Reliable, Experienced, and Versatile: Biography of Admiral Alan Goodrich Kirk

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RELIABLE, EXPERIENCED, AND VERSATILE:
A BIOGRAPHY OF ADMIRAL ALAN GOODRICH KIRK

by

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Abstract

This study is a biography of Admiral Alan Goodrich Kirk. Kirk is known primarily for his role as commander of the American landings at Normandy during World War II. This biography explains that Kirk was one of the founders of modern amphibious warfare, a model and pioneer in joint-warfare, and was key to the earliest meetings between American and British military officers that laid the groundwork for allied cooperation. Kirk’s service as ambassador to the Soviet Union and the Republic of China maintained peace during the Cold War. Born in Philadelphia in 1888, his mother came from the Goodrich family of naval figures – most notably Admiral Caspar Frederick Goodrich, a founder of the Naval War College. The Spanish American War was the formative event in his childhood, and the US became a world empire in need of a large navy. Kirk served in China and the Philippines, contracting malaria and observed the start of World War I. Battleships represented the cutting edge of weapons technology, and Kirk witnessed other technologies challenge and overtake them in prominence – namely aircraft and submarines. He served aboard the presidential yacht during the Wilson and Harding presidencies. He studied and evaluated the new 16-inch guns during the war – almost a quarter century before they were deployed in World War II. He was on duty in London during the Blitz. He was the Director of Naval Intelligence in the months preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor. Kirk then was commodore over ships engaged in convoy duty in the stormy north Atlantic. He commanded American naval forces in several amphibious invasions, including Sicily and the greatest in history - at Normandy. This study considers Kirk’s rocky relationships with British Admiral Bertram Ramsay and American Admiral Harold Stark and addresses criticisms of his character. After the war Kirk was US Ambassador to Belgium, then the Soviet Union, and later Taiwan. Kirk was a transitional figure from a policy considering “roll back” to “containment.” Kirk is worth exploring as a “time capsule” to the first half of the twentieth century – a progressive during tremendous technological advancement and wars.
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Alan Goodrich Kirk was a professional naval officer. He is most remembered for commanding American forces in the Normandy invasion, the largest amphibious assault in history. It required thousands of vessels, hundreds of thousands of troops and millions of tons of supplies. The 1962 movie based on Cornelius Ryan’s book of the same name – *The Longest Day*, includes one very brief scene with Kirk on the bridge of his flagship.¹ The actor is attired in the dark navy-blue jacket and cover that Kirk favored over kaki. He stands to the right of General Omar Bradley, peering through binoculars, then checking his watch. “General,” the Kirk actor says, “in exactly two minutes the fleet will open fire.” This brief clip – about 15 seconds of an almost three-hour film, is indicative for two reasons. First, paradoxically, Kirk’s part is very important yet very small. There is no substitute for action and drama in a popular war story. A film that highlights an office headquarters with endless meetings, drafting of reports, talk of supply hang-ups, and personal conflict is a guaranteed flop. D-Day rightly belongs to the fallen and those who put their lives most at risk. Second, the time scale ratio is appropriate for relating such a brief event in a full life like Kirk’s. If he is best known for his role at Normandy, D-Day was just one day out of a ten-month project of planning, organizing, training, executing and follow-up.² What is more, these months in 1944 were only a few out of a long naval career that prepared Kirk to bring his unique knowledge, skills, and abilities to bare.

A Full Career

In the events of the first half of the twentieth century, Kirk participated fully. Raised in a small New Jersey town near Philadelphia, Kirk knew early on he wanted the navy life. After graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy, he was assigned to the Asian squadron in China and the Philippines, where he had a brief encounter with Sun Yat-sen, the first man to lead China after the fall of the ancient imperial dynasty. During World War I, while assigned to the Naval Proving Ground in Maryland, he became expert in big naval guns when they were considered the major weapon of national security. Kirk served President Warren Harding as an officer of his presidential yacht. Kirk advanced through the ranks to command, honed administrative skills on the staffs of several admirals and studied at the Naval War College. He became naval attaché in London at the beginning of World War II, experienced the “Blitz” firsthand and studied German advances on the front line of the war. Kirk then became Director of Naval Intelligence where he monitored the Japanese code signals before Pearl Harbor and befriended the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover. After briefly leading destroyer escorts on convoy duty in the North Atlantic, he joined Admiral “Betty” Stark’s London staff and helped organize and coordinate early American naval efforts against Germany. Kirk helped plan the allied invasion of North Africa and commanded an invasion force in Sicily and then Normandy. His final role in the war was to oversee U.S. Naval Forces in France and Germany. After the war Kirk was U.S. Ambassador to Belgium, and then, as Cold War tensions developed, to the Soviet Union and there navigated the start of the Korean War. Finally, Kirk was made Ambassador to China (Taiwan) and helped preserve peace.
Scholarly Accounts

Kirk is most remembered for his part in Normandy not only in film, but also narratives by popular military historians. Even here Kirk is portrayed as only briefly important – a type of figurehead. Whether it is older popular historians Max Hastings or Stephen Ambrose or the recent and well-known works of James Holland or Peter Caddick-Adams, Kirk is barely mentioned if at all. In accounting for Kirk and his contributions in World War II, three scholars stand out. Mitchell Simpson, in his book published in 1989, expresses a harsh view of Kirk, while more recent accounts of Christopher Yung and Craig Symonds hold Kirk in much higher regard for his character and contributions.

Mitchell Simpson portrays Kirk as self-serving and incidental to the Normandy invasion effort. In Simpson’s view, Admiral “Betty” Stark was the real leader and hero of preparations for Normandy and British Admiral Bertram Ramsay and Kirk were limited to executing the operation - valuable only for the short time of action. Simpson explains the command arrangement between Admiral Ernest King and Stark as one where Stark retained not only administrative oversight, but operational as well – this in order to ensure American forces were always led by American naval officers except for brief periods when they would operate in a combined allied operation. What’s more, Simpson offers a vignette that depicts Kirk as vain and petty – bolstering the view Stark had to manage Kirk’s self-serving tendencies.

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5 Ibid., 244.
The scholar who best captures Kirk’s character and contribution is Christopher Yung in his excellent study of amphibious planning for the Normandy invasion - *Gators of Neptune*. Kirk was ambitious, says Yung, but his ambition did not interfere with his performance. Yung concludes Kirk was “unquestionably technically proficient” and “a skilled bureaucrat and politician. Kirk was able to do his job while serving three opinionated and strong-willed masters – Ramsay, Stark, and Ernest King.” Yung’s assessment of complaints about Kirk’s supposed showiness, rudeness, and reckless ambition is in alignment with a careful study of Kirk’s character as shown throughout his career. Yung notes evidence that all three Kirk detractors during the war – Admirals Ramsay, Stark and Hall - had their own jealousy and dysfunctional tendencies.

Craig Symonds, in *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings*, judged Kirk in the right during the controversy over the German E-boats stationed across the English Channel at Cherbourg France. The E-boats attacked American landing exercises just before the Normandy invasion. Ramsay’s refusal to heed Kirk’s request to modify his area of responsibility to include Cherbourg, says Symonds, “created a certain ambiguity about Allied naval command structure and potential for confusion – even, as it proved, catastrophe.” Kirk was right and Ramsay wrong and to drive the point about character, Symonds showed Ramsay was incensed and deeply and personally offended after a meeting with Kirk and Eisenhower where he felt his American subordinate and boss talked around him regarding the E-boats.

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7 Ibid., 222, 223.
8 Ibid., 9.
10 Ibid., 219.
The Argument

Until now, there was no comprehensive biography of Kirk. This biography explains the story behind the man in the short commanding role at Normandy - what brought him to this point and what became of him afterwards. The reader will learn that Kirk was a more important figure than popular memory allows. Biographers can drift toward the “great man theory” approach to history attributing special powers and meaning to their subject that warrants attention. A Kirk biographer is not as tempted in this, because there is no charismatic character or specific personal event that can feed this perception. Even the Normandy role seems comparatively cranial and sedentary. Mindful of this, this study of Kirk’s life seeks to explain and highlight unsung attributes that are overlooked. The great naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison captured the essence of Kirk in showing why he was chosen to lead the amphibious task force to Sicily’s shores in 1943 - Kirk was “reliable, experienced, and versatile.” This is decidedly not the stuff of great man theory in its Napoleonic-type grandeur, but leadership in a complex twentieth century war required these characteristics. He was indeed, as Morison suggests, “reliable, experienced, and versatile” as were others in high command during World War II. This biography provides evidence for this description of Kirk and refutes several mischaracterizations of him.

