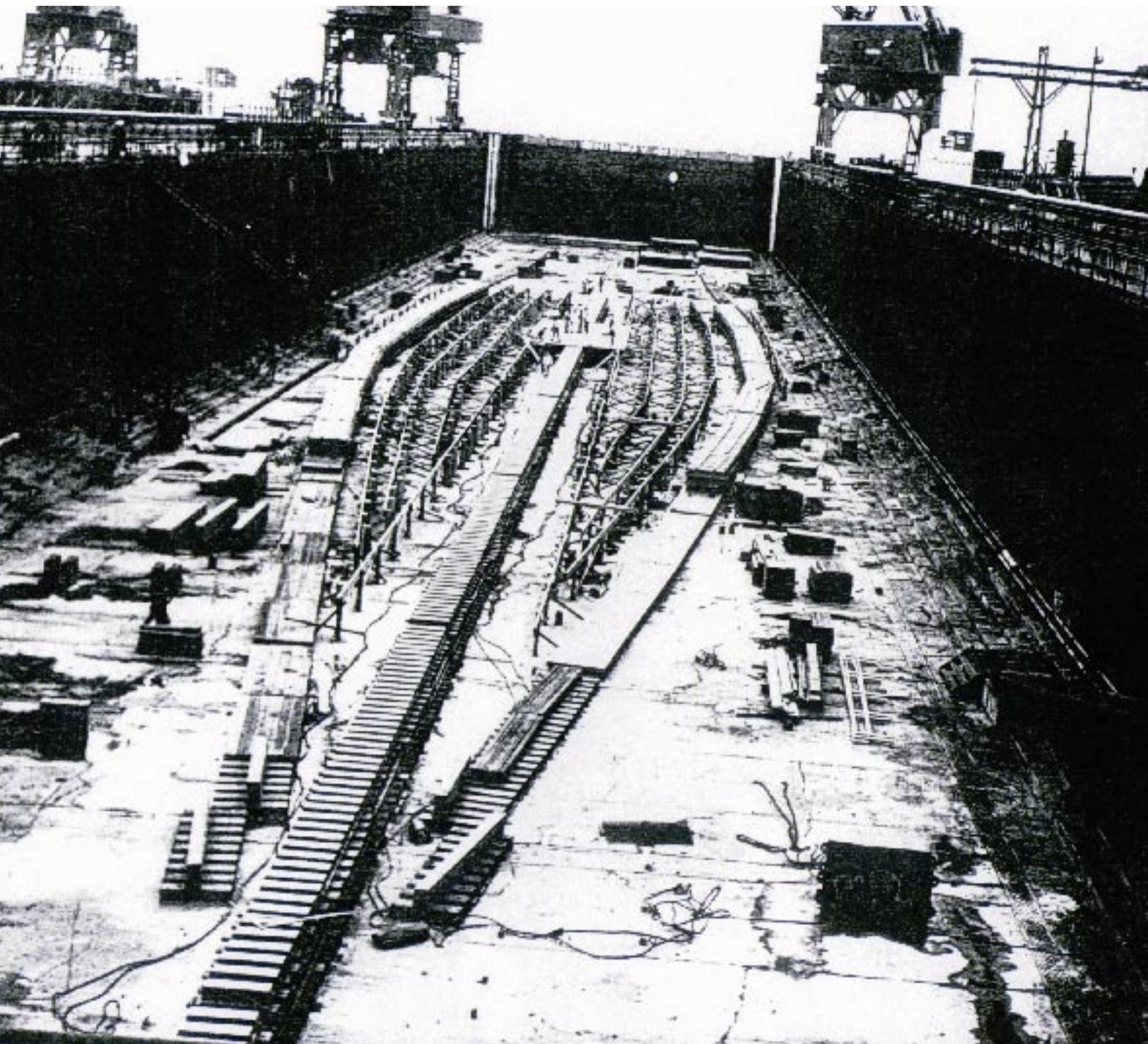


Moral Court



Bravery: Vital to Navy Leadership



By Jeffrey G. Barlow

In wartime, physical bravery is commonly exhibited by military leaders. However, during periods of both war and peace, it is moral courage—the firmness of spirit that allows an individual to carry on despite the precariousness of the course—that separates the exceptional officer from his fellows. It is relatively easy to put one's career on the line when human lives are at stake, but somehow it is more difficult to do when the issues are less clear-cut.

