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OUR UNSUNG ADMIRAL



By Frank D. Morris

RADIOED FROM HONOLULU

The chief of the new Central Pacific Command scares reporters to death, and that is why you haven't heard much about him. His time is spent putting over jobs like Midway and the Gilbert Islands. Collier's correspondent, walking in where angels fear to tread, comes up with a fine story

RAYMOND A. SPRUANCE must be on the Navy Department Secret Weapons list. In Washington, whenever the three-stripers or better get together to talk sea tactics, they are fulsome in their praise of the Halseys, the Nimitzes, the Kings, the Starks, the Fletchers and our other top-flight admirals, but when someone says, "Now, take Spruance," they all sit back and smile flatly and murmur "Ahhhh . . ."

However, outside of Navy circles, very few persons know much about the man who bosses our task forces in the Pacific and has never lost an engagement. But Admiral Nagano knows of Spruance; so does Tojo—because, if it weren't for Spruance at Midway, Japanese carriers might now be based at Pearl Harbor.

People who should know predict that Vice-Admiral Raymond A. Spruance will win the Pacific war in a walk. They mean it literally. He's the walkingest officer in the Navy. Eight or ten miles a day of heel and toe is just a warm-up for this man who, as second in command to Admiral Chester Nimitz, holds down the most important naval post in the Central Pacific, where we are now slugging it out with the Japs.

When Admiral Spruance isn't walking he's driving—driving himself, his subordinates, his ships and the enemy. He's a demon for work. He and Vice-Admiral F. J. Fletcher drove the Japs back at Midway last year when our carrier task force was greatly outclassed in size and number of ships. By clever deployment of his forces to get the most out of each, Admiral Spruance has been able to mow the Japs down. Shortly after Midway, Admiral Nimitz showed in a practical way what he thought of Spruance's performance in the battle by making him his Chief of Staff. As head of the newly created Central Pacific Command, Admiral Spruance headed up the conquest of the Gilbert Islands.

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Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, one of the greatest U. S. Navy tacticians of all time, on the deck of his cruiser flagship with Collier's Pacific Fleet correspondent, Frank D. Morris (right)

As Nimitz's right-hand man, he remained quietly in the background for over a year, until the Gilbert Islands attack, helping the Commander of the Pacific Fleet map most of the direct route to Tokyo. He swapped his flag bridge for a landlocked office at CINCPAC Headquarters and, with all the patience he could muster, watched the greatest navy in the history of the world develop from the ashes of Pearl Harbor. His name disappeared from the headlines. While the MacArthurs, the Halseys and the Eisenhowers continued to make page-one stories, Spruance was busy with a job at hand.

The admiral, incidentally, detests personal publicity. When this correspondent first put in a bid for an interview, the reaction here at Pearl Harbor was one of alarm.

"What? Interview *him*? Don't you know how he feels about publicity and the press? Why, he eats correspondents—chews them up fine and spits out the pieces!"

So, waiting in his office for the admiral to arrive was about as comforting as Daniel's date with those lions. The Fleet Public Relations officer, Commander Waldo Drake, was there, too, to help me tremble. When Admiral Spruance came in, he asked us to be seated, then started to talk. Some two hours later, he was still talking—and making sense—while your correspondent was wondering when he has ever met a nicer guy. The admiral proved to be as formidable as an old shoe.

"This job we have to do out here in the Pacific," he said, "can't be handled by any one branch of service. It requires complete co-ordination of surface and air forces, troops and submarines. The whole plan of action may seem complicated but, boiled down to its essentials, all you need is teamwork and proper use of the weapons at hand.

"Are we ready to strike? Well, as Admiral Nimitz says, 'No one is ever ready. You just have to set a date and go ahead, hoping the breaks are with you.' The Japs got that sort of break on December 7, 1941. There's one thing you have to remember about making war—the breaks, good and bad. Take the Doolittle raid on Tokyo as another example. Our carrier force was picked up early one morning by a Jap patrol vessel and, to play safe, the bombers were launched ahead of schedule. That meant that they had to fly several hundred more miles to their target than we expected and, as you know, most of them made crash landings. Just a bad break for us.

