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ADMIRAL JOSEPH MASON REEVES, USN (1872-1948)

PART II—1931 TO 1948 COMMANDING THE U.S. FLEET AND IN WORLD WAR II

An article

by

Rear Admiral John D. Hayes,
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In his previous work on Admiral Reeves, the author suggested that "A man of one generation to be remembered by another must either do something worth recording or write something worth reading, for the only thing that truly lasts is the written word." Preserved here are some observations of a naval officer whose professional leadership, competence, and energy did much to prepare the U.S. Navy for World War II. Admiral Reeves was a man of extraordinarily high principles and dedication which he fully lived up to both at sea and on the Washington scene.



Background. The first part of this biographical sketch of the naval career of Joseph Mason Reeves covered the period of his life up to 1931.* It first summarized his 4 years at the Naval Academy where he concentrated his efforts mostly on football, crew, and chess; his engineering services aboard *Oregon* during the Spanish American War; his transfer to the line; and his specializing in gunnery which, under the enthusiastic sponsorship of William S. Sims, was gaining serious attention in the fleet. In the battleship *Oregon*, Reeves had shown that he could make engineering personnel perform beyond themselves; he was to do the same with guncrews and later with naval aviators; and finally with the officers and men of the whole U.S. Fleet. His primary means were concentration and enthusiasm.

Reeves assumed his first command in April 1913, the collier *Jupiter* which was also the first electric-drive vessel in the U.S. Navy. Later this ship became the Navy's first carrier renamed the *Langley*, in which he hoisted his flag in August 1927, after being commissioned rear admiral.¹

The turning point in his naval life had come 2 years earlier at the age of 53 when, after a tour as student and staff member at the Naval War College, he was ordered to the Naval Air Station at Pensacola, Fla., for duty involving flying, preparatory to taking over command of the Aircraft Squadrons, Battle Fleet. Most of the first part of this biography therefore involved his aviation activities, certainly the most challenging period of a productive life and no doubt his most significant contribution to the U.S. Navy.

One dramatic incident, occurring prior to 1931, which did not concern

aviation activities was his encounter with columnist Drew Pearson before the Senate Naval Affairs Committee in October 1929. In this contest the naval officer bested the newspaperman in a battle of words.

The cause of the confrontation went back more than 2 years to the abortive naval disarmament conference of June-July 1927 at Geneva, Switzerland. The aircraft squadrons which had earlier accompanied the Battle Fleet to the east coast were to spend the summer of 1927 at Hampton Roads, with *Langley* providing carrier landing training for pilots of squadrons to be assigned *Lexington* and *Saratoga*. Reeves looked forward to supervising these exercises, but instead, he received temporary duty orders in late June to act as aviation adviser to the U.S. delegates at the Geneva Naval Conference. Despite the world attention being given the issue at the time, Reeves was too absorbed in aviation matters to pursue the intricacies of naval disarmament.

At the Geneva Conference the United States proposed that the 5-5-3 ratio for battleship tonnage for Great Britain, United States, and Japan—agreed upon at the Washington Conference of 1921—be extended to all ship types. The fear was that unless some disarmament could be achieved, an arms race in other classes of warships would result.

The U.S. delegates to the Geneva Conference were Hugh Gibson, an early career diplomat, and Adm. Hilary P. Jones, a former Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet and one of the Navy's most respected officers. Another naval officer delegate was Britain's Adm. Sir John Jellicoe, who represented New Zealand where he recently had been Governor General.

Both Great Britain and Japan had large cruiser-building programs during and following World War I. The United States, on the other hand, had not built any of this type between 1908 and

*John D. Hayes, "Admiral Joseph Mason Reeves, USN (1872-1948) Part One—to 1931: The Engineering, Gunnery, and Aviation Years," *Naval War College Review*, November 1970, p. 48-57.

1923 and so would need a large building program to catch up. The focus of attention at Geneva, therefore, was on cruisers. The main discussions concerned whether they should be of 10,000 tons with 8-inch guns or approximately 7,500 tons mounting 6-inch guns. The British wanted most of the tonnage allowed to be devoted to the second type as this would provide more ships to cover her extensive sealand. The United States, on the other hand, wanted fleet cruisers of heavier armament and longer range to accompany her battle fleet in an extensive movement across the Pacific. Japan just wanted more ships. After 6 weeks of fruitless debate, no compromise could be effected, and the conference ended in failure.²

Reeves versus Drew Pearson. Public interest in disarmament continued, and by 1929 the popular notion developed that the failure at Geneva had been due not to irreconcilable differences, but to the efforts of a flaunting publicist, one William B. Shearer. He was employed by the U.S. shipbuilding industry, and it was supposed his objective was to insure that the Conference would fail so that naval shipbuilding in the United States would not be curtailed. A subcommittee of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, headed by Senator Samuel M. Shortridge of California, initiated an investigation to determine whether or not this was the case.

