bombing attack because of the deflection factor and the short range of the automatic weapons. The carriers, on the other hand, have a no-deflection shot as the bomber is diving straight at them, and the carrier's gunners were their own best defense.

Admiral Fletcher was at Midway too and was senior officer present, although tactical command was ostensibly vested in Admiral Spruance. Admiral Fletcher sent a search group to find the enemy carriers and sent a strike group from *Yorktown* which sank the carrier *Soryu*. So, at the time of the Invasion of Guadalcanal he was our most experienced commander in carrier-to-carrier operations. Even Admiral Halsey had never participated up to that time in a carrier duel. I reject the mystique that one has to be an aviator to command a carrier task force. The British got on very well with nonaviators, including carrier captains.

Butcher states that in the Invasion of Guadalcanal we were short of almost everything including ships, and that it was correctly dubbed operation "Shoestring." I thought we had an extremely powerful force. Consider this composition: A total of

82 ships, including 23 transports, 3 aircraft carriers, 1 battleship, 11 heavy cruisers, 2 light cruisers, 30 destroyers and 4 minesweepers.

Before the invasion, a conference of all the admirals and element commanders was held on the *Saratoga*. Admiral Ghormley did not attend the conference but his deputy, Rear Admiral Callaghan, attended. Vice Admiral Fletcher was the commander of the expeditionary force and presumably responsible for the coordination and success of the invasion. At the conference he announced that he would not risk his carriers within range of Japanese land-based air for more than 48 hours. This brought strong opposition from Admiral Turner. But Admiral Fletcher would not budge. This decision meant that air support would be denied the transports at the time when the enemy response to the invasion would probably be at its peak and the transports would be only half unloaded. It doomed the complete success of the invasion from the outset.

As pointed out by Butcher, Fletcher's orders contained the statement: "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 preliminary air strikes." I call this a political, general, prudential statement designed to inform Fletcher he was on his own, and to cover everyone up the line in the event of a carrier disaster. It did not tell Admiral Fletcher he was to withdraw after any arbitrary time limit and abort the unloading operation for lack of air support. In the actual event, the striking force withdrew after 36 hours without sighting *any* Japanese aircraft. Were land-based bombers a superior force?

Let's analyze what we knew about land-based air at the time. The *Enterprise* was attacked by 5 twin-engine land-based bombers in glide formation on 1 February 1942. When the automatic weapons bit into them, they pulled up sharply and their pattern of 15 bombs missed on the port side. One was smoking and pulled up astern and came in to crash the ship. The pilot was killed by AA fire and the plane missed the ship. Hours later two more made an ineffective high altitude run on the ship and were disposed of. (At Midway, U.S. Army Air Force land-based planes dropped hundreds of bombs on the invading Japanese forces and made no hits.) Finally, Admiral Fletcher had the experience of his own transport force and escorts on the 7th, and 8th of August. On the 7th, they withstood and beat off an attack of 25 twin-engine bombers with bombs. Our forces had no casualties. On the 8th, they were attacked by 40 twin-engine bombers with torpedoes. The destroyer *Jarvis* was hit and damaged. The torpedo bombers avoided our fighters stacked over Savo Island by coming in over Florida Island. Antiaircraft fire alone exacted a heavy toll on these bombers, and by now Japanese on Rabaul must have been running low on planes. Only the destroyer *Jarvis* was hit. Surely a powerful carrier task force could take care of itself.

By far the most important omission to me was the failure to send a morning search group on the 8th of August in a sector covering the slot and to the northwest where Japanese surface forces might be expected. If Japanese carriers were around, that was the way to find out quickly. It is true that we had a land-based air-search plan that included PBVs. There was a demarcation line up the slot that marked MacArthur's sphere of command. But a protective early morning search from the carrier was standard operating procedure. Nothing should prevent a carrier task force



commander from protecting his flanks to keep from being blind-sided. A morning search was a prudent thing to do. Had it been undertaken, they would have discovered 7 Japanese cruisers and 1 destroyer 30 miles east of Bougainville and 40 miles northwest of Choiseul. They had sent their float planes in to scout the invasion. We could have hit them all day long.