This biography refutes Simpson’s disparaging mischaracterizations of Kirk. It seems Simpson seeks to protect his subject (Stark) in attacking Kirk. Simpson’s account is self-contradictory and flawed in explaining Kirk’s authority, responsibilities, and character during World War II. Simpson wrongly suggests Stark had operational oversight for Normandy and

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contradicts himself when he affirmed Kirk’s operational role had to be made clear to Stark by Eisenhower himself when Kirk oversaw U.S Naval Forces in France after Normandy.\(^{13}\) In fact Kirk was in Eisenhower’s operational chain of command and had the responsibility and authority that the role required. An operational commander, whatever his title and organizational arrangement, has the responsibility and the authority to command and act. This biography supports the views of Symonds and Yung. Both serve to refute Simpson’s take. Symonds’ operational account and Yung’s administrative account supported the notion Kirk was a solid character who oversaw the action during planning, preparation, and execution for the Normandy invasion. Important figures like Admiral Bertram Ramsay and Admiral Harold Stark unjustly criticized Kirk for being insubordinate. This biography confirms prior analysis of Morison, Symonds, and Yung that Kirk was a steady professional of solid character and his main detractors – Ramsay, Stark, and Hall, do not portray an accurate depiction of Kirk and his accomplishments. Only a careful review of his life and career enlightens us.

Kirk was ambitious, but his ambition was restrained by duty. He honored and maintained a family heritage of naval and diplomatic service. He was demanding, but not vain. He left no memoir to soften or bolster his image – only an oral history that was respectful and complementary of most all he met. Although he was sensitive to the need for public relations and the press, he saw himself as playing an important part of democratic society and considered interactions with journalists and the public as a duty to boost American morale to help defeat the enemy. He had no moniker like “Bull” Halsey, “Terrible” Turner, “Ike” Eisenhower, “Blood and

Guts” Patton or “Monty” Montgomery. He normally was not the loudest voice nor the most
dramatic. But when duty called, he could not be ignored.

Kirk’s greatest accomplishments, contrary to his detractors, resulted from his diplomatic
knowledge, skills, and ability to foster cooperation toward common goals. He was master at
navigating difficult people with strong notions. As such, Kirk was vital to early cooperation
between the U.S. and Britain. This biography confirms what naval intelligence historian Jeffery
Dorwart suggests – that Kirk was key to early talks between American and British military
officers. These meetings resulted in the “Europe-first” understanding that became important
after Pearl Harbor and they were fruitful for building strong ties that made great allied operations
possible.

This study also shows that Kirk is one of the founding fathers of modern amphibious
warfare and joint operations. He was involved with the planning for allied amphibious operations
from the very beginning of the war – starting with the invasion of north Africa. His involvement
deepened in the subsequent invasions of Sicily and Normandy. In addition, Kirk was ahead of his
time in modeling effective joint operations. At a time when service rivalry was standard, Kirk
made cooperation with the army seamless, and this was fundamental to allied victory. As an
early practitioner of “jointness,” Kirk deserves credit as an organizational innovator.

When World War II ended, Kirk’s quiet prestige and professional network helped
solidify his appointment as ambassador to Belgium and then to the Soviet Union. Kirk, as a
leader of the force that established the western front and sealed the fate of Nazi Germany, was an
ideal ambassador. He personified American goodwill in Europe. Kirk was a living and constant

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14 Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval
Institute Press, 2019), 257.
15 German and Japanese forces were notorious for in-fighting and non-cooperation which undoubtedly contributed
heavily to their defeat. As it was, even within the army, allied air forces wanted to fight their own war.
reminder, to Soviet leaders especially, that America could be trusted. However, on the single occasion when Kirk met with Joseph Stalin, hope was all but extinguished that Normandy was remembered to America’s credit. Kirk found the Soviets increasingly hostile - the old ally was no more. But fortunately Kirk was “reliable, experienced, and versatile.” He was a cool-headed and steady American ambassador to Moscow at a time of growing global Cold War tension where diplomacy, then the primary battleground, gave way to a shooting war in Korea. During the first part of his ambassadorship Kirk saw the Soviets as an enemy to quickly defeat, ready to support a “roll back” of Soviet gains in Europe and around the world. But later Kirk reassessed the struggle with the Soviets and, by the end of his tenure, decided the more peaceful sounding “containment” policy of George Kennan and the Truman administration was the right approach.

Kirk’s contribution is also found in the calm – that there was no higher tension or misunderstanding than there was. The idea that Kirk was right for the role of ambassador, at the right time and place in history, is addressed in the idea of the problem of conjecture. Henry Kissinger, the Harvard historian and former Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford administrations, explains that after intelligence and skill are used on known problems, conviction remains the only guide to inform on the unknown.16 How many problems were avoided because Kirk was “reliable, experienced, and versatile” and his beliefs unflappable? What difference did it make to have a calm American ambassador in Moscow during a tense time of mistrust and the beginning of the Korean crisis and war? Kirk helped keep the United States – and the world – out of a larger war. 

Applied history is using history to inform decisions in the present. It is to mine lessons for application in today’s world. Applied history is fundamental to armed forces education, most

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notably at the U.S. Naval War College – an institution Kirk loved and that his uncle, Admiral Caspar Goodrich, helped found.\textsuperscript{17} Kirk and his generation of naval officers who were students there were steeped in the ideas of applied history. Study of the past – and past lives – can help with current decisions and courses of action. Kirk’s life reveals that reliability, experience, and versatility are just as important as knowledge, skills, and ability in a successful career. Kirk shows that cultivating a professional network of friends, and having the right person in a role that capitalizes on their strengths can lead to victory.

Kirk’s life touches on many themes in United States, European, and Global history. Kirk was a quintessential progressive, reared as an American “renaissance man” who valued education, occupational professionalization, and democratic principles of America’s middle class and elite. His life coincided with the burgeoning youthfulness of a modern America and U.S. Navy. He and his generation were inspired by their elders to fulfill the promise of American dominance and the promotion of democracy and democratic institutions worldwide. America became a world power after two world wars. His generation, born in the waning days of the Victorian Era, was fully immersed in professionalization and progressive notions of the start of the twentieth century, with the application of the scientific to the whole of life. Progressivism was an obsession with western nations bent on advancing, or progressing, in every field of endeavor. Ever advancing technologies and tighter controls and efficiencies made for multiple revolutions in human existence – with positive and negative results. The Wright Brother’s first flight and Armstrong’s walk on the moon were Kirk’s generational bookends. They engaged in two world wars that dramatically altered the global social, economic, and political landscape.

Chapter 1

Recrudescence of Feeling: Progressive Inspiration

Alan Goodrich Kirk’s early life coincided with the burgeoning of a modern America and resurgent U.S. Navy with global interests. He and his generation were inspired by the visionary leaders and innovators of the Gilded Age to fulfill the promise of American dominance through well beyond the first half of the twentieth century. Kirk’s early years came at the height of Progressivism – his generation were the first true naval professionals.¹

The Kirk Family

Alan Goodrich Kirk was born October 30, 1888, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Kirk’s parents were of the upper middle class, connected, with means. His father, William Thompson Kirk, was a successful grocer who came from devout Quaker stock with deep roots. Kirk could trace his paternal ancestry in America back to 1635. The Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers, was the pacifist and egalitarian religious sect of Philadelphia’s founders. Kirk’s grandmother was a leader in a local group.² Her son, however, became an Episcopalian in adulthood, and the Kirks attended St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in town and, as Kirk later recall, “the Quaker side rather faded out.” Kirk had fond memories of his grandfather and grandmother Kirk, but they were not nearly as influential as his mother’s family.³

³ Ibid., 22.
His mother, the former Harriet Whitney Goodrich, came from a clan of tremendous history, lined with colorful members with ready adventure stories to entice a young man. Harriet’s middle name, “Whitney”, was given to her by her father in memory and celebration of the inventor of the cotton gin, Eli Whitney, who, it was said, was a family friend. Harriet’s younger brothers loved history and genealogy. They found traces of family in early colonial Connecticut and Massachusetts and even back to England. In some cases, they proved to have a larger supply of imagination than factual evidence, as Kirk discovered later life to his chagrin, especially the family connections to England through Goodrich Castle and the lineage to Bishop Godric in Ely. But family culture placed a high value on education and learning. It was rare for a woman of the time, but Grandmother Sarah Ann Beardon, from a prominent North Carolina family, attended Mount Holyoke College, a women’s education institution in Massachusetts founded in 1837. She married in 1857, and her wedding ring would one day belong to Kirk’s wife Lydia.

