

ADMIRAL WILLIAM S. SIMS  
UNITED STATES NAVY, DECEASED

William Sowden Sims was born in Port Hope, Ontario, Canada, on October 15, 1858, the second son of Alfred William and Adelaide (Sowden) Sims. His father was a member of a well-known Philadelphia family, and as a civil engineer, went to Port Hope to construct certain harbor facilities on Lake Ontario. The father's contracting work kept the family in Port Hope until 1868 after which they went to Pennsylvania to live.

He received an appointment to the U. S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, on June 24, 1876, from the Eighteenth District of Pennsylvania. On June 10, 1880 he graduated, twenty-eighth in a class of fifty-six, and was promoted to Midshipman, June 22, 1882; Ensign, junior grade, March 3, 1883; and Ensign, June 26, 1884. He subsequently received periodic promotions attaining the rank of Rear Admiral, to date from August 29, 1916. During World War I, he served in the temporary ranks of Vice Admiral and Admiral, reverting to his permanent rank of Rear Admiral on March 5, 1919, upon relinquishing command of the U. S. Naval Forces in European Waters. On October 15, 1922, he was transferred to the Retired List of the U. S. Navy in his permanent rank of Rear Admiral, and was later commissioned Admiral on the Retired List to date from June 21, 1930.

Upon completion of the four year course at the Naval Academy, he was assigned to the USS TENNESSEE, flagship of Commander of the North Atlantic Station. He served on board that battleship until July 1882, when he was transferred to the Receiving Ship COLORADO. Consecutive duty afloat followed in the USS SWATARA, the USS YANFIC, the Nautical School Ship SARATOGA, the USS PHILADELPHIA, the USS CHARLESTON and the Receiving Ship RICHMOND.

In February 1897 he was appointed Naval Attache to Paris, France; St. Petersburg, Russia; and Madrid, Spain. Relieved of duty at the Embassy in Madrid in August 1897 he continued duty at Paris and St. Petersburg until June 1900. In this assignment he had charge of the secret service work in Spain, Russia and Italy during the Spanish-American War.

Ordered to Gibraltar, he reported on November 7, 1900 on board the USS KENTUCKY and served in her until March 1901 when he joined the USS MONTEREY. He next had duty on the Staff of the Commander in Chief, U. S. Asiatic Fleet, October 1901 until February 1902, and while on China Station met Captain Percy Scott, the British officer responsible for the British Navy's wonderful progress in gunnery. Captain Scott explained the entire system to him, which had to do with a device called a Morris tube, for improving gun pointing without actually firing the big gun, making possible a continuous aim irrespective of the rolling ship. Sims immediately put the system in operation in his own ship and at the next target practice easily out-shot all other ships in the Asiatic Fleet.

Being a young officer, he supposed that when the merits of such a system were brought to the attention of the Navy Department, immediate improvement in the gunnery of the Navy would result. He wrote through official channels to the Bureau Chiefs and then the Secretary of the Navy, but he heard nothing. Finally he wrote directly to President Theodore Roosevelt in November 1901.

Upon reading his letter, President Roosevelt ordered the Atlantic Fleet to a test in target practice. At the test, the fleet scored thirteen per cent, while the British Navy was making eighty to eighty-five percent. The President cabled China and ordered Sims home at once and gave him complete charge of target practice. In February 1902 he assumed the title of Inspector of Target Practice, which position he held for six and a half years, also serving as Naval Aide to the President during the last two years of that period. His improved system increased the rapidity of hits one hundred per cent and the general effectiveness of fire five times.

On March 1, 1909 he assumed command of the USS MINNESOTA and in May 1911 was detached for instruction at the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. Completing the course in September of that year, he remained there for duty on the Staff until June 1913. He was then assigned command of the Torpedo Flotilla, Atlantic Fleet, to examine its efficiency. He was so pleased with this duty that after two years he asked for a year's extension. In November 1915 he reported for fitting out duty in the USS NEVADA at the Fore River Shipbuilding Company, Quincy, Massachusetts and assumed command of that battleship when she was commissioned, March 11, 1916.