This was the case in 1949 when the U.S. Navy found itself in danger of being relegated to second-rate status by newly appointed Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson. The service had emerged from WW II as the strongest navy in history due to the culmination of its development of aircraft carrier striking forces. But the advent of the atomic bomb at the end of the war complicated the issue of U.S. national security. Although Navy leaders first sought permission in 1946 to integrate the atomic bomb into the fleet, this request provoked a highly negative reaction from the Army Air Forces, which sought

exclusive control of the powerful new weapon. The Navy finally received authorization from Secretary of Defense James Forrestal in 1948 to employ atomic weapons in its targeting, much to the dismay of the recently created U.S. Air Force.

The centerpiece of the Navy's effort to move carrier aviation into the atomic era was a new flush-deck aircraft carrier, eventually designated CVA (heavy aircraft carrier) 58, designed to operate an air group of 80 jet fighters and 18 100,000-pound heavy-attack aircraft capable of carrying atomic bombs to a combat radius of 2,000 nautical miles. Congress authorized construction of this new aircraft carrier as part of the FY 1949 program, and the initial funding was appropriated in June 1948. A month later, President Harry Truman authorized its construction in a private shipyard.

Unfortunately for the Navy, the issue of the flush-deck carrier's construction was reopened within a year. In late March 1949, James V. Forrestal resigned as Secretary of Defense, setting the stage for a

Adm. Louis E. Denfeld receives a farewell salute from Navy personnel as he walks down the steps of the Pentagon in November 1949 after being succeeded as Chief of Naval Operations by Adm. Forrest Sherman.

Associated Press



Left, Adm. Arthur Radford (far left), CINCPACFLT, reads his comments on B-36 bomber issues before the House Armed Services Committee's Unification and Strategy Hearings, 7 October 1949. Below, SECNAV John L. Sullivan (left), congratulates Adm. Louis E. Denfeld after he was sworn in as CNO on 15 December 1947.



series of events that would later be dubbed the “revolt of the admirals.” His successor, Louis Johnson, was a well-connected lawyer who reputedly had donated a large amount of money to President Truman’s 1948 reelection campaign. Johnson came into the job as a strong supporter of the Air Force, which remained bitterly opposed to carrier aviation. Determined to keep the Navy from intruding on the Air Force’s responsibility for strategic (atomic) bombing, Johnson canceled construction of the flush-deck carrier, named *United States*, less than a month after taking office.

In the aftermath of this action, Navy Secretary John L. Sullivan and Navy Under Secretary W. John Kenney resigned in protest. The man Johnson and Truman eventually chose to replace Sullivan was Francis P. Matthews, a Nebraska lawyer-businessman with no prior military or government experience. Matthews took the job as Secretary of the Navy feeling beholden to Johnson and uncertain of senior Navy officer support.

Within days of Johnson’s cancellation of *United States*, an anonymous document highly critical of the Air Force’s new B-36 bomber began circulating on Capitol Hill—the work of two individuals in the Navy Department, Cedric R. Worth, Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of the Navy, and

Commander Thomas D. Davies, a noted Naval Aviator who worked with Worth. This paper accused Air Force Secretary W. Stuart Symington and Defense Secretary Johnson of supporting the increased production of this huge, lumbering, WW II-designed bomber because they had personal financial interests in its production and owed political favors to the manufacturer.

This anonymous document eventually forced House Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Vinson to convene a hearing on the B-36 program. In early June 1949, Vinson notified each of the service secretaries that their services would be expected to provide testimony before the committee.

It became evident during July 1949 that under Johnson’s projected FY 1951 budget, Naval Aviation was going to take a tremendous beating. The Navy Department was told to plan for downsizing from 8 large carriers and 1,554 aircraft to just 4 carriers and 690 planes. Many admirals in the office of the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) were convinced that little could be done about this disastrous situation. They counseled caution in dealings with the Secretary of Defense, convinced that it would be better to wait out his budgetary cutbacks rather than challenge the logic behind them. These views dovetailed with the predisposition of CNO Admiral Louis E.

Denfeld, who was inclined to sit back and await events.

Fortunately for the Navy, there were other senior officers who were ready to tackle the issues head on. One of these was Admiral Arthur W. Radford, Commander in Chief Pacific and U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC/PACFLT). A career Naval Aviator, Radford had served as Deputy CNO (Air) in 1946 and early 1947. When Adm. Denfeld became CNO in December 1947, he picked Radford to be his Vice Chief of Naval Operations (VCNO). In this challenging job from January 1948 to May 1949, Radford worked tirelessly defending the Navy’s interests during the roles and missions debates with the Army and the Air Force.