Most importantly for Kirk, the Goodrich family were sailors. Harriet’s brother Casper Frederick Goodrich was an influential naval officer that came from a line of Goodrich men connected to the tea trade. Based out of New Haven, Connecticut, the Goodrich clan sailed to China by way around South America in the early 19th century. Captain William Goodrich was thought to be something of a privateer who had scrapes with authorities in various lands. Harriet’s oldest brother, based in China and working for Russell & Co., was once paid 10,000 Mexican dollars for damages suffered in his wrongful arrest. He had been locked in a bamboo cage and paraded around the streets of “Swatow” enduring the disdain of the populace, some of

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4 Kirk, Reminiscences, 2.
5 Ibid., 21.
6 Ibid., 19.
whom threw things at him. Harriet’s younger brother William served in the Connecticut infantry during the Civil War. Another younger brother, King, as a young man, taught English at the Imperial College in Kyoto, Japan. He held many jobs – one as a Pullman conductor. King ended up in San Francisco where he invited his sister Harriet for an extended visit. She traveled to be with him by ship in her own adventure, making the cut across Panama by steam train to the waiting Pacific transport up the west coast.

The Influence of Casper Goodrich Upon the Navy and His Nephew

Harriet had another younger brother, the renowned Admiral Caspar Frederick Goodrich, who became the single most important inspiration for his nephew Kirk’s naval career. Casper Goodrich was born in Philadelphia in 1847. At 14 years old, he joined the navy during the Civil War and attended the Naval Academy in Newport, Rhode Island, where it had been relocated from Annapolis out of concern for the school’s proximity to the Confederates. Graduating top of his class in 1864, he joined the fleet before the war ended. He would be still in uniform a half-century later when, during World War I, he presided over the naval unit training officers at Princeton University.

He experienced the Civil War as a midshipman, and the Spanish-American War as the commanding officer of cruisers. Known as a reformer, he served twice as President of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and was a prolific writer and lecturer. Goodrich backed up Mahan in fostering the study of history to discover principles of strategy in war. He gave

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7 Kirk, Reminiscences, 2.
9 Kirk, Reminiscences, 3.
support to young officers like Washington Champers, who became known for his pioneering
efforts in modernizing the fleet. 11 Rising to rear-admiral rank in 1904, he was commander-in-
chief of the Pacific Squadron from 1904-1906. He retired in 1909, the same year Kirk graduated
from the academy, but was returned to active duty during World War I to direct the Pay Officers’
Material School at Princeton University.12 He and his family made their home at Pomfret,
Connecticut. There could be little wonder that Kirk would find this part of Connecticut special.
During his career Kirk spent time in Connecticut and made it his retreat for many years. Kirk and
his family vacation spot choice at Black Point, Niantic, Connecticut. Not only did the place have
maritime charms being located by the sea, the New London, Groton and Mystic seaports, but it
was down river from his uncle’s resort at the more inland and rural Pomfret. Here Lydia could
enjoy New York culture and her husband could develop his Naval War College network. Here
the Kirks rested and recharged in vacation getaway throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Casper Goodrich, as Captain, published an essay “The Naval Side of the Revolutionary
War” where he applied Mahan’s lessons along with his own to the naval history of the
revolution. “The war in question was a naval war,” he wrote, “to an extend seldom fully realized
and never generally acknowledged.”13 In his praise of French naval power during the decisive
Yorktown victory, George Washington “states but the simple truth, the honor of the event does
belong to de Grasse,” said Goodrich.14 The lesson of the war is simple, the American navy was
unprepared and American interests in the war was at the mercy of an allied naval power. So,

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11 Stephen K. Stein, From Torpedoes to Aviation: Washington Irving Chambers and Technological Innovation in the
New Navy, 1876-1913 (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007) 64.
12 Caspar F. Goodrich papers, 1869-1925, Clements Library University of Michigan, accessed April 24, 2023,
Read before the Society of Naval History on Tuesday evening, March 7, 1896.
said Goodrich, “we should profit by their unhappy experience and concentrate our efforts in naval construction on armed vessels until our fleet is strong enough to serve its true purpose, the avoidance of hostilities through its power to act with vigor and effect in the event of war.”15

Goodrich was inspired by, and partnered with, Alfred T. Mahan and Stephen B. Luce and, with them, helped found the Naval War College. It was Goodrich who wrote the “In Memoriam” tribute to Luce upon his death in 1917, in which he praised Luce for his no-nonsense anti-bureaucratic command style. “Luce blandly ignored” said Goodrich, an order from the Bureau of Equipment and Recruiting to get approval for enlisted ratings under his command.16 If Kirk shared his uncle’s appreciation for sanctity of command and disdain for bureaucracy, it was perhaps reflected in his career in his early departure as Director of Naval Intelligence, and his frustration with his Naval Forces Europe assignment as we will see later.

His Uncle’s influence can be seen in that Kirk would become a gunnery expert, remain a student of and retain respect for British naval innovation. Kirk’s focused interest and association is reflected in his career made up of attaché duty, naval intelligence, association with the preeminent sea power, Britain, and even later interests in the value of psychological warfare. All these were rooted in Goodrich’s “Report of the British Naval and Military Operations in Egypt, 1882,” which Kirk undoubtedly read and took to heart. The British Admiral Sir Frederick B. P. Seymour led his squadron to bombard Alexandria and land 25,000 troops at Ismailia in response to the native mob massacre of close to 50 Europeans. Goodrich’s book is a comprehensive work of 340 pages with 79 plates of diagrams and illustrations. Extensive and detailed, Goodrich did not neglect to draw numerous conclusions that when analyzed back in the states, was a huge hit.

The book contributed to the growing discipline of naval warfare and professionalization of the officer corps and was a personal boost to his career.\textsuperscript{17}

Casper Goodrich’s son, and Alan’s older first cousin, C.F. Jr, graduated from the Naval Academy in 1901 and served in the Pacific fleet on the newly commissioned \textit{Georgia}, a pre-dreadnought \textit{Virginia}-class battleship. C.F. Jr and eight others were killed in an explosion that also injured eleven others. The family had a magnificent portrait to remember him by. The world renown artist John Singer Sargent had lodged with the Goodrich family in Newport in 1887 and pained young C.F Jr. as a gift. Goodrich and his first wife Eleanor met and befriended the American painter in 1880 in Florence Italy soon after Sargent completed a portrait of his teacher, Carolus-Duran, then on exhibit in Paris.\textsuperscript{18} The finished piece is of young Caspar in sailor’s winter dress, with arms crossed and eyes directed toward the viewer. Sargent inscribing it “To Mrs. Goodrich.”\textsuperscript{19} There can be little doubt the painting was an inspiration to not only the family and to the public soon to see it on display, but also the subject’s younger first cousin. Undeterred, Kirk’s uncle continued to mentor him.

“So, he was the inspiration for me to go into the navy,” Kirk recalled.\textsuperscript{20} Known as Uncle Fred, the bearded adventurer regaled the family with stories of China and the Far East where he had commanded a squadron of ships through unknown and hazardous waters. Kirk was enthralled. He knew he wanted the navy life. “I can’t remember not planning to go into the navy.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 4.
My whole career, schooling, training, etc., was designed to get me into the Naval Academy.”  

His father, although brought up pacifist as a Quaker, “had no real objection.”  

Goodrich nurtured Kirk’s interests by sending him books about the navy and its’ heroes.  

**Beverly New Jersey Youth**

Kirk grew up in Beverly, New Jersey, a small town of about 1500 people just up the Delaware river from Philadelphia, and just down river from Levittown, the future model of American suburbia. Water featured prominently from his earliest memories. His family home, beside the river was a refuge from the swimming, paddling, rowing and sailing for fun and sport. “I became, as a boy, a competent waterman,” Kirk recalled, “with sails, small sailboats, catboats and what-not, rowing a rowboat or paddling a canoe.” He also became proficient “poling” over marshland, a skill he put to use later in life when he took his family on a punt to see the races in England.  

Kirk’s mother was a stern disciplinarian. She spanked her wayward young with the “slipper tea” which consisted of the subject bent over her knee while she applied her bedroom slipper to the subject bottom. It was a judicious and restrained exercise Kirk recalled, “It was not used unduly.”  