But we didn't know about them until a message was received about 1630 from an Australian coast watcher on Vella Lavella Island. It reported 7 Japanese cruisers and 1 destroyer passing and gave their course and speed. I plotted it on a chart and it showed their arrival off Savo Island to be about 0100. At that time of year in the Southern Hemisphere, daylight lasted until about 1900. We thought we were going to make a strike. Commander John Crommelin, Air Officer of the *Enterprise*, asked Admiral Kinkaid of our task group to request permission to send a strike hut was refused curtly. Admiral Noyes recommended no air strikes be made because they might not get back until after dark and some of our pilots were not trained in night carrier landings. The irony was that the *Wasp* had just returned from the Mediterranean where her pilots had fully qualified in night carrier operations and had engaged in some while there. Privately, many officers of the *Enterprise*, including aviators, were highly critical of our failure to strike the oncoming cruisers.

After the recommendation, Admiral Fletcher sent Admiral Ghormley, Commander South Pacific Force, the following message: "Fighter plane strength reduced from 99 to 78. In view of large number of enemy torpedo planes and bombers in this area, I recommend withdrawal of my carriers. Request tankers be sent forward as fuel running low." One historian pointed out that 78 fighters was one more than we had in the Battle of Midway. It is true our fighters could not match the Zero then and our pilots were perturbed, but they did an excellent job of destroying many Japanese land-based planes anyway. The carrier task force had not sighted a single enemy plane. Fuel reports of the striking force showed *Enterprise* and *Wasp* with 12 days steaming remaining, *Saratoga* with 10 days, cruisers over 60 percent and destroyers well off. The phrase running low on fuel was a false assessment by any reasonable standard and seemed designed to gain Admiral Ghormley's acquiescence to the withdrawal. It might be well to mention here that Admirals Ghormley, Fletcher and Noyes were Naval Academy classmates of the class of 1906.

Admiral Fletcher's plans were to leave the area at once and go to a prepositioned point to the southeast to await a reply to his message, and this he did. But that is not the worst thing that happened. The message from the Australian coast watcher was not passed on to Admiral Turner and the fire support groups. They were caught unawares and unprepared for the Japanese cruisers and in the early morning hours suffered a major defeat. Four of our cruisers were sunk, *Astoria*, *Quincy*, *Vincennes* and *Canberra*. The *Chicago* was heavily damaged. Casualties were 1,000 dead and over 700 wounded.

If Admiral Fletcher were not going to intercept the cruisers, the least he could have done was to be sure Admirals Turner and Crutchley had the coast watcher's message. Then he could have sent in the battleship *North Carolina* to augment the surface power of the invasion force in our favor. He did neither!

It is not known if Admiral Ghormley received the coast watcher message. If he did, it is reasonable to assume he would have ordered Fletcher to remain in the vicinity to hit the retiring cruisers in the morning.

In regard to the withdrawal, I can only quote Admiral Lord Nelson who said "Whenever England has an enemy, her ships must definitely be put at risk. That is why they were constructed."

Shortly after the cruisers were attacked, Turner sent Fletcher a message saying "Surface attack on screen . . . *Chicago* hit by torpedo, *Canberra* on fire." Captain Forrest Sherman in *Wasp*, with an air group especially trained in night operations, asked Admiral Noyes three times for permission to speed northwestward with his escorts and attack the retiring cruisers. Admiral Noyes refused three times to even forward the request to Admiral Fletcher. But shouldn't Admiral Fletcher have initiated that action himself? It was his last chance to inflict damage on the enemy, which was not a superior force either.

After the cruiser attack and Admiral Fletcher's withdrawal, Admiral Turner was forced to cancel further unloading of the transports and leave the area. This left the marines stranded without needed supplies and equipment.

Butcher gives Admiral Fletcher's reasons for his withdrawal and I will comment on them. First, it should be noted that the reasons make no reference to being short of fuel or of the torpedo bombers which so intimidated him.

- "Overall U.S. carrier strength in the Pacific was four ships."

Comment: See Admiral Nelson's dictum above.

- "No replacements . . . were in sight for another 9 months."