Drew Pearson, who was the subcommittee's star witness, testified that Shearer had been paid a fee by the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, and the New York Shipbuilding Company of Camden, N.J. His assignment, according to testimony of the shipbuilders, was "observing and reporting." Shearer evidently took a wider view of his duties. According to Pearson, he was a lavish spender with an expensive apartment in Geneva, at-

tended all newspaper conferences at which he passed out releases to the press, and continually associated with U.S. naval officers. Pearson stated that at the hotel where he and naval officers stayed, he frequently saw Shearer with Adm. F.H. Schofield, Comdr. H.C. Train, Lt. Comdr. H.H. Frost, and Reeves. Under questioning, he further stated that Reeves frequently expressed the hope that the Conference would not succeed.

Pearson's testimony drew nationwide attention. The *Baltimore Sun* of Friday, 27 September 1929, devoted six columns to it. Pearson stated that he had testified reluctantly, and he was careful to exonerate U.S. delegates Gibson and Jones, stating that they were anxious for an agreement and that they had never met Shearer. In later testimony, Pearson was called a liar by the flamboyant Shearer who admitted he had conferred with the U.S. naval officers but denied that they had expressed the hope that the Conference would fail.

At the time of this investigation, Reeves was a member of the General Board, serving an interlude of 1 year between his two Pacific Fleet aviation commands. The prestige of the General Board had dropped since Admiral Dewey had been at its head before World War I and it was to regain some of this that Reeves, along with other promising officers, had been ordered to duty on the board by the Secretary of the Navy Charles Francis Adams. The General Board was engaged in examining the designs of the proposed 10,000-ton cruisers when the Pearson testimony exploded like a bomb upon the unsuspecting Reeves. He knew that he had to undeniably refute it or his naval career would be ruined. He received this opportunity in a telephone call from Senator Shortridge inviting him to testify before the subcommittee on the Monday following Pearson's article in the *Sun*. Reeves eagerly accepted and spent the weekend preparing

his short, carefully worded testimony. He even memorized it, not trusting to his natural gift for speaking extemporaneously. His statement in full was:

I would like to state that I have never expressed the hope that the Geneva Naval Limitations Conference in 1927 would fail; I have never entertained such a hope.

It is impossible that thinking, experienced officers of the American Navy should desire the failure of a naval limitation conference to reach an agreement fair, just and equitable, to limit navies, for a very simple but excellent reason. American naval officers, in the event of war, desire that our country shall have a navy of equal strength to that of the enemy; as naval officers they want an equal chance in battle.

They recognize that a naval limitation agreement is the only means by which this equality can be assured. Without a limitation agreement, there is instability, uncertainty and doubt. With a limitation agreement fair and equitable, there is stability and certainty. Therefore, American naval officers hope for a naval limitation agreement which will include three things essential to equality—first, recognition of the right of the United States to a navy of equal strength to that of any foreign nation; second, limitation sufficiently low to insure that the United States can and will build its quota; third, for each nation to build the kind of cruisers that best meets its own needs.

Such an agreement on limitations naval officers recognize as the only means which will insure our country that equality necessary for its security. For such an agreement of naval limitations, each member of the Delegation at Geneva in 1927, naval and civilian

alike, diligently worked and sincerely hoped.

To represent our naval officers as big navy advocates opposed to naval limitation, is unjust and illogical.³

The next day the *Washington Star* commented in an editorial: "He spoke his piece like a born orator . . . it did not contain a single superfluous syllable." The *Washington Post* editorialized: "Why is it sought to show that Americans are responsible for the failure of the United States and Great Britain to agree on naval parity?" The Senate subcommittee satisfied itself with condemning a few anti-British magazine articles and terminated the hearings.

Reeves versus Moffett on Airships. Discredited in the Shortridge investigation, Drew Pearson renewed his attack on Reeves in a book, *More Merry-Go-Round*, published in 1932 as a sequel to his earlier sensational volume *Washington Merry-Go-Round*. Both were published anonymously but were generally known to have been written by Pearson and his columnist associate, Robert Allen. The Pearson attack this time dealt with the preference of Reeves for San Diego rather than Sunnyvale, Calif. as the site for the west coast base for the airships *Akron* and *Macon*.

Reeves had good reasons for preference, and they are factually stated by Richard K. Smith, historian of these airships. Smith's account is quoted here:

With the prospect of two new airships the Navy was faced with an airship housing problem which made the West Coast base a necessary corollary of the ZRS4&5's construction. Thus in January 1929, the Secretary of the Navy asked Congress to provide for an investigation of sites for the new air station. This was the first substantial move toward the establishment of the Naval Air Station at Sunnyvale, California.

A board of officers headed by Admiral Moffett was appointed to make the investigation, and on 15 May it met to study 97 locations between Puget Sound and the Mexican frontier. The members of this so-called Moffett Board were Rear Admiral Joseph M. Reeves, ComAirBatF'or (Commander Aircraft, Battle Force), Garland Fulton, Rosendahl, and Lieutenant Commander Edward J. Marshall, an officer of the Civil Engineering Corps.⁴

The several sites were soon reduced to two in California; one, a square plot of 1,700 acres in the Santa Clara Valley near Sunnyvale; the other known as Camp Kearny, was a rectangular area of 2,032 acres on the arid coastal plain about 11 miles north of San Diego. Both would eventually be acquired, but at this moment the board decided on Sunnyvale. The decision was not unanimous, and here occurred a significant division which serves to illustrate the gap between the airship organization and the Fleet.