Kirk would remember a “healthy and fine” youth of “good fun” roaming free in the countryside for miles, gleaning corn, grapes, apples, pears and cherries. He was a voracious reader. “On my mother’s side there was always a strong studious bent, and we always were reading books,” Kirk recalled. James Fenimore Cooper stood out as “heavy going” but he

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22 Kirk, Reminiscences, 4.  
23 Ibid. 15.  
24 Ibid. 5, 7.  
25 Ibid. 25.  
26 Ibid. 18.
read many classics and developed a habit of reading early-on, and it stuck with him throughout life.²⁷

Kirk had the benefit of an excellent education. The Farnum Preparatory School at Beverly was funded by a private-public partnership and was geared for preparing bright students for Teachers College at Trenton. The coed institution had over 60 students with a faculty of excellent women teachers – the only male was the principal, who was also a college professor. Kirk studied Latin and English and drawing. He excelled in history. His mathematics course was especially designed for him to do well in the Naval Academy entrance examination.²⁸ He was captain of the school football team and mainly played the offensive left half-back position. He led his team to local championship. They were undefeated, he said, “because I bought a book from A. G. Spalding and Co. for 15 (cents) entitled, How to Play Football, and we taught the boys how to play football according to the book.” From this Kirk learned that knowing more about a subject than your opponent was a decisive advantage.²⁹

Kirk’s childhood story also included familiarity with guns and explosives. Decoration Day and Fourth of July were featured patriotic days full of festivities and fireworks. Big “Chinese crackers”, cannon crackers, pinwheels and skyrockets – Kirk and his friends had varied and ample supply with money saved up from a month of chores removing ashes, shoveling snow, and clearing drains. His father was member to a local gun club, and he went with him hunted birds – duck, railbirds and reed birds.³⁰ Young Kirk learned to recognize the silhouettes of The John A.

²⁷ Kirk, Reminiscences, 19.
²⁸ Ibid. 6.
²⁹ Ibid. 7.
³⁰ Ibid. 9.
Werner, the Twilight, and the Columbia - all passenger and freight ships that operated regularly on the Delaware River.  

In 1897, 9-year-old Kirk attended an inspection tour, hosted by his storied flag officer uncle, of the nation’s newest and most formidable battleship, Iowa (BB-4), commissioned that same year. It was undoubtedly a fantastical hallmark of youth. Kirk was invited by his uncle, then President of the Naval War College, to go with him on a ship inspection hosted by Captain Robley Evans. The legendary Evans gained the title “Fighting Bob” as his ship Iowa was first to fire on the Spanish fleet in Cuba in 1898. Kirk remembers attending Sunday service (Sundays were reserved for formal captain’s inspections) on the quarterdeck. They sang a decade old hymn “Throw out the Lifeline,” Kirk recalled. The song, published the year of Kirk’s birth, was written by a religious minded member of a Massachusetts lifesaving station. Ella Fitzgerald would later make it famous in an album release in the late 1960’s civil rights era. The imagery is profound – a marrying of Christian gospel mission with naval supremacy. Kirk was impressed with seeing the ship’s magazine.

In the summer of 1897, the Kirks made a long and memorable visit to Newport – then at the peak of its gilded age glamour where summer “cottages” of the wealthy provided splendid respite from refined entertainments such as yacht racing. They attended Trinity Church and walked the famous Cliff Walk, which Kirk remembered had a sign that read “Dogs and Sailors Not Allowed.” Kirk caught and ate lobster. They toured the Civil War era Constellation,

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31 Kirk, Reminiscences, 11.
33 Kirk, Reminiscences, 14.
commissioned in 1855, in the harbor. Uncle Fred had commanded the ship earlier in his career and had sailed her on her final trip back from Europe in 1864.34

The Spanish-American War and a Recrudescence of Feeling

Kirk’s naval interests were laid with natural familiarity with water and guns mixed with stories of family seagoing adventures and the cultivation of interest by Uncle Fred. Added to these youthful interests was the solidifying landmark event of not only young Kirk’s life, but also the life of a maturing nation bent on participating on the world stage. The Spanish-American War captured the imagination of the nation – especially Kirk’s generation. As youth they saw a relatively quick war involving diverse peoples and distant lands of global proportions. Their generation was to be greatly impacted - they would experience World War twice and deal with the ramifications of explosive power far beyond what gunpowder would do.

“There was a recrudescence of feeling about our country just as the Spanish War was beginning, and that international period. We were building more ships, and writers were writing about Farragut and Decatur and Bainbridge and the Constitution and the Constellation.” 35 When the war began Kirk was home recovering from measles and his father brought him a photo album of ships in the U.S. Navy. He admired the battleships Iowa and Indiana especially. He read reports of the Battle of Santiago. “Of course,” Kirk later recalled, “we read all about that famous Brooklyn loop at the Battle of Santiago…” refereeing to a turn ordered to avoid collision with a Spanish warship, precipitating a near collision with Texas, which made a full-stop just in time.

34 Kirk, Reminiscences, 16. Kirk, while in retirement, attended the commissioning of the latest USS Constellation (CV-64), a supercarrier, on 27 October 1961.
35 Ibid., 15.
The three-hour battle proved decisive for the war, as the unharmed U.S. Navy pummeled its’ Spanish opponent with over 10,000 rounds of gunfire.36

Kirk also read criticisms of Captain Bob Evans, who’s ship Iowa kept firing at Morro Castle with little effect, wasting ammunition it was said. Kirk recalled marveling at Evans who was reported exclaiming “Oh, hell, what’s powder made for?” Young Kirk loved it! “As a boy, I thought that was wonderful, you know.”37 Kirk’s future father-in-law, Frederic Lincoln Chapin, served on Indiana. Kirk remembered the ship – admiring the photo in the book his father had given him while sick in bed about the time the Spanish American War broke out.38 What jubilation the nation and Kirk witnessed in 1899 for Admiral Dewey’s homecoming – an inspiration to the World War II Admiralty.

The Naval Academy Metamorphosis

Appointment to the Naval Academy is political by its nature. A member of Congress must grant an appointment to an applicant. Through the influence of his uncle, Kirk was able to get a copy of the rules, regulations and guidebooks to assist in preparing for nomination and appointment. Uncle Fred encouraged Kirk to collect letters of recommendation indicating his academic prowess and moral character. Kirk did have a weakness, however. His father was a Democrat and the Congressman, John J. Gardner, was Republican. Kirk showed up at Gardner’s office armed with letters of recommendation from the minister of his Episcopal Church vouching for his character, and praise for his academic record by Professor Dilkes, Farnum Preparatory

37 Kirk, Reminiscences, 13.
38 Ibid., 12.
School principal. The congressman remained unmoved. Kirk did not quit. A local businessman and family friend, John W. Hamer, provided the needed political leverage. A loan executive for Prudential Life Insurance Company, Hamer had significant sway over the “big people” in the state.39 Gardner finally gave Kirk his nomination leading to appointment.

Kirk graduated from Farnum in the Spring of 1905.40 After a brief trip to Annapolis for “cramming school” or “Bucks,” Kirk returned home briefly to celebrate the 4th of July with his family. The next day, July 5th, he checked into Annapolis.41 Kirk was admitted as midshipman at the United States Naval Academy a month after the Japanese defeated the Russian fleet at the Battle of Tsushima. It was the first time an Asian power defeated a western power in four centuries. And it was the result of decisive naval action. The Russo-Japanese War was concluded with the help of President Roosevelt in the early Fall. A naval arms race ensued with the British launching the first modern battleship, HMS Dreadnought, ensuring obsolescence of all other capital ships, during Kirk’s sophomore year. During his junior and senior years the Great White Fleet circumnavigated the world in a show of force new to the United States. Stark competition, primarily between the U.S., Britain and Japan, in battleship numbers, sizes and power sparked revolutionary change in naval warfare.42

At 17, Kirk was younger than most in his freshmen class and, by his own admission, “pretty immature.” He did not distinguish himself athletically but did manage the fencing team.43 Kirk had a knack for the dramatic and served as chairman and first president of the “Masqueraders” - the drama society.44 Kirk was no rebel. His disposition and upbringing, which

39 Kirk, Reminiscences, 17.
40 Vital statistics form 1 December 1937 in P/R Box 1.
41 Ibid., 17. Also see Casualty Report on the death of Kirk dated 21 October 1963, P/R, Box 1.
43 Kirk, Reminiscences, 22, 23.
44 Ibid. See also vital statistics form 1 December 1937 in P/R, Box 1.
included “not sparing the rod,” prepared him well for midshipman regimentation.  

45 Like perhaps most of his of his classmates, he was drawn by the regulations and the discipline, and wanted a naval career that supported these principles.  

46 Besides, Kirk maintained a good conduct record in order to get out on town in Annapolis city, which he loved. Good conduct not only gave a midshipman a mid-day pass on Sunday, but it also meant money to spend. Depending on class rank and conduct score, a midshipman could earn a stipend of one to three dollars per month. Kirk immensely enjoyed these Sunday outings with friends.  