Comment: True, but because of this he failed to carry out his mission. He was sent down there to do a job, not to withhold use of his ships under circumstances that failed to indicate the presence of superior forces.

- "The Japanese Navy could put more carriers in the Guadalcanal area than [he] could [four vs. three]."

Comment: There were no Japanese carriers in the vicinity at the time of the invasion. They did not appear until almost 3 weeks later at Eastern Solomons. I don't know where Admiral Fletcher got his count on the Japanese carriers. Of the 6 first-line Japanese carriers at the outbreak of the war, 4 were sunk at Midway. Only *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* remained. They had some light carriers (48 planes) such as *Ryujo*. If we were not to get any new carriers for 9 months, how long would it take the Japanese to replace theirs?

- "Japanese land-based air (high level bombers, dive-bombers and torpedo planes) was present and offensively active."

Comment: Did he expect to have no opposition to the invasion? Why was he there? Actually the land-based planes on 8 August were cut to pieces by anti-aircraft fire of the transports, cruisers and destroyers. We, in the carriers, had not been discovered by the Japanese.

- "His instructions from CINCPAC were positive and limiting in regard to risking the carriers."

Comment: I don't read the instructions that way. Were torpedo bombers a superior force? I can't believe Admiral Nimitz would so restrict him that he couldn't carry out his mission.

- "Enemy subs were on their way to attack Tulagi occupation forces in the Guadalcanal area."

Comment: True. I believe there were four on the way. Our carrier task force had speed and destroyers. Further, we had not been discovered. This is further evidence of Fletcher's fearfulness and timidity. We weren't even near Tulagi.

Let us now go to the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. The Japanese had decided to recapture Guadalcanal and sent down a strong invasion force to land 1,500 elite troops. Our carrier task force, with 3 carriers—*Saratoga*, *Enterprise* and *Wasp*—was near the Eastern Solomon Islands. On the 23rd of August 1942, a PBY discovered and reported the Japanese transport group coming down. A powerful strike was ordered from the *Saratoga* and from Guadalcanal. The transport commander had turned north, however, after the PBY sighting. The weather was bad and the strike groups found nothing and returned. But Admiral Fletcher knew an invasion force was coming down and it was reasonable to assume it would be escorted by heavy ships and aircraft carriers for air cover. It was at this juncture, then, the evening before the battle, that Admiral Fletcher chose to detach the *Wasp* and her group to go south to refuel. The result was that instead of having 3 carriers to oppose the Japanese the next day, we only had 2. Further, the *Wasp* was fueled previously, at the same time as the *Enterprise*, and the *Enterprise* had better than 60 percent fuel remaining. A great victory might have been achieved had the *Wasp* remained with us.

We actually faced two first-line Japanese carriers next day plus a light carrier. *Enterprise* was heavily damaged by three bomb hits and the Japanese light carrier *Ryujō* was sunk. *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* were undamaged, although the latter received two near misses from *Enterprise* scouts. If we won a strategic victory, it was because fighter planes and antiaircraft gunners cut to pieces a Japanese air group. *Enterprise* gunners alone brought down 15 planes. The two Japanese carriers then proceeded home for replacement planes and pilots, leaving the transports without air cover. Marine and *Enterprise* planes from Guadalcanal on 25 August attacked the transport group and forced it to turn back.

Space does not permit refutation of Butcher's convoluted thinking about the Battles of Santa Cruz and Guadalcanal. Actually, antiaircraft fire from *Hornet* and *Enterprise* cut to pieces 4 Japanese air groups at Santa Cruz. *Enterprise* gunners alone shot down 30 planes. This left them without air power at Guadalcanal although they had 3 undamaged carriers. However he comported himself in other engagements, Admiral Fletcher was neither aggressive nor battle-minded at Guadalcanal.

His fearful preoccupation with the safety of the carriers prevented him from using them effectively to protect our invasion forces and insure a successful invasion. As commander of the expeditionary force that was his responsibility, yet he acted as though the invasion forces were an independent element on their own. His failure to pass along the message from the coast watcher at Vella Lavella, at best, was an oversight that showed a callous disregard of the invasion forces.