Admiral Moffett, Fulton, Rosendahl, and Marshall recommended Sunnyvale because of better meteorological conditions, and it would provide naval aviation with facilities in the San Francisco area. At Camp Kearny, however, it was known that severe temperature inversions were common; 692 acres of it was unusable canyon land, and there was a problem getting sufficient water. But they recommended that if Sunnyvale were selected, Camp Kearny should also be purchased, for use as an airplane base and a secondary airship facility.

Admiral Reeves disagreed; he felt that the San Diego site was at least the equal of Sunnyvale, and its strategic position was over-

whelmingly superior because it was near the center of the Fleet's exercise area, whereas Sunnyvale was from 350 to 550 miles away. Pointing implicitly at lighter-than-air's isolation from the Navy at Lakehurst, he felt that the airship and its personnel should be located in the immediate vicinity of the Fleet, its heavier-than-air units, and their thinking, instead of being hidden away in a remote area.

Reeves's tough logic did not prevail; it was felt that Sunnyvale was more suited to the peculiar needs of lighter-than-air, and that the airship's great range would compensate for the base's distance from the Fleet operating area. No one could foresee how that distance would artificially bedevil the *Macon's* operations; nor that three years later Admiral Moffett would no longer be an actor in the airship drama; nor that in five years it would be Reeves, as Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, who certify the end of the *Akron* and *Macon* epoch of naval aviation.⁵

The difference between objective history and subjective reporting is nowhere better illustrated than in a comparison of the above account with that of Pearson on pages 248-249 of his book *More Merry-Go-Round*.

As Smith indicated, Reeves wanted the Camp Kearny site, now the Miramar Naval Air Station, because San Diego offered ideal flying weather and an airship base there would simplify the problems of integrating this new aviation type into the fleet. He convinced Secretary of the Navy Charles Francis Adams of the soundness of his views and for 3 days lucidly explained them to the Naval Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives which would eventually make the choice through its appropriations. Reeves was complimented by the committee's chairman,

Representative Carl Vinson, who told him: "I have been on this Committee some fourteen years and, Admiral Reeves, your testimony has been the best I have ever heard from a witness in stating his viewpoint."⁶

The committee, however, withheld approval of the San Diego site. Pearson charged in his book that Reeves, to get his way, leaked a copy of a General Board report favoring San Diego as a dirigible training base but without the statement in the same report that in time of war it would be necessary, for considerations of strategy, to locate such a base near San Francisco. Pearson added that Secretary Adams, because of Reeves' action, sent a letter of apology to the committee, stating it reflected no credit on his department.

Reeves on the General Board. From May 1929 to April 1930, Reeves served as a member of the General Board. This was his only extended duty in Washington until World War II and certainly was not a happy experience. Within this 12-month period came his defeat on the airship board and the Drew Pearson affair, while the remainder of the year was spent under the shadow of President Herbert Hoover's "disarmament by example" and the London Naval Conference.

The London Conference, which extended from January until April 1930, appeared to be a success in contrast to the Conference 3 years earlier. The General Board, under the leadership of Adm. Charles F. Hughes, Chief of Naval Operations, had been at loggerheads with President Hoover over the number of 10,000-ton cruisers necessary for U.S. national security. The board's number was 21, a minimum in its joint opinion and a figure which it refused to lower. This position incensed the President and he summoned Adm. William V. Pratt, then Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, to be the chief naval adviser. Pratt thus again became a key figure as

he had been at the Washington Conference of 1921.⁷ Agreement with the British was finally obtained when the American delegation, on Pratt's recommendation, accepted 18 heavy cruisers of 10,000 tons with 8-inch guns. The remaining tonnage was allotted to additional ships of the 6-inch gun type.

Before confirming the treaty, however, the full Senate Naval Affairs Committee held hearings at which Reeves, together with other senior flag officers, testified. The views expressed by Reeves extend over 17 pages of printed testimony. He held that each nation should be allowed, within the limits of the treaty, to design cruisers to fit their needs, but he indicated that he himself favored the 10,000-ton, 8-inch gun cruiser of the fleet type.⁸

Experience in World War II was later to prove that the 6-inch cruiser, with its high volume of fire, was the superior warship, especially for the night surface actions which characterized that war. This could not be foreseen, but it must be admitted that naval officers in the decade 1927-1937 did make a fetish of the 10,000-ton treaty cruiser. This attitude was carried into World War II when the 6-inch gun ships were hardly given the chance to show their worth until after the 8-inch gun type had taken heavy losses.

There are dissenters from the common view. The most prominent, of course, was Adm. William V. Pratt who gained the ill favor of some U.S. Navy contemporaries for his advocacy of the 6-inch gun ships. Others were Rear Adm. Harry E. Yarnell and Arthur J. Hepburn and especially Capt. Alexander H. Van Keuren of the Construction Corps who held that the 10,000-ton, 8-inch gun treaty cruiser was a monstrosity.