47 Jesse B. Oldendorf, Monroe Kelly and Harold Train, comprised his favorite pals. “A good bunch,” Kirk remembered.  

48 The sum of Kirk’s academy career is found in the 1909 edition of The Lucky Bag, moniker of The Annual of the Brigade of Midshipmen. It has a full page reserved for “Bill” or “Kirky” and for each of his other graduating classmates. The page is that of a fully engaged midshipman in academy life. Kirk was manager of the Fencing Team, a member of both the “Hop (dance) Committee” and the “Class Song, Yell and Color Committee.”  

49 He was not just a choir member, but was in fact “The Sweet Singer of the Tenth Company, and was end-man in the choir…” according to his page write-up. Perhaps he was most proud of being president of the Masqueraders since he notes this late in his career. The annual shows he had a winning sense of humor, “never too busy to get off a bum joke, or listen to one of yours.” His positive and engaging character showed. In sum, Kirk was judged “the happiest man in the class – and has a
right to be.” Perhaps his closest friend was Monroe Kelly, called “Mike” or “Monk”, fellow classmate from Norfolk, Virginia. The two were often together out on the town, as freedom to do so was awarded. Kirk was “a joint proprietor with Kelly of most of the city of Annapolis.” They sang together in the choir and planned dances and balls in the “Hop Committee.” And they were both loyal Masqueraders. Almost thirty-five years later they would both take part in the landing of American forces in the Atlantic European theater during World War II.50

Kirk was already in love with the eastern coastal area of Connecticut that would become his regular get-away in the years ahead. He evidently went there on several occasions for training and the limited leisure time he could slip in to demanding academy existence. By graduation it was claimed Kirk “owns many shares of stock at Eastern Point…” and his interest in the area as a restful place of peace and vacation would last throughout his career. There is another characteristic of Kirk that would serve him well. He was calculating and meticulous. By graduation Kirk had the reputation as “the sort of man who counts, no matter what he goes in to do.”51 Kirk was a good student that did not get into disciplinary problems. He accumulated 42 demerits in all. A midshipman was bound to have some – about 100 for historical average. Even the top-most in conduct, a William Devotie Billingsley of Winona Mississippi, had seven. Most had many more - a few able to rack up around 200.52 If he had acquired more, he would have been confronted by the aggressive, cutting and no-nonsense Lieutenant Ernest J. King in the Department of Discipline. Who knows that any infraction might have much later sunk his

50 Ibid. https://Valor.militarytimes.com/hero/27318
prospects among close competition for assignments in World War II. By all counts King as CNO was not one to suffer foolery in the Admiral’s ranks. Lieutenant Commander Arthur MacArthur, son of an Army General and Military Governor of the Philippines, and older brother to later famed Pacific War General Douglas MacArthur, was also disciplinary officer on the staff. Hardened by seeing action in the Battle of Santiago during the Spanish American war, as well as action in the Philippine insurrection and the Boxer Rebellion, MacArthur was a living deterrent to disorderly conduct. Kirk would have met and interacted with the lieutenant assigned to the Physics and Chemistry Department, William D. Leahy, later to be the senior most naval officer of World War II. Fleet Admiral William Leahy would serve as Chief of Naval Operations, Governor of Puerto Rico, Ambassador to France and Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief during the critical war years and early Cold War. No doubt Kirk would not have progressed without Leahy’s at least tacit approval of Kirk’s flag promotions and ambassadorial assignments.53

Kirk’s academy record was excellent. His placement was at the upper quarter of midshipman. He graduated 44th in a class of 166 - five ahead of his friend Kelly.54 At graduation he had accumulated five months and five days of training at sea. In his senior year he was in the top half of his class in every category except “Engineering Materials and Design,” placing 97. Mathematics was his biggest challenge, but he conquered it – especially in application to ordnance. He found law and languages (especially French) suited him, placing high in the subjects among his class at 28. Skills needed by top officers and their staffs, and diplomats, he

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would accentuate his strengths later in his career. He also performed well, 38th, in the training cruise and ordnance. He would excel throughout his career as a gunner and ordnance man at sea. Navigation and Electrical Engineering on the other hand, did not come as easy and he ended in the mid-range at 68th. Indeed, he would not shine as navigator or engineer in the navy.

Following the Spring semesters at the Academy, midshipmen continued their training at sea. Summer cruises served as on-the-job training for midshipman and Kirk’s summers included taking part in all aspects of the running of a naval vessel including shoveling coal. His cruises mainly transited the eastern seaboard.\textsuperscript{55} Kirk spent the summer of 1908 (from 6 June – 28 August) abord \textit{Olympia}, Admiral Dewey’s storied old flagship. The Great White Fleet sailed on its round the world voyage during Kirk’s upper classmen years. It was a two-years long and 16 battleship demonstration that the United States intended to play a major role at sea, joining the competition for naval dominance.\textsuperscript{56} Kirk graduated on-time after four years in June 1909. He was a scrappy 137 pound and 69 and half inches tall checking into his first command – the \textit{Kansas}. \textit{Kansas}, a 16,000-ton \textit{Connecticut} class battleship built in Camden, New Jersey, was commissioned in April 1907 and just participated in a world cruise as part of the Great White Fleet tour that ended in February 1909.\textsuperscript{57} From the spring of 1910 to late 1911, the ship was to travel to France, England, and the Baltic – including Russia.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{55} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 23. \\
\textsuperscript{56} Stein, Stephen K. ed. \textit{The Sea in World History: Exploration, Travel, and Trade}, vol 2, 617, 677. \\
\textsuperscript{57} Report of physical examination 1910, in P/R, Box 3. \\
\textsuperscript{58} Naval History and Heritage Command, “Ship Histories,” accessed April 24, 2023, \hfill \url{https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories.html}
\end{flushright}
Twentieth Century Prequel Voyage

Kirk was thrilled that although he was assigned to unremarkable junior officer duties, he would get to see Europe. What is remarkable is that the places he visited later factored heavily in the apex of his career over three decades later. After pulling into England’s Weymouth port, Kirk found himself in London. It was thrilling to him.\textsuperscript{59} London was the world power-center of finance and naval dominance. He had returned to the land of his ancestors so much discussed by his uncles. \textit{Kansas} next went to the port of Cherbourg, from which he traveled to Paris - places that factored heavily into his naval career’s dramatic conclusion. While in Paris, the naval attaché, Captain Frederic L. Chapin, welcomed the members of the \textit{Kansas} crew by providing them tickets to the opera. Eight years later, in 1918, Kirk married Chapin’s daughter, Lydia.\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Kansas} then joined a good-will tour force of the Second Battleship Division of the Atlantic Fleet touring Baltic ports.\textsuperscript{61} Kirk believed the extended port visits were hastily arranged for two reasons. One was to placate Kaiser Wilhelm, who considered it insulting if the United States Navy did not pay equal attention to Germany. The other was that conflict in Mexico diverted the west coast squadron that was originally assigned the mission later that year. \textit{Kansas} also made visits to Denmark, Sweden, and Russia.\textsuperscript{62} Kirk’s first European tour was a great introduction to the great-power rivalry and conflicts that informed his military and diplomatic career. Thirty years later many of the places visited in his first sea tour became important in his naval career. On June 5, 1911, Kirk was commissioned as Ensign onboard \textit{Kansas}. His naval career was officially begun. His departing professional evaluation reflected excellent marks in bearing and conduct. He was marked proficient in the French language, reflecting his interest in

\textsuperscript{59} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 25.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
things European. He developed a taste for diplomatic life – especially with the Chapins - and interacted with a great variety of foreign peoples – which he found interesting. Although glad of his early adventure in Europe, however, Kirk knew young officers where needed in the world hotspot of the time – China. So, after a period of leave in late August, Kirk was on his way to his next assignment to the other side of the world.63

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63 Memo to Kirk from Bureau 7 Jan 1915. Fitness Report 1 Jul 1911 – 20 Aug 1911 Ensign Kirk USS Kansas watch and division officer. Kirk received a middling 3.6 marks mainly. General bearing and conduct and aptitude are the highest marks. French is fairly proficient. Senior’s comment was “A very good officer” USS Kansas. Kirk was on leave in the summer of 1911, June 25 to 27, and August 14 to 20, P/R, Box 4.
Chapter 2

Mahanian Generation: Guns, Boats, and Diplomacy

Ensign Alan Goodrich Kirk was ready to see the world – a world that now included the United States as expanding power in Asia. He was in his prime - a handsome and healthy 23-year-old, close to 70 inches tall and 142 pounds.\(^1\) What they had once learned from books - now many young American men like Kirk now added experiences. Kirk and his generation of young Americans learned first-hand about distant exotic people – and the requisite conflict and new diseases involved in the burgeoning global interest of their country. The most powerful tool of power was the gun, and advances in gun technology soon reached a zenith. Kirk became an expert in the most advanced guns.