Apprised of the seriousness of the situation for Naval Aviation, Radford quickly decided that he would do what he could to change it. One way he sought to accomplish this was by having Navy leaders provide well-organized, strongly reasoned and persuasive testimony to the House Armed Services Committee on the importance of car-

rier aviation to U.S. national security. In late July 1949, Radford wrote Captain Arleigh Burke, "For my money the whole Navy had better realize that the B-36 investigation . . . will probably mean all or nothing in the long run." Capt. Burke did not need to be convinced of the importance of this effort. His shop, CNO's Organizational Research and Policy Division, had already become the *de facto* organizing office for CNO's response, and during the next several months Burke and his staff provided invaluable support to Radford's effort.

Called to Washington in August by Navy Secretary Matthews at the request of Carl Vinson to confer with him on aviation matters, Radford attended several of the B-36 hearings. He also worked closely with CNO's office to plan out the Navy's upcoming presentation to the committee.

Cedric Worth's startling revelation on 24 August to the House Armed Services Committee that he had authored the anonymous document maligning the B-36 and its administration supporters brought the first portion of the committee's hearings to a sudden close. The ensuing press attention over Worth's disclosure quickly blackened the Navy's reputation.

Although Vinson had planned to reconvene the committee in October to take testimony from the Navy and the Army, some of his senior staff members believed that it would be better to simply close the matter now that the Air Force had defended the B-36 successfully in the initial hearings. Accordingly, in September 1949 committee staffers met with Secretary Matthews several times in an effort to get him to support their proposal for ending the hearings. Matthews, who was well aware of Secretary Johnson's pro-Air Force stance, was inclined to go along with this request, but he felt he needed the acquiescence of his senior admirals before agreeing to do so. During these meetings, Denfeld's new VCNO, Naval Aviator John Dale Price, and Adm. Radford argued persuasively that the

hearings should continue so that the Navy could get its chance to be heard. Angry at this interference but unwilling to challenge the confident officers, Matthews allowed Navy preparations for the hearings to continue.

On 6 October 1949 when the hearings resumed, Secretary Matthews did his best as the Navy's initial witness to downplay the Naval Aviators' concerns and even tried to get the House Armed Services Committee to receive Adm. Radford's testimony only in executive session. Luckily for the service, this ploy failed, and Radford and the other Navy witnesses were allowed to present their testimony openly before the committee.

Next to Radford, the key Navy witness was CNO Louis Denfeld. After days of vacillating about whether he should support his compatriots or side with the secretary, Denfeld made up his mind to follow his conscience—reportedly after his wife asked him at breakfast one morning, "Louie, are you going to stand up and be counted or aren't you?" On the afternoon of 13 October CNO told the committee members, "As the senior military spokesman for the Navy, I want to state forthwith that I fully support the broad conclusions presented to this committee by the naval and marine officers who had preceded me." It was an act of moral courage that ultimately cost him his position. Within days, an angry Francis Matthews received permission from President Truman to relieve Denfeld of his duties as CNO. Although offered another flag billet, Denfeld later decided to retire.

Capt. Arleigh Burke was a second victim of the Navy secretary's wrath. His division was hurriedly

disestablished, and Burke left town for a month's leave. While he was gone, Adm. Radford wrote to him, "I hate to think where we *might* be had we not had your loyal service in a key role. I am grateful for it. I am sure that the Navy and the country, if they were fully informed, would be equally grateful." In mid-November, Burke was selected for promotion to rear admiral. When the selection board's list was presented to Matthews, however, he crossed through Burke's name and ordered the board to reconvene and select another officer in his place.

Fortunately for the Navy, Burke's name was reinstated on the list by the president a few weeks later.

Radford was spared Matthews' vindictiveness only because Louis Johnson did not want to make a martyr of him. This decision was undoubtedly made easier by the defense secretary's belief that being stationed in Hawaii as CINC-PAC/PACFLT lessened Radford's

future chances of influencing events in Washington.

The morally courageous stands taken by Radford, Burke, Denfeld and other senior naval officers during the fall of 1949 had important consequences for the Navy, since they helped convince Congress of the continuing value of Naval Aviation. Britain's great naval commander Earl St. Vincent once remarked that the true test of a man's courage is his power to bear responsibility. As these men demonstrated, there are times when an officer must be willing to put his career on the line for the good of his service. ✈



Capt. Arleigh Burke

Dr. Barlow is a historian in the Contemporary History Branch of the Naval Historical Center and author of *Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950*.