Admiral Hughes and the members of the General Board were all to know President Hoover's displeasure. Reeves for a time escaped by leaving the Washington scene. Rear Adm. Richard H.

Leigh, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, offered him either the presidency of the Naval War College or a return to his old job of Commander Carriers, Battle Force. He chose the latter because he preferred sea duty to shore duty and the west coast to the east coast. (The story of this year has already been told in Part One of this biographical sketch.)

The ax fell some 10 months later when Reeves, his direct connection with aviation over, came ashore once again. His new assignment was the lowest prestige flag officer job on the west coast—senior member of the Pacific Coast Section of the Board of Inspection and Survey. A year later he became Commandant of the Navy Yard at Mare Island, but all indications were that he would receive no more important fleet commands.

To Sea Again. Far-reaching changes, however, were taking place. The American people, in the depths of the depression of 1932, chose Franklin Roosevelt as President. The Navy, under Roosevelt's almost personal direction, soon began the climb to the position it finally reached in World War II—in the vanguard of the Armed Forces of the world's most powerful Nation. Joseph Mason Reeves was to play a major role in this ascent.

Not long after election, he received a letter from Washington to the effect that he would be going to sea the following June as Commander, Battleships Divisions, to be followed by command of the Battle Force and eventually the U.S. Fleet. This selection, which, of course, had the approval of the President-elect, came as a surprise to Reeves. He had stayed clear of duty in Washington as much as he was able and, therefore, had had no previous contact with the former Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Josephus Daniels, as did many other senior officers of the time.

The succession of commands of

battleships, the Battle Force, and the U.S. Fleet that Reeves was scheduled to pass through comprised the usual 3-year ascent of the Navy's select senior officers in the period between World Wars. It provided a means of obtaining continuity while affording incumbents the opportunity of demonstrating their capabilities. The appointment of the Chief of Naval Operations, however, was for a period of up to 4 years, and since the officer chosen would be carrying out Presidential policies, the Chief Executive usually concerned himself directly with this appointment. It was, as a rule, made from one of the senior fleet commands.

Admiral Pratt, who had been CNO since September 1930, reached the retirement age of 64 shortly before the President's inauguration. Roosevelt, for several reasons, did not want an immediate change in the top Navy post, so Pratt retained his office until 1 July 1933. Pratt's choice as his successor was Arthur J. Hepburn who had served as his Chief of Staff when he was Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet (CinCUS). However, the President selected William H. Standley who had had considerable experience in Washington as Assistant Chief of Naval Operations. At this time Standley held a cruiser command, but in order to fulfill the traditional requirement of CNO coming from a major fleet command, he was transferred to the post of Commander Battle Force for a few days before Reeves actually took it over.

During his last months as Commandant, Mare Island Navy Yard, Reeves had the unique opportunity of taking part in Fleet Problem XIV in February 1933, in which he acted as umpire of the Black Force. He thus had a major role in nine of 11 fleet problems between 1926 and 1936. He also had the opportunity to judge the fleet that he would soon be directing. What he saw did not please him, for units were undermanned and had been allowed

insufficient fuel for proper training.

In forming his staff, Reeves selected as his flag lieutenant Lt. Comdr. James G. Atkins, his aide at Mare Island. Atkins, a submariner who had never performed this staff duty, demurred at first. The admiral, however, assured him that his duties would not be those of the usual flag lieutenant but rather to give advice, whenever he believed that Reeves was about to do something wrong. At Atkins' suggestion, Lt. Comdr. Francis C. Denebrink became flag secretary. Both men remained with Reeves for the next 3 years. The one, however, who served Reeves longest, 8 years, was Punch, his Boston terrier. Punch was not to complete this last tour, however, as he died at sea during maneuvers in the spring of 1936.

Reeves had three chiefs of staff during the next 3 years. The first was Adolphus Andrews, Sr., who left in early 1935 to become Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. He was followed by Samuel W. Bryant who was detached after a few months because of illness. His last chief of staff was James C. Richardson who was himself to command the Battle Force and U.S. Fleet, 1939-1940.

Comdr., later Vice Adm. Frank B. Wagner, became aviation officer on the staff. As readers of Part One of this sketch will recall, he had been operations officer on the Aircraft Squadrons, Battle Fleet staff. Among others who served as staff members were Capt., later Vice Adm. William W. Smith and Capt. George B. Wright, operations; Lt. Comdr., later Rear Adm. Malcolm F. Schoeffel, aviation; Capt. H.B. Saunders, material; Comdr., later Adm. Harry W. Hill, and Comdr., later Vice Adm. Robert M. Griffin, gunnery. Horatio Rivero, Jr., assistant communications officer, then a lieutenant (junior grade), became one of the foremost post-World War II flag officers.

Fleet Security and Emergency Train-

ing. The first exacting task to which Reeves devoted himself in his new sea job was that of improving security within the force and developing a war-oriented attitude among its personnel. The world was upset, and the probability of war to him was real. Pacific oriented as he was, he was convinced that the enemy would be the Japanese. Increased Japanese commercial activity on the southern California coast drew his attention as their fishing boats and tankers, closely observing the U.S. Fleet units during their exercises, were obviously being used for intelligence purposes. Reeves also saw the possibility here for sabotage and for mining operations that might cripple his fleet at the outbreak of war.