"That's what I mean when I say that luck plays an important part in any of these operations. You can go with the utmost secrecy to attack an enemy base. All your plans have been carefully made to avoid being seen. Then an enemy patrol plane or a ship or sub may pick you up and spoil the whole show. So we can't depend entirely upon the element of surprise. We just have to go on the theory that we *won't* catch them off guard. Then,

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The admiral plots task-force jobs alone in his cruiser cabin. He plotted the taking of Tarawa and Makin here. For that job he assembled the most complex armada yet thrown against our Pacific foe

if we do, and get away with it, we are that much to the good.”

The Japs Were Caught Napping

In the invasion of Guadalcanal and Tulagi in August of last year, the admiral pointed out that Madame Luck was playing first base on our team. For that occasion, we had the largest force we had ever assembled, and it seemed impossible that such a mass of ships could be moved into the Solomons area without being caught flatfooted by a Jap patrol. That time, we did get away with it. Before the enemy had the sleep out of his eyes, our Marines had landed, and the first American offensive in the Pacific war was under way.

You couldn't call Spruance a swivel-chair admiral. He has a desk but seldom uses it. In fact, he seldom sits down at all. During our two-hour interview, he stood or walked about all the time—not restlessly, but slowly and deliberately. At first glance, you might mistake him for the late Will Rogers. He's a man of medium build, with a rugged face, well weathered by years of sea duty, and his coarse brown hair is flecked with gray. A pair of steel-blue eyes bore you like needles, and the set of his mouth and chin hint that he isn't a person to be fooled with.

We got around to an inevitable question—the turning point in the Pacific war. “Looking back now, we can see several turning points,” he remarked. “But the high-water mark was reached, I believe, in November, 1942, when the Japs were making their big push to recapture Guadalcanal. You remember that was the time they sent a huge convoy down through the slot, and an air group from one of our carriers slaughtered them. Admiral Halsey sent up everything he had for that show, and the enemy losses were terrific. This setback was particularly important because it put the enemy strategically on the defensive.

“Our latest successes in New Guinea, the Solomons and the Aleutians have had another salient effect upon the enemy. For the first time, the Jap found out that he can be licked. He had been brought up to believe in his invincibility, and once a Jap soldier or sailor finds he has been beaten, he loses confidence. This is one of the most important psychological effects we have achieved in our campaign against Japan.”

An Analysis of Airpower

Admiral Spruance is not an aviator. Most of his sea duty prior to the war was aboard destroyers, battleships, and cruisers, but his current appraisal of airpower is backed up by the authority of a wartime task-force commander who has used carrier planes expertly to turn back a superior enemy force.

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"The carrier," he said, "is a highly mobile, extremely vulnerable airfield from which you can operate short-range aircraft and do much more accurate bombing than long-range bombers from land bases can do. On the other hand, the big four-engine planes are able to make long reconnaissance trips, while our carrier-based planes are limited in their scouting range. It's the same old story: No one branch of the service can do the same job that the other can. They must all work together. Midway proved something about combat between carriers. It is just like the old Western gunplay. The guy who first gets the draw stays alive. We got the first draw there, and they lost.

"I don't believe in crying down the enemy. Jap ships and planes and the men fighting them are good, as we have found out on several occasions—the hard way. But I think ours are better, particularly our planes and pilots. Apparently, Japan's basic aviation industry today is not able to turn out new designs in quantity, and they probably also have a shortage of pilot material. Don't forget one thing about the Jap, though: He will always fight; you don't have to urge him. No one can win a war without fighting, but of course you have to fight intelligently."

For a man with fifty-seven years behind him Admiral Spruance appears youthful. When he was graduated from Annapolis in 1906 he stood 26th in his class, the largest class ever graduated up to that time. At the Academy, he didn't go in heavily for athletics, but he did play some tennis and he did hike.

He was born in Baltimore and spent part of his early life in New Jersey. When a boy in his teens, he was taken by his father on a visit to West Point. Spruance, Sr., had picked a day when the cadets were to put on a dress parade, and all through it he watched his son's reactions. The father had hopes it might inspire the boy to try for the Military Academy, but he was disappointed. Young Ray had other ideas. A short time later, at seventeen, Ray got an appointment to the Naval Academy and passed the entrance exams.

A two-year cruise around the world on the old battleship Minnesota followed graduation, and he was officially commissioned ensign in 1908. Then he had a tour of shore duty, taking a postgraduate course in electrical engineering in Schenectady before he was ordered to the China station. His first command out there was the U.S.S. Bainbridge. That was the time the Navy first started numbering its destroyers, and the Bainbridge proudly bore a Number 1 on its bows.