**Asiatic Station**

Kirk received orders to China Station for three years. Detaching from *Kansas*, he traveled to Norfolk Navy Yard on August 17, 1911. Both he and another officer were given responsibility for a group of sailors enroute to Mare Island California on the coal-burning Southern Railway train. Kirk had fun with the sailors, passing out meal tickets and treating them to bugle calls – including revile (he bought a bugle just for the occasion). At one stop at Salt Lake City, Kirk had the men do morning exercises on the salt bed in their blue uniforms.\(^2\) While he traveled, Kirk was careful to exercise – a requirement President Theodore Roosevelt had put in place several years before. Roosevelt’s vigorous program of activity was a very personal mission, and he made it a mandatory part of the navy profession. Ninety miles on a horse, 50 miles on a bicycle or 25

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\(^1\) Health record, 17 April 1917, P/R, Box 4.

miles on foot in three consecutive days – “pretty rugged,” observed Kirk, “if you weren’t in some sort of shape.” Kirk sailed on *Logan*, an Army transport, on the 31-day transit to the Philippines. They stopped in Hawaii and Guam – Kirk going ashore to explore and exercise.

One of the first things he did on arrival in Manila, was to go straight to the paymaster. He had spent all his money on the trip - even borrowed from a friend. He fully and excitedly expected to get milage reimbursement of 8 cents a mile going across the continental United States, but the paymaster gave him bad news. The railroad was traveling on a land-grant, so the only milage that counted was from Mare Island to San Francisco, and at 30 miles, that was a grand total reimbursement of $2.40 – a severe blow when he expected a $240! Not only was the cash a letdown, but the ships of the U.S. Asiatic fleet, which was re-constituted the year before in 1910, must have disappointed Kirk. If there was innovation happening, it hadn’t reached here.

From Manila, Philippines, Rear Admiral John T. Hubbard commanded 3 old armored cruisers, 10 gunboats, 2 monitors, and 9 torpedo boats. Kirk took passage on “a little old-fashioned monitor of Civil War days,” and went to Hong Kong. He was assigned to the gunboat *Rivington* at nearby Canton. Then, after a brief stay aboard *Monterey*, Monitor No. 6, he was assigned to *Wilmington*, the flagship of the gunboat flotilla. *Wilmington*, gunboat No.8, launched in 1895, was engaged from 1908 in river service primarily on the Yangtze up to Hankow. She also made rounds to Hong Kong, Canton, and Swatow. She provided river security much as a highway patrolman in a vital and busy network of commerce. Periodic displays of power were necessary.

One story told of target rafts being occupied by fishermen, and the only way to get them to leave

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4 Ibid., 31. Kirk made the point of saying he made the trip (in 1960) from San Francisco to Japan in 18 hours by air.
5 Ibid., 33.
6 Ibid., 33. See also chart on “The development of the U.S. Fleet 1890-1899”, accessed 25 April 2023, [https://www.naval-history.net/xGW-United%20States%20Navy1917-1918.htm#5](https://www.naval-history.net/xGW-United%20States%20Navy1917-1918.htm#5).
was to fire blanks overhead. The degree to which innovation advanced during Kirk’s career is reflected in the slow and rudimentary vessels – many designed during the Civil War, that he initially encountered in the Asiatic fleet. But Kirk was fascinated by the area that he had learned so much about while growing up in Beverley, exploring the land and people connected with the old stories of his relatives in the tea business in the 1830s and 1840s.

Ensign Kirk’s arrival in late October 1911, coincided with a low point in Chinese history. The country was dominated by foreign powers and revolutionaries were actively destroying the remainder of the Manchu Dynasty, which had ruled China for over two and a half centuries. Within two months, Sun Yat-sen became head of a provisional revolutionary government at Nanking. Canton (modern Guangzhou) had a settlement of foreign powers and their forces – notably gunboats of the British, American, German, and Japanese navies. In what Kirk called a “big how-do-you-do,” Sun Yat-sen, the new leader of China, came to a meeting with the American naval commander and shook hands with Kirk as he crossed the deck. Later in his career, when Kirk was the US Ambassador to Taipei, his brief greeting with Sun Yat-sen impressed President Chiang Kai-shek and others – Kirk had shaken the hand of a founder of the Republic.

Kirk continued to display strong interest in diplomacy. He spent time from the first months of his tour working on language skills – paying out of pocket for lessons in both in

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7 Commander William L. Rodgers was her first commander. Monterey (Monitor No. 6) was launched in 1891 and served primarily in China and the Philippines, making the ocean trip without incident even though not designed for ocean travel. Monitor design was still based on those used during the Civil War. See also Naval History and Heritage Command, “Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships,” accessed 15 Feb 2021 and 24 April 2023, www.history.navy.mil.

8 Kirk, Reminiscences, 33. Kirk said his “forefathers had sailed there in ships, all the way up to Canton for tea and I have no doubt, a little bit of opium in the holds...”. See also Naval History and Heritage Command, “Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships,” accessed 15 Feb 2021 and 24 April 2023, www.history.navy.mil.


10 Kirk, Reminiscences, 34.
French and Cantonese. His French was good enough to win him the appreciation of his skipper who commended him for acting as interpreter with French speakers on occasion. His Cantonese was another story. In June 1912, Kirk’s gunboat was sent to Hong Kong for boiler repairs, and it remained for two years. While in Hong Kong, Kirk experienced an early lesson in diplomacy gone wrong. It was almost a year since he had begun to learn the language, and he decided to “show off a little bit” when the Governor-General of Hong Kong, Sir Henry May and his daughter came to a 4th of July celebration the Americans held while Kirk was officer of the deck. Kirk was standing on the gangway platform engaging Miss May in conversation when a sampan (essentially a pontoon boat) approached the Americans with supplies from Canton. Kirk recognized the young woman at the bow as “this saucy little miss called Ah-He.” Kirk playfully called out in a broken mix of Cantonese and English that amounted to “Ah-He, what side you come from? Long time I no have see your handsome face.” To which the young woman responded with a “gesture of great disdain, flipped her fat little rear up at me and said ‘You - handsome face – you allee smell my ass!’” Although Miss May seemed to ignore the episode, it was a lesson for Kirk – do not “try to get fresh in somebody else’s language. You should know exactly what you’re saying and what the response is likely to be.”

But he greatly enjoyed his interactions with the British sailors and soldiers. There was an estimated 50,000 of them stationed in the city of about 200,000. The witnessing of a severe typhoon that pounded the city was a fearful omen. He made what he thought would be lasting

12 Fitness Report 1 Apr 1912 – 30 Sep 1912, P/R, Box 4. Ensign Kirk started studying the “Cantonese dialect” and his “Progress slight, though encouraging.” April 24 to May 3, 1912, Kirk assigned temporary duty on Callao under lieutenant junior grade S. W. Cake for a trip up the West River to Woo Chow and return to Canton, China. Marks for French 3.5; Watch and division officer were much better marks – 4.0s with only “manor of giving commands” lower at 3.5 or “very good.” P/R, Box 4.
14 Kirk, Reminiscences, 36, 37.
friendships in the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, but most of them soon went to their deaths in the killing fields of Europe during World War I.\footnote{kirk, reminiscences, 35. memorandum of record of service, 26 feb 1914, p/r, box 1}

**Personality**

Kirk did not display Type A personality characteristics. He did not have an overt ‘take charge’ demeanor and he was prone to pace himself on achieving success in competitive projects – a liability perhaps in navy culture. A showman he was not. While assigned to *Wilmington*, Kirk worked under two commanding officers. The first, Commander E. A. Edgar, gave high marks to his bearing and conduct, aptitude, appearance in uniform, and his performance relating to senior officers. He was marked well, but lower in intelligence, giving commands and dealing with the enlisted men. In fact, Edgar lowered his opinion of Kirk’s “manner of giving commands” in a follow up report. Kirk’s early fitness reports also note, interestingly, his interest in fire control and naval strategy – two career-long interests that he continually studied and refined.\footnote{fitness report 1 apr 1912 – 28 may 1912, ensign kirk’s performance with senior officers noted very good (3.5), and enlisted men good (3.0), bearing and conduct excellent (4.0), but manner of giving commands good (3.0), uniform appearance excellent (4.0), and intelligence good (3.0). signed commander e.a. edgar, commanding officer, wilmington. kirk marks lower for: french fair, manner of giving commands (2.8), uniform appearance (3.2), but bearing and conduct excellent. aptitude very good but liking or interest in naval profession good (3.0). kirk was marked in good health with no sick days. p/r, box 4.}