On February 11, 1917 he became President of the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island and Commandant of the Second Naval District. In March 1917 he was designated by the Secretary of the Navy as Representative of the Navy Department in London and Command of the United States Naval Forces Operating in European Waters.

Early in April 1917, 1/ two gentlemen in civilian clothes sailed on the American steamship NEW YORK for England. They were entered on the passenger list as V. J. Richardson and S. W. Davidson, but in reality the latter was Admiral Sims and the former his Aide. They went incognito because of the tense situation then existing between the governments of the United States and Germany and the imminence of war between the two countries. With the utmost secrecy, Admiral Sims had been called to Washington and dispatched to England to represent the American Navy and formulate the best policy of cooperation with the Allied Powers, on the outbreak of war. Three days before the arrival of the NEW YORK at Liverpool, April 9th, Congress passed the declaration of war, which was approved by President Woodrow Wilson, and the United States entered World War I. Admiral Sims and his Aide were received in London in the most cordial manner.

In the early period of the war the British were suffering heavy ship losses due to the quantity and effectiveness of German submarines. Within five days after his arrival in Liverpool, Sims sent his first cable message to the Secretary of the Navy which stated: "The submarine issue is very much more serious than the people realize in America." He followed this message with a long cable detailing the urgency of the situation. He suggested that all destroyers and other light craft in the Navy be assembled and sent immediately where they could do the most good--Queenstown, Ireland.

American destroyers arrived at Queenstown on May 4, 1917, but for several months thereafter the United States Navy was slow (despite Sims's previous warning) to enter with great force into the winning of the war. The convoy system, after the first experiment from Gibraltar, was successfully used throughout the war in reducing the submarine sinking. The American sub-chasers (with their hydrophones) and destroyers proved a troublesome enemy of the U-boats. Though few submarines were destroyed by airplanes directly, the "eyes" for submarines and other surface craft were of the greatest assistance to the British Navy in the safe transportation of millions of troops across the channel and in other conveying.

By this time the SIXTH Battle Squadron, composed of six dreadnaught battleships, had joined the Grand Fleet and more followed to serve as watchdogs, based at Berehaven, Ireland. Though mines had been planted off German bases across the English Channel and the Strait of Otranto and other places, they were ineffective because of the poor quality and inadequate supply. With the development of a new type of mine by an American electrical engineer, assisted by the Bureau of Ordnance, the submarine sinkings materially decreased. The North Sea Mine Barrage had a great deal to do with the mutiny which demoralized the German Fleet in the fall of 1918 and thus hastened the War's end.

In 1918 when Russia collapsed, only a small part of the American Army had reached Europe, and Germany had superiority on the Western Front. Thus it became the duty of the American and British Navies to meet this emergency. By June and July American soldiers were being transported in enormous numbers and landed at the largest French ports, while British and French Armies held their ground.

In the operations carried on so successfully by our Navy in European Waters, Admiral Sims was the Commander in Chief. He worked with his Staff at "London Flagship," his headquarters, which grew from an organization of a few (the Admiral, his Aide and the Naval Attache and his Aides) quartered in a small room in the American Embassy, to a complement, at the time of the Armistice, of 1,200 officers, enlisted men and clerical force, occupying six large private residences. With the assistance of his various department heads, he was able to direct and keep in close touch with American Naval Forces scattered from the Azores to Constantinople, and from Gibraltar to Murmansk, Russia, and direct the operations of nine rear admirals who were subordinate to him. He was

also a member of the Allied Naval Council and thereby had a hand in directing the policy of the Allied Forces, which brought at last an unequalled "Victory at Sea."

After the War, Admiral Sims returned to the United States and again became President of the Naval War College. He remained there until relieved of all active duty pending his retirement, effective October 15, 1922, having attained the statutory age of sixty-four years. During the year 1925 he was called to Washington several times for temporary duty in connection with the President's Aircraft Board and in the Bureau of Navigation, Navy Department.