Such fears, history now reveals, were largely groundless. Nevertheless, they did afford a means by which the fleet could be made security conscious. Port watches were armed, sentries were posted on piers to which vessels were moored, and increased protection measures were taken when ships transited the Panama Canal.

Fleet Problem XV in the spring of 1934 was to be held in the Caribbean. Units of the U.S. Fleet in the Pacific, including the fleet flagship, arrived off the Pacific entrance of the Panama Canal on 20 April. Prior to leaving the San Pedro-San Diego area, the Commander in Chief, Adm. David F. Sellers, had been informed by the Navy Department of the possibility of attempts to blow up ships of the fleet while transiting the canal. Immediately after arrival, Sellers held a conference with the Governor of the Canal Zone, and it was decided to transit the entire fleet as soon as possible. All commercial traffic was stopped, including that from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This made the entire canal facilities, including both sets of locks, available to the fleet for its Pacific to Atlantic passage.⁹

The task of scheduling the transit was delegated by Sellers to Reeves.

Under the latter's direction, 110 ships passed through in 32 hours without mishap of any kind—an operation that would normally have required about a week. The major gain from the operation was perhaps the vivid impression that it made on the alerted crews.

Such an unplanned emergency transit during war would have left the fleet unprepared for battle had an enemy been waiting in the opposite ocean. Therefore, on the return passage of the fleet to the Pacific, some months later after Reeves had assumed the office of Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, he arranged for another emergency transit, but one so planned that the fleet would be ready to go into battle deployment on its completion.

This operation was also conducted with secrecy. During August 1934, fleet units were engaged in routine training exercises at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. While there, the admiral, sent Lieutenant Rochefort, his intelligence officer, in a destroyer to Panama with plans for the transit. Rochefort had orders to arrange this with the Governor only, without informing Army and Navy commanders in Panama. This would have meant also informing the Navy Department where Reeves felt there was too much loose talk with respect to fleet movements.¹⁰

The transit arranged, Rochefort sent a message via a simple code giving order of units, fueling schedules, et cetera. Thus when the fleet arrived, ships began passing through immediately according to a definite tactical plan—destroyers, carriers with their cruiser escorts, battleships, the remainder of the destroyers, and finally the train. All transited in less than 34 hours, while heavily armed soldiers stood guard on the locks and along the 50 miles of the canal route, and aircraft patrolled above.

Another emergency action by the commander in chief that was highly successful in its conduct and beneficial in its results was a surprise sortie of the

fleet from the San Pedro-San Diego area on a Friday afternoon in the early spring of 1936. The various units had just returned to port from a week of training, and crews were preparing for a weekend ashore. Instead, at 1400, a general signal was sent to every ship, including those under repair, directing them to prepare to get underway. Half an hour later another dispatch came to put to sea at 1600 and rendezvous at a point designated. Before sundown the harbors of Los Angeles and San Diego, which had been crowded with ships, were almost empty, with a few stragglers still putting their machinery together. Aircraft squadrons at North Island joined their Long Beach-based carriers, some fliers making their first after sunset landings.

An unforeseen situation developed as one of the frequent California fogs closed in over the rendezvous. More emergency signals became necessary, and the rendezvous point was moved to what was judged to be a clear area. Everything turned out well in the end. The next morning, after putting the ships through their paces with some fast maneuvering, the admiral sent them home at maximum speed. All were soon back in port for the weekend with a "Well Done." Reeves had reason to be proud of his fleet and its men proud of themselves.

Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, in a biographical sketch such as this, it is difficult to discuss the Reeves actions as Commander Battle Force separate from those while in command of the U.S. Fleet as he handled the same ships with the same men in much the same manner during the 3 years. But it was as commander in chief that he put the stamp of authority as well as his personality upon his actions.

The high point of the U.S. Fleet concentration on the east coast in 1934 was a 2-week visit to New York in June. This opened with a review of the fleet

by President Roosevelt, on the bridge of the cruiser *Indianapolis* off Ambrose Channel lightship at the harbor's entrance. The ships then moored in the North River or alongside piers where over 10,000 people visited them daily. Finally on 15 June there took place a display of ceremony unlikely to be seen in today's Navy as six major command changes took place in a single morning, culminating at noon with Adm. Joseph Mason Reeves relieving Adm. David Foote Sellers as commander in chief aboard the fleet flagship *Pennsylvania*.

After the ceremony and Sellers' departure, Reeves took one of his characteristic positive actions that made his name a byword in the Navy. The operations officer on Admiral Sellers' staff had been Comdr. Halloway H. Frost, an authority on the Battle of Jutland and an author of considerable note. Frost had been given a great deal of freedom in handling the fleet during the previous problem, and several of the maneuvers he directed had annoyed Reeves because of their artificiality.¹¹

Frost, moreover, persuaded Sellers to issue a set of fleet orders dealing with tactical matters that would have continued the Frost concepts as fleet doctrine. Reeves would have none of this. It has always been naval custom to observe a polite period of waiting before countermanding a predecessor's order. Instead, Reeves within an hour sent his first directive to the fleet cancelling these orders. Seagoing wits were quick to quip that Reeves had "defrosted" the fleet. Frost unfortunately died some 6 months later while undergoing surgery, but he did leave a lasting impact on the U.S. Navy with his two books, *On A Destroyer's Bridge* (1930) and his posthumous *Battle of Jutland* (1936).