Detaching the *Wasp* one day before the Battle of the Eastern Solomons to refuel defies the imagination. Some have said Admiral Fletcher didn't know the Japanese carriers were coming down. He knew an invasion force was coming down. He knew the Japanese knew we had carriers in the vicinity. It follows that the Japanese would provide carrier air cover for the invasion force.

Why couldn't Admiral Fletcher have waited one day to refuel the *Wasp*? The answer is that he could have waited. The *Wasp* and her group had plenty of fuel!

Certainly Admiral Fletcher's conduct of operations at the Invasion of Guadalcanal and the Battle of the Eastern Solomons was not derived from any doctrine taught at either the Army or Naval War Colleges.

Perhaps I am prejudiced because the *Enterprise* was Admiral Halsey's flagship. During the first six months of the war I watched him on the flag bridge below my battle station in sky control. I *know* what he would have done to the Japanese cruisers on 8 August 1942.

When I graduated from the Naval Academy in 1930, I was assigned to *Lexington*. My first commanding officer was Captain Ernest J. King. I'll trust Admiral King's final judgment as ComInch as regards Vice Admiral Fletcher.

I agree with Lieutenant Commander Butcher in one respect; the truth is the first casualty of war. Could it be because sometimes all the facts are not known?

Elias B. Mott  
 Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.)  
 Irvine, California

### Pioneer Warrior?

Sir,

Lieutenant Commander Butcher's article in the Winter issue, "Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, Pioneer Warrior or Gross Sinner?" addresses a most interesting aspect of Pacific combat operations and personalities during that most difficult, crucial year, 1942. The issues raised are worthy of additional study. With the overwhelming superiority of 1944-45, tactical errors were not crucial. In 1942 they could have been fatal.

In the area of personality conflicts, Admiral Fletcher may have suffered from his long (5 months) association with *Yorktown* (CV5) and the ambitions of the then commanding officer of *Lexington*, in addition to the adverse opinion of Admiral King.

The then commander, Jocko Clark, was executive officer of *Yorktown*, and not air group commander as stated by Lieutenant Commander Butcher. He detested most of the ship's officers and particularly the department heads. The feeling was reciprocated. Morale, enthusiasm and self-confidence were restored with his replacement by the magnetic Dixie Kiefer. Admiral Clark's bad-mouthing of *Yorktown* did not cease with his 1942 comments in Washington. They continued on in his published memoirs and in the writings of his spokesman, Professor Clark Reynolds.

The protection of the career ambitions of *Lexington*'s captain was more subtle, but possibly equally damaging to Admiral Fletcher's reputation. *Lexington*'s performance in the Coral Sea battle left much to be desired, especially in the disposition and control of the combat air patrol defending the force. Admiral Fletcher, during the days leading up to the battle, considered taking air control away from Rear Admiral Fitch who was in *Lexington*, but did not do so because Admiral Fitch was an aviator

and he was not. The ex-commanding officer of *Lexington*, in his capacity as acting chief of staff to Admiral Fitch after *Lexington's* sinking, directed *Yorktown* to revise its battle report by deleting recommendations for better deployment of the force's defensive combat air patrol.

This protective interpretation of events—cover-up, if you will—like Admiral Clark's derogatory comments, also lingered on in the written record. The commemorative booklet, *75 Years of U.S. Naval Aviation*, published by American Heritage, described the Coral Sea battle as "a confused and muddled affair." It also states that "Fletcher had committed his cruisers to fight Japanese surface ships, leaving only four destroyers to screen the *Lexington* and the *Yorktown*. This is simply not true; there were five heavy cruisers and seven destroyers. The implication is clear, however. The loss of *Lexington* was Fletcher's fault.

A postscript to these events was the decision not to award *Yorktown* a unit citation in the postwar review of such citations. The unofficial explanation was that *Lexington* was not considered deserving of a citation and that if one were given to *Yorktown*, *Lexington* would have to get one also.

I was delighted to read Lieutenant Commander Butcher's defense of Frank Jack Fletcher's record. His reputation has too long suffered from unfounded criticisms.

J.E. Greenbacker  
Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.)  
Halifax, Virginia