He died in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 28, 1936, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia, on October 1, that year, following funeral services at St. John's Episcopal Church, Washington, D. C.

On December 1, 1919, in his annual report, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels published his list of "Medals of Honor, Distinguished Service Medals, and Navy Crosses Awarded." Unfortunately this list disagreed so very radically with the recommendations of the Board of Awards, and with the recommendations which Sims himself had made that he refused to accept the Distinguished Service Medal which had been awarded him.

Admiral Sims had the Spanish Campaign Medal; the Philippine Campaign Medal; the Mexican Service Medal; and the Victory Medal, Overseas Clasp. He also held the highest decorations which five foreign governments had ever, at that time, awarded citizens of other foreign countries. The Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George from Great Britain; Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor, France; Grand Cordon, First Class Order of the Rising Sun, Japan; Grand Cordon, of the Order of Leopold, Belgium; and Grand Officer of the Crown of Italy.

He received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the following universities: Yale, Harvard; Tufts; Columbia; Pennsylvania; Cambridge (England); McGill (Montreal); and Queens (Kingston, Canada), and from the following colleges: Williams; Union; Juniata and Stephens Institute.

The USS SIMS, a 1,570-ton destroyer, name in honor of Admiral Sims, was launched on April 8, 1939, sponsored by his widow, Mrs. W. S. (Anne H.) Sims of Boston, Massachusetts. That vessel was sunk by Japanese forces on May 7, 1942 in the Battle of the Coral Sea. The second USS SIMS (DE 154, later APD-50) was also christened by Mrs. Sims, and commissioned on April 24, 1943 for later World War II service.

His professional skill, forceful leadership and proficiency in gunnery are described in the following excerpts 2/ from an article by Captain Harry A. Baldrige, USN, Retired.

"I have always thought of Sims as an iconoclast. Was he not one who attacked cherished beliefs as shams; was he not radical rather than liberal? He was fiery and vehement in his attacks upon methods of gunnery training in his attacks upon the poor design of ordnance material, and in his attacks upon faulty naval construction. He never ceased his criticisms of the Navy's organization for war or its system of education for the commissioned and enlisted personnel, yet he always set forth constructive measures to supplant the idols and images he sought to destroy."

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"Each fall there gathered in the Washington basement office of Sims, in the State, War, and Navy Building, a board of officers from the Atlantic Fleet to meet with him and his assistants; they all discussed the faults of that year's rules for target practice and drew up new rules for the next year. Everything was delightfully informal, everything thoroughly debated, and unanimously decided upon. Sometimes these conferences lasted from 10 to 14 days--Sims would never end the discussions until unanimity had been reached. In this way he received fresh ideas from the fleet which worked out the new methods in practice at sea. It had the advantage of enabling the fleet to feel it shared in the running of things. He was like that. All the youngsters adored him and the fleet gunnery officer...would return to the Fleet...keyed up with enthusiasm for the new work ahead. Thus under the guidance of Sims from Washington the gunnery methods and ordnance material improved from 1905 to 1907, (with)...faithful, gunnery and battery officers offering suggestions from sea..."

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"After his two battleship cruises in the MINNESOTA and NEVADA, Sims was made commander of our destroyers--what he did in this command bore fruit on the 'other side' later on in convoy and escort work, hunting submarines, rescue work, etc...Thus began the initiation of the convoy system which finally led to a decrease of sinking and allowed our 2,000,000 men and their supplies to reach Europe. Sims scored again--the iconoclast is a blessing when he is steering a true course."

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1. "Famous American Naval Officers," (Rev. 1945) Charles Lee Lewis, Pub. by L. C. Page & Co., Inc., Boston.
2. Article "Sims--The Iconoclast," by Captain Harry A. Baldrige, USN, Ret., U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings, Vol. 63, No. 2, Feb. 1947.