The new commander in chief followed with another drastic reforming action 2 weeks later in Newport, R.I. when he gathered officers of *all ranks* for a lecture at the Naval War College. The situation was not unlike that in

1925 at the Naval Air Station, San Diego. Again he spoke extemporaneously. Fortunately much of this lecture has been included in the biography by Adolphus Andrews, Jr.

The admiral, in part, told his surprised but impressed audience:

In everything we do, we must ask ourselves: does this directly advance preparation for war?

Our Fleet today is over-organized, over-educated, over-theorized, over-instructed, over-administrated, over-complicated, and overwhelmed with red tape, correspondence, paperwork and books!

I believe the Fleet can be handled far more effectively and practically than is the case today if the number of tactical books used by the Department is limited to four. Any commander may indoctrinate his command in any way he chooses, except by complicated books and pamphlets on tactical procedures.

If war comes, this Fleet must fight "as is." You must fight at sea and not on paper. Victories are won by practical results. Practical results are obtained by application at sea of our studies, theories and analyses on shore.

You will get lied with your nose in the wrong book and your pocket full of red tape and fine forms unless you lock your library in the safe, stand up and face a practical sea situation in a practical seamanlike way, using your own brains and making your own decisions.

The speech at North Island 10 years before had heralded the transformation of the naval air arm into an effective combat weapon; the speech at Newport was the beginning of a transition from a peacetime fleet to one whose men were mentally and emotionally prepared to fight.

The admiral, shortly after, made a trip to Washington, summoned to meet the President for the first time. From these conversations he realized that Roosevelt saw himself as personal Commander in Chief of the Navy and that the President had a wider understanding of the Navy and its purposes than many of its own officers. On the other hand, Admiral Standley, the Chief of Naval Operations, thought Roosevelt had an inflated opinion of his knowledge of naval strategy and tactics. The relationship between Standley and Roosevelt, according to the former, never got beyond a purely official basis.¹²

Reeves next saw Roosevelt in December 1934 when the admiral was in Washington as a member of the flag selection board. At this time he learned that the President intended to break precedent and retain him as Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, for an additional year. This came just as the next fleet problem was to be announced. Fleet Problem XVI was to be conducted between 29 April and 10 June 1935, the most extensive Fleet exercises up to that time. It was to range from the west coast to the Hawaiian and Aleutian islands with the entire fleet participating, except for a few elements of marginal combat value still on the east coast.

On 29 December, Reeves made a news release on the general plans for the problem. The newspapers announced it as the greatest game of mock warfare ever to be staged. Immediately there was reaction from peace groups and isolationists to the effect that this was a threatening gesture against Japan. Roosevelt was annoyed at this publicity but refused to interfere after Reeves informed him that the fleet would not operate within 2,000 miles of Japan. After the problem had commenced, orders came from the Chief of Naval Operations that no ships would pass beyond the 180th meridian. Midway Island, key point in the problem, is less

than 150 miles east of this meridian.

This publicity resulted in considerable interest by the press with resulting requests for correspondents to witness the maneuvers. The reaction of Reeves was that this problem followed war plans too closely to allow press coverage. He was overruled, and the Navy Department authorized about 30 correspondents to join the fleet. The admiral, however, required these to sign written agreements that they would submit nothing for publication that he had not first reviewed and approved. When so informed, only five of the correspondents remained to witness the fleet problem. One of these was Hanson Baldwin of *The New York Times*.

This fleet problem, according to the commander in chief's report, was of great value in demonstrating the capabilities and limitations of Pearl Harbor in its first test as a wartime base. All ships were berthed inside except the carriers as the dredging to accommodate their draft had not then been completed. The initial phase of the problem, the passage from the west coast to Hawaii, was primarily devoted to submarine operations. Although surface units were successful in eluding the submarines, the Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet report stressed the urgent need for developing antisubmarine material and methods.

The later phases of the problem consisted of an attack and landing on Midway Island and finally a fleet action, exercises remarkably similar to some of the wartime operations conducted in the Central Pacific less than 10 years later.

The aviation exercises, marred by a series of accidents, however, were disappointing. The airship *Macon*, whose worth was to be tested in this fleet problem, had broken up and sank off Point Sur on the California coast in February.¹³ The promising PBY's, then being introduced into the fleet, perhaps too hurriedly, also experienced several

accidents, some of them with fatalities. These casualties disrupted air operations and some surface plans. Nevertheless, valuable experience was gained as was shown by a massed flight without incident of over 40 aircraft which returned from Midway to Pearl via French Frigate Shoal. Reeves was pleased and expressed his appreciation to the aviation personnel for their efficiency and readiness to accept the risk of protracted operations.