The second commanding officer, John T. Hubbard, gave Kirk top marks, except for “manor of giving commands,” which was still high, but obviously the primary weakness.\footnote{fitness report 1 apr 1912 – 30 sep 1912 (this fitness report overlaps with previous), ensign kirk given additional marks in seamanship (4.0), gun division officer (4.0), watch and division officer (4.0), and interestingly naval attaché (3.5). his reporting senior was john t. hubbard on wilmington. see also fitness report 1 oct 1912 – 31 mar 1913, ensign kirk, wilmington, french (3.4), watch division officer (3.9s and 4.0s), and fitness report 1 apr 1913 – 30 sep 1913 wilmington french (3.0) and marks 3.8 and 3.9 (no 4.0s), (3.0) in both navigation and piloting. fitness report 1 oct 1913 – 5 nov 1913, wilmington, french is worse at (2.5) and more 3.8s and few 3.9s and no (4.0s). senior is captain hubbard. p/r, box 4.} What should be concluded about Kirk from his two commander’s assessments of the way he commanded enlisted men? Does this mean that there was a certain deficiency or a wrong style to giving orders?
Kirk’s record shows consistency in this regard in later years, and the challenges and successes as a naval officer suggests Kirk’s style of command was indirect and delegatory, not as culturally respectable as the dominant direct and take-charge “A” type characteristic. He was more a Spruance than a Halsey, more a Bradley than a Patton.

Kirk was bookish and was able to feed this bent during a transfer to another ship. In late October 1913, with Wilmington in the yards, Kirk was reassigned to the Saratoga, flagship of the Asiatic Fleet. Saratoga was an old cruiser, originally named New York, launched in 1891. It had been Admiral Sampson’s flagship in the Battle of Santiago the summer of 1898. Transferred to the Asiatic fleet in 1901, she cruised between the Philippine Islands, China and Japan. The draft of the ship limited her range up the Yangtze as far as Hankow. While on a slow watch, Kirk read books. His selection? The American Statesman series, anything on naval history, and everything written by Mahan. He periodically mixed in psychology and philosophy subjects. Significantly, there was another book Kirk devoured, “back and forth and all about.” It was, Kirk recalled, a “new book on how to win the gunnery trophy” and he studied it carefully. His self-guided studies while in Asia had a great influence on his career because it built confidence, broadened his knowledge, and focused his interests. Just as his understanding of the rule book helped lead his high school football team to victory, he used his knowledge of gunnery and the navy’s competitive rule book to win at naval gunnery.

Kirk’s final year on Asiatic station was capped by several developments including sickness, promotion, and war. While hunting in Luzon, Philippines, late in the year 1913, he contracted what was most likely malaria. It was tertian, a type of malaria that causes fever every 18

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19 Kirk, Reminiscences, 39.
second or third day – extending misery to victims. Laid up at the naval hospital in Olongapo for 10 days in mid-January, he was administered 90 grains of quinine and, as he remembered – “I thought my head was going to blow off.” On January 24, 1914, while still recovering, Ensign Kirk certified his annual report of physical exercise. The new policy of monitoring and certifying physical fitness was instituted by Theodore Roosevelt only several years before. By February 8, his doctors could report that the quinine had the fever under control, and so prescribed decreased dosage until he was discharged on February 14.

Kirk’s commanding officer, Commander John H. Dayton, gave him high marks for his performance as gun division officer and watch officer. His highest rating was for neatness and appearance. His manner of giving commands was also rated well. Although still considered good, his lowest mark was associated with “endurance” – perhaps a residual effect of sickness, or simply a differently aligned pace of life. Perhaps the sickness swayed him among other things, but Kirk soured on duty in Asia and indicated his desire for Atlantic duty.

On June 19, 1914, Kirk was promoted to lieutenant (junior grade). Commissions in the Navy are by law appointments by the President of the United States “with the advice and consent of the Senate.” After three years as an Ensign, it was customary to promote. Commander Dayton presented Kirk his promotion appointment and commission.

Kirk, Reminiscences, 38. The disease may have been Dengue, which was reflected in his fitness report. See Memorandum to Commandant US Naval Station Olongapo PI, from US Naval Hospital Olongapo, 18 Jan 1914. Kirk was hospitalized from 8-18 January 1914. P/R, Box 4.
22 Medical history, P/R, Box 3.
23 Fitness Report 6 Nov 1913 – 31 Mar 1914. Ensign Kirk is gun division officer and watch officer on Saratoga. French (3.5), Kirk also asks for Atlantic duty to participate in WWI in Europe; Fitness Report 5 Nov 1913 - 13 Apr 1914, Ensign Kirk aboard Saratoga in Olongapo, PI. French (3.0) and neatness personal dress (4.0) and manner of giving commands lower at (3.7), this report had many 3.7s. and this may be due to being sick 21 days with malaria and dengue. Kirk’s endurance is good (3.0). His senior is Commander John. H Dayton, Saratoga, P/R, Box 4.
24 Memorandum form CO USS Saratoga to Kirk, 23 June 1914, P/R Box 1.
Leaving Asia

Just over a week later, news came of the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and then news of the resulting political catastrophe the following month. The First World War began on July 28, 1914, when Austria declared war on Serbia. The reverberating effects of the assassination, and resulting war, were soon felt in Shanghai. The Austrian cruiser in the harbor, Kirk recalled, “went into mourning” with black draped at the stern. They “held services, and then they disappeared.” The disappearing act was next performed by the German cruiser.

On August 19, 1914, no doubt alarmed at the news in Europe, Kirk’s father sent a letter to Rear Admiral Victor Blue, Bureau of Navigation, Wash. DC. asking when his son “will be detached and ordered home on leave. I understand the service at this station (Asiatic Station) is three years and as he has served the full time, I am looking for his return.” Admiral Blue responded that he should be on his way “as the reliefs for the officers who have completed their cruise on the Asiatic Station are now enroute.”25 After 37 months on the China station (the navy managed to squeeze an extra month out of his time there), Kirk went home for leave, bringing to a close his only Asian tour of duty during his naval career.

Kirk detached from Saratoga September 14, 1914, and transited to Nagasaki, Japan aboard Galveston - sailing on the 16th.26 Then Kirk berthed on a U.S. Army transport bound for San Francisco on September 20. There was again a stopover in Hawaii. When he arrived in San Francisco, not even the preparations for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition slowed his

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progress east on the Overland Limited. He stopped in St. Joseph, Missouri, for a day to visit the parents of his academy friend Fitzhugh Green, who was away on an arctic expedition. He brought him silk pajamas from China. Green became an expert and proponent in artic exploration, writing a biography of famed arctic explorer Richard Byrd for youth published in 1928.

When he arrived in Philadelphia in mid-October, and made his way home to Beverly, Kirk was surprised to find roads into towns blocked by armed men refusing to allow children entry because of the outbreak of polio disease that caused infantile paralysis. “It was a very serious thing,” Kirk recalled, “people were literally up in arms against it.” The disease would periodically cause panic in America for the next four decades, until Jonas Salk, born just a couple of weeks after Kirk’s arrival home, and just up the road in New York, discovered a polio vaccine. What’s more, Kirk witnessed the beginning stages of the Japanese beetle invasion just underway. On a golf outing Kirk found the greens were over run and turned the purple-black color of the invading insects. The tension of war and the outbreak of disease and pestilence clouded his homecoming. Kirk recalled that “the country seemed to be in a perilous state.” But Kirk found respite. He had had no leave since August 1911, and he made the most of the month and a half home. He greatly enjoyed every minute - visiting with family and friends.