Back in the States, a few years later, he helped build the battleship Pennsylvania and went to sea in her when she was commissioned in 1916.

"I was shanghaied ashore in November of the next year to take over as electrical superintendent at the New York Navy Yard. I finally wangled two months at sea in 1918, before the war was over. The following year, they made me executive officer of the transport Agamemnon, bringing troops home from France. It was interesting work, but I wouldn't want to do it for a living."

Admiral Spruance has spent six years in the Naval War College at Newport, one while taking the senior course and the rest as a member of the staff. His naval career also has been rounded out by tours of duty in the Bureau of Engineering and in Naval Intelligence. The last ship he commanded was the battleship Mississippi before he became a rear admiral in 1940 and was appointed commander of the Tenth Naval District in the Caribbean. The following year, he commanded a division of cruisers in the Pacific and held down that job until Admiral Nimitz sent him out to do that chore at Midway.

On the second day of that battle, one of our submarines on reconnaissance sent a message reporting a large Jap invasion force ninety miles away and heading for

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Midway. The submarine that flashed that warning had as one of its officers a Lieutenant Edward D. Spruance, the admiral's son. The younger Spruance was awarded the Silver Star later in the war for his work in submarines in the Southwest Pacific.

The rest of the admiral's family—his wife, and daughter Margaret—live in Monrovia, California. There was another member of the household, but mention of him brings a wistful look to the Spruance face. It seems the admiral has another passion that is a rival to his hiking, namely schnauzer dogs. He once had a schnauzer named Peter that was his pride and delight. But Peter had an unfortunate habit of getting tough with every other dog he met, and Mrs. Spruance rebelled. The admiral isn't much of a hand at retreating. However, he agreed to keep his warrior tied up.

We were talking about mistakes that had been made during the war. "Sure, we've made mistakes," he remarked. "And we have learned from them. The Japs have made mistakes, too. The biggest one they ever made was not military, but political. That was the attack on Pearl Harbor. The people of Japan didn't want war, but the militarists were in the saddle then, and the people had nothing to say about it.

"Many people think our letting the Japs evacuate Kiska undetected was a mistake. Well, in my opinion, if we can make the enemy get out of any of their bases under any circumstances, it is better to let them go and carry the word back home, 'We're damn' well licked!' As a matter of fact, we knew all the time that Kiska would be a very tough place to take directly, so we jumped over it, took Attu and then turned the heat back on Kiska until the Japs had to evacuate. We had cut off their supply line."

His fellow officers, senior and junior, think Spruance is quite a guy. Vice-Admiral William L. Calhoun told me: "I don't have to do any apple-polishing for Spruance because I am senior to him, but I have known him for forty-two years and I consider him one of the most competent men I have ever met. Unless I miss my guess, he is going to climb higher. On top of all this, he is a cold-blooded fighting fool. If he possesses one fault, it is that he believes too much in work and doesn't get enough play. That really is a just criticism."

High Praise from His Chief

The big boss, Admiral Nimitz, made a brief, sincere comment: "I have the highest regard for Admiral Spruance, and the highest expectations. He is a fine man, a sterling character and a great leader. He took over when Admiral Fletcher's flagship (the Yorktown) was immobilized at Midway and did a remarkable job. Nothing you can say about him would be praise enough."

Nimitz and Spruance lived in bachelor austerity in a house at Makalapa, overlooking Pearl Harbor until Spruance recently moved on board his flagship. They hike and swim together and entertain occasionally by giving small dinner parties. Admiral Spruance doesn't smoke. He is practically abstemious, too, but is one of the best drink mixers on Oahu. A sample sip of the cocktails he mixes for his guests (to see if they are up to standard), is the limit of his alcoholic fling.

He loves good music. Whenever he is worried by a problem so great that it persists after office hours, he will go to his quarters, put a symphony recording on a phonograph and close his mind to everything but the music. This treatment usually works. The next time he tackles the problem, it isn't nearly so hopeless of solution.

Too shrewd to predict even in a general way the date the war will end, Admiral Spruance nevertheless is optimistic about its outcome.

"When Germany collapses," he said,

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“the war out here in the Pacific will enter an entirely new phase. Instead of wondering where we can get the proper weapons to fight with, we shall face the problem of where to use the abundance of weapons we will then have placed in our hands.”

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