Fleet Problem XVII, the last in which he was involved, was conducted in the Panama-west Central American area, 27 April to 6 June 1936. This time Reeves acted in the conventional Commander in Chief U.S. Fleet role of observer and chief umpire. The PBY's in this problem proved the worth that was to mark their operations through World War II. Carrier and carrier squadron operations also indicated that a high level of training had been reached. To the crews of the fleet, however, the most memorable part of this problem was the sweep which Reeves directed down the South American coast and across the Equator for the sole purpose of making it a fleet of "shellbacks."

Reeves' job was done. Tactician that he essentially was, he was now ready to turn the fleet over to strategist Arthur J. Hepburn.

The change of command ceremony aboard *Pennsylvania* was much the same as that of 2 years before. What was different came after. The now rear admiral¹⁴ changed to civilian clothes but still had on his uniform white shirt, black tie, and high stiff collar. He reappeared on the quarterdeck to receive his last side honors and the age-old three cheers by the crew of his flagship. Awaiting at the foot of the flag gangway was the *Pennsylvania*'s raceboat, serving as a barge, with a crew made up of members of his staff: Comdrs. W. Magruder, operations; R.M. Griffin, gunnery; F.D. Wagner, aviation; Lt. Comdrs. F.C. Denebrink, flag secretary;

W.M. Lockhart, aerology; J.G. Atkins, flag lieutenant; Lts. J.J. Rochefort, intelligence; and K.L. Forster, communications; Capt. E.E. Larson, USMC,¹⁵ Lts. (jg.) T.J. Hickey, L.S. Howeth, H. Rivero, and Ens. W.S. Bobo.

This crew had a mile and a half pull to the San Pedro landing with the admiral, in the Old Navy tradition, himself for a time handling the tiller. He stepped ashore, lifted his civilian hat, turned, and all was over. He left with his son, J.M. Reeves, Jr., a Los Angeles artist, and a grandson.¹⁶ His second son William, a graduate of West Point and lieutenant in the Army Air Corps, had been killed in an airplane crash in December 1934 near Cressy Field, San Francisco, Calif. As one friend put it, this tragedy would have overwhelmed a lesser man.

World War II. Joseph Mason Reeves retired on 1 December 1936 after serving the intervening months as Chairman of the General Board. This retirement was short for in May 1940 he was again ordered to active duty in the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, one of the first officers so recalled in the national emergency prior to World War II. He held the assignment of Navy Department Lend-Lease Liaison Officer from March 1941 to December 1945. Concurrently with this he served as a member of the powerful Munitions Assignment Board of which Harry Hopkins was Chairman and Major Gen. James H. Burns the other member. He was advanced to vice admiral on the retired list on 23 February 1942 and to admiral on 16 July of that year.

It was Adm. Ernest J. King who saw to it that persuasive and Pacific Ocean-minded Reeves was appointed to the Munitions Assignment duty because the wartime Chief of Naval Operations wanted an able advocate for naval operations in that position. Reeves' health was not too good at this time so King had him assigned an office on the

first floor of the old Navy Department building which was without elevators. It was always King who made the walk from the sacrosanct third floor to see Reeves below.

Most trying of the admiral's wartime assignments was being one of the two Navy members of the five-man Roberts Commission to determine responsibility for the Pearl Harbor disaster. This commission, headed by Associate Justice Owen J. Roberts of the U.S. Supreme Court, was appointed by the President immediately following the return of Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox from a personal survey of the situation 4 days after the attack. The Supreme Court Justice was, of course, the President's selection, and there seems little doubt that the Navy and Army members were chosen personally by the Secretaries of the Navy and War Departments. There was no later criticism of the choice of the two Navy officers but much adverse historical comment on the selection of the two Army representatives.¹⁷

According to Samuel Eliot Morison, official naval historian of World War II, Reeves regarded Pearl Harbor as a disgrace to the Navy. Admiral Standley, who was the other Navy member of the commission, was afterwards to write: "At the beginning Admiral Reeves indicated quite openly his opinion that Admiral Kimmel and General Short were entirely at fault. I could not subscribe to this view."¹⁸ The sad Pearl Harbor duty had one compensation for Reeves. He was able to have a Christmas visit with Mrs. Atkins and her small daughter. Her husband, his former aide, was at sea.

Reeves was not relieved from active duty until 23 December 1946. He went to live with his niece Eileen, whose husband, Comdr. Robert B. Wood, USN, was then on duty at the Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Md. His last days were thus spent within the sight and sound of the Navy's aircraft of the future. He died at the Naval Hospital,

Bethesda, Md., 25 March 1948. More than 50 of his 76 years of life had been devoted, in the fullest meaning of that word, to the U.S. Navy.

Some Appraisals of the Man. A naval officer during his active service is judged by his seniors. But history's judgment of him is provided by his juniors, those who served him, were his shipmates, or otherwise associated with him. A few of these judgments are given here.

J.J. Rochefort:

My feelings toward Admiral Reeves were blind and total loyalty and a deep respect and admiration for his leadership. I am sure my feelings were shared by other members of the staff, particularly the younger ones. . . . He had the ability so essential to all leaders of getting people to work for him. While he was, on the surface, almost gently persuasive, on occasion his eyes would flash and one could almost feel the force of the man.

Mrs. James G. Atkins:

When amused, his eyes would sparkle.

Eugene F. Wilson:

When I remarked to him on the bridge at midnight, "Sir, there'll be many a dry eye in the morning if you stub your toes tonight!" And his rejoinder was, "Wilson, any commander who pauses to consider the consequences of a military decision upon his own fortunes, has no right to command."

F.C. Denbrink:

He was a strategist, tactician and leader in full measure. My years with him dominated by subsequent Navy career.

Horatio Rivero:

As a j.g. I was the junior member of the staff, but Admiral Reeves was kind enough to devote a considerable time to my education as a naval officer. He had a brilliant and incisive mind, and an uncanny ability to get to the heart of the problem. His mind was always alert to new ideas and he was constantly probing for new ways to improve the war readiness of the fleet. I have never known any officer who could excel him in those qualities of leadership and vision which make a great military leader.

Frank D. Wagner:

If he said "Black is white" why, doggone it, so it was as far as I was concerned.

The Man had Charisma.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Rear Adm. John D. Hayes, U.S. Navy, (Ret.), is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy in 1924, holds a master's degree from the University of California, has done advanced work at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, and has attended the Army and Navy Staff College, the Naval War College, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. During his naval career he served on the staffs of the 3d and 7th Amphibious Forces in the Pacific in World War II and commanded Service Squadron 1 during the Korean war. As a retired naval officer, Rear Admiral Hayes resides in Texas City, Tex., where he is active as a writer on modern applications of seapower for professional military and naval periodicals.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Langley* was affectionately nicknamed "The Covered Wagon" by her crews.
2. Ben Scott Custer, "The Geneva Conference for the Limitation of Naval Armaments—1927," an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 1948.
3. Adolphus Andrews, Jr., "Admiral With Wings: The Career of Joseph Mason Reeves," Unpublished Senior Dissertation, Princeton University, April 1943. A copy is in the U.S. Naval Academy Library. Reeves' statement also was reported in the *Navy Journal*, 5 October 1929.
4. Reeves actually had been detached from his sea command a few days before.
5. Richard K. Smith, *The Airships "Akron" and "Macon": Flying Aircraft Carriers of the United States Navy* (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1965), p. 37.
6. Andrews, p. 80.
7. John D. Hayes, "William Veazie Pratt, 1869-1957," *Shipmate*, June-July, 1963, p. 22. See also Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Toward A New Order in Sea Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. 146.
8. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Naval Affairs, *London Naval Treaty of 1930*, Hearings, 14-28 May 1930 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1930), p. 308-324. This document of 507 pages contains statements on the treaty by Secretary of the Navy C.F. Adams and 22 flag officers, one captain, and one commander. These assertions, some approving others disproving the treaty, provide historians with a view into the thinking and foresight of the men who led the U.S. Navy in the decade before Pearl Harbor.
9. Andrews, page 90 as corrected. See appended letter (no date) to Chairman of the Department of History, Princeton University, p. 2-3.
10. Letter from Capt. J.J. Rochefort, USN (Ret.), 23 April 1970.
11. The artificiality, in Reeves' opinion, stemmed from certain conditions of the problem in which one actual unit would sometimes represent two or more ships, usually whole divisions. Also, in some exercises each plane would represent two. The intended purpose was to simulate actual wartime conditions with opposing fleets in various exercises representing navies of the world. Ships and planes were also restored to action after having been declared sunk or seriously

damaged in order to keep all units in operation and increase opportunities for training. See *Report of Fleet Problem XV, Confidential Report of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, 1934*, p. 66; and *Annex B. Organization and Composition of Blue and Gray Fleets*, p. 39-501; also Andrews, p. 92-93.

12. William H. Standley and Arthur A. Ageton, *Admiral Ambassador to Russia* (Chicago: Regnery, 1955), p. 29.

13. Smith, p. 147-162.

14. In the U.S. Navy at this time there were no permanent grades above rear admiral. Admirals and vice admirals held these ranks as temporary commissions only while assigned designated commands.

15. Larson commanded the Marine Guard of the flagship *Pennsylvania*. He had been an outstanding football player at the Naval Academy and was later to become a successful coach there. Like Reeves, as player and coach, he never lost to West Point.

16. Joseph Mason Reeves, Jr., painted the portrait of his father which was reproduced on the cover of the November 1970 issue of the *Naval War College Review*.

17. Standley and Ageton, p. 80-81. See also two articles on Pearl Harbor and the Roberts Commission written 25 years after by (1) Vice Adm. Frank E. Beatty, USN (Ret.), then aide to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, and (2) Percy Greaves, with comments by Harry Elmer Barnes in *National Review* 13 December 1966, p. 1260-1272, and especially page 1267.

18. Standley and Ageton, p. 84.



The character of the man is above all other requisites in a commander-in-chief.

Jomini: Precis de l'Art de la Guerre, 1838