28 Kirk, Reminiscences, 42.
30 Kirk, Reminiscences, 43.
31 Sulk was born 28 October 1914 in New York City.
32 Kirk, Reminiscences, 44.
33 Kirk leave request to SECNAV 19 Oct 1914, P/R, Box 1.
34 Memo to Kirk from Bureau of Navigation 7 Jan 1915. Leave was approved from 5 November to 19 December 1914, P/R, Box 1.
Soon Kirk was down to Washington D.C. to negotiate a new assignment. To his surprise he found that his old boss, John H. Dayton, the captain from Saratoga, was in charge of detailing (giving assignments to) officers, and he was warmly received. They discussed options and it was decided he would go to a battleship, the preeminent fighting machine, and the best opportunity, they agreed, for advancement. Dayton was later assigned to the coveted post of commandant of the Washington Navy Yard from 1920 to 1923 and was promoted to flag rank. He proved to be another important connection in Kirk’s career network. Kirk got a coveted assignment to the superdreadnought Utah.35

The Gun Club

Utah was Battleship No. 31, launched December 23, 1909 in Camden, New Jersey. She had a more than a thousand-man crew and a displacement of almost 22,000 tons. With her ten 12” and sixteen 5” guns, she was a gunner’s paradise. While Kirk was assigned, she was, for the most part, employed in battle practice and exercises off the east coast in preparation for possible entry into the war in Europe.36 It is hard to imagine Kirk not specializing in guns. To be a gunnery officer on a large battleship was institutionally sound advice. Certainly, there were those young mavericks who were involved with innovative technologies, as in aircraft and submarines, but Mahanian notions of the primacy of capital ships with dominating firepower and massive fleet engagement held sway in the early twentieth century. The informal yet substantial “gun

“club” seemed to rule over money and promotion in the navy. Besides, of personal significance, Kirk was to continue in the work his uncle and cousin lived and died for. His experience shooting small guns in youth, his early positive experiences in assignments on Kansas and Saratoga, his personal studies of the gun competition rulebook – all pointed to a career in guns.

On December 21, 1914, Lieutenant (junior grade) Kirk reported to Utah, berthed at the New York Navy Yard. He served onboard for two years, and was put in charge of Turret Number 4. Soon after reporting aboard, the ship sailed for Veracruz in southern Mexico, and operated off the coast searching for a German supply ship with arms bound for the dictator Victoriano Huerta. The interception looked to fail, so Utah landed a contingent of sailors and marines to secure port facilities. It was the first of several incursions into Mexico by U.S. forces on the orders of President Woodrow Wilson, the largest coming in 1916 to track down the revolutionary leader “Pancho” Villa. It was an early amphibious experience Kirk observed up close. For his participation, Kirk received the Mexican Service Medal.

Kirk found adapting to Utah’s command leadership “a very shocking experience.” But his new commanding officer and executive officer proved highly beneficial for his professional growth. The captain, Albert Gleaves, was a strict disciplinarian. It is reasonable to believe Gleaves’ significant influence on three of Kirk’s follow-on assignments – the bulk of his mid-career. Gleaves had helped develop the Ordinance Proving Ground and commanded the presidential yacht Mayflower when it was put into service in 1902. Kirk soon served in both

37 Thomas C. Hone and Trent Hone, Battline: The United States Navy 1919-1939 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 33, 68, 177.
39 Kirk, Reminiscences, 46.
40 Kirk letter to SECNAV 30 Dec 1914 from New York NY aboard Utah, P/R, Box 1. Neither Kirk or his captain, Albert Gleaves, makes any more mention of the campaign in Veracruz in their oral history – as if it was not important to them.
41 Kirk, Reminiscences, 46.
organizations. In addition, Gleaves saw Kirk’s strength as administrator when he was assigned additional duty as division secretary – assisting Gleaves in his commodore role responsible for a group of ships. Kirk was like a flag secretary. “The duty of this officer as Secretary to Division Commander” Gleaves wrote in Kirk’s fitness report, “was excellently performed. He has all the qualifications for Flag officer’s staff.” 42 Gleaves was observant and prescient. Kirk later served on multiple flag officer staffs with distinction. Gleaves was promoted to flag rank after leaving the Utah and was given command of the fleet in Asia, before retiring and authoring a book, Life and Letters of Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce, U.S. Navy, Founder of the Naval War College, published in 1925. Gleaves also wrote a memoir, recording his time on Utah as “brief and uneventful.” 43

The executive officer, Frank H. Clark, did not suffer any foolishness. He was, according to Kirk, “very wise and acute” and “one of the most exact, precise minds it was ever my good luck to associate with.” 44 Clark wanted his subordinates to think and reason out problems and solve them, and Kirk credited him for modeling effective leadership qualities. If an officer asked a question that was in their power to find out for themselves, then Clark was “a little disdainful.” 45 This motivated the officers of Utah to solve problems and take responsibility.

Week after week, Kirk and Utah’s crew trained and exercised along the eastern seaboard and as far south as Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, preparing for the possibility of war, which became significantly more likely with the submarine torpedo attack and sinking of the Lusitania on May 7, 1915. With this news, the ship came back to New York at the end of May. Kirk does not

44 Kirk, Reminiscences, 45.
mention the Lusitania in his oral history, suggesting he discovered its importance sometime later. Kirk took ten days leave home to Beverly from May 31 to June 9, 1915.  

Kirk learned tremendously while aboard Utah – gaining significant experience. In addition to his primary roles as gun division officer and watch officer, and performing additional duty as division secretary (completing staff work for Gleaves who was commodore over several ships), he was also the ship’s first lieutenant (over deck division – the ship’s largest) for about six months during the fall and winter of 1915 to 1916. As first lieutenant, Kirk focused on ship handling. During his Utah tour, Kirk continued to hone his expertise in guns and attended a class in ordinance at the developing postgraduate school at Annapolis. He also completed a newly developed correspondence course with the Naval War College. Implemented in 1913, the Navy War College correspondence course replaced the on-site two-week elementary course that was determined too difficult and disruptive to administer. The course was designed to give officers an introduction to War College studies at their duty stations in the fleet and Kirk was hooked and in his element.

Kirk also applied to a special “Ordnance Class,” made up of a handful of junior officers specializing in naval ordnance. “In the eyes of the gunnery people, it was sort of a corps d’élite,” remembered Kirk. Those chosen were provided a thorough course on the subject, including familiarization with the entire production process with tours of the various plants involved - steelmaking, armor powder, and projectile plants for example. In the end he was not chosen. However, his deep disappointment in not being selected was quickly replaced by “great

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46 Leave Request slip N. Nav. 296, dated 21 June 1915, P/R, Box 1.
49 Kirk, Reminiscences, 46.
gratification” with news his nomination was approved for assignment to the Naval Proving Ground at Indian Head, Maryland. Opened in 1890 by Rear Admiral Montgomery Sicard, a great supporter of research and development and innovators like Washington Chambers, the ordnance proving ground was an ordnance man’s great opportunity to build professional knowledge and network for career advancement. 

**Experienced Expert in Guns**

At the end of April 1916, Kirk detached from *Utah* upon its’ arrival in Charleston, South Carolina for a port visit, and he proceeded north to Indian Head, Maryland, as inspector of ordnance in charge, also known as proof and experimental officer. Here he served for the remainder of the Great War. Located about 20 miles downriver from Washington D.C., the proving ground was the Bureau of Ordnance’s center of testing. The secretive and secluded base was only accessible by ferry tugboat. Staff worked long hours and into the weekends. “So we

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50 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 47. Leave Request slip N. Nav 296, dated 3 Nov 1915, P/R, Box 1. Lieutenant (junior grade) Kirk request 5 days leave from *Utah* from 29 Oct 1915 - 2 Nov 1915. On 2 Nov 1915 Kirk gets word he is to transfer to the Naval Proving Ground. Navy Dept. Radio Message 16 Nov 1915, P/R, Box 1. This message shows on November 16, 1915, Kirk was assigned as member of general court-martial at New York Navy Yard but his orders were revoked/cancelled and he found out about the same time he would go to the Naval Proving Ground at Indian Head. He was also able to take leave for Christmas from *Utah* 22-26 Dec 1915.


52 Letter from Josephus Daniels to Kirk 18 Mar 1916, P/R, Box 2. See also Memo from Naval Proving Ground to Navy Department 22 April 1916, P/R, Box 2. This directed Kirk to, on 15 April 1916, proceed to Indian Head as Inspector of Ordnance in Charge. Kirk was at Naval Proving Ground on 22 April 1916.

53 Memo to Lieutenant (junior grade) Kirk from Josephus Daniels 15 May 1916, P/R, Box 2. On 15 May 1916, Josephus Daniels signs detaching orders for Kirk to detach from *Utah* to Indian Head. “This employment on shore is required by the public interests.” Kirk was ordered to Naval Proving Ground at Indian Head, Maryland, as proof and experimental officer (or Inspector of Ordnance in Charge). Here he would serve the remainder of World War I. See also a press release information form filled out by Kirk 1 December 1937, P/R, Box 2.
were pretty well immolated,” according to Kirk with a flair of combustion lingo. He threw himself into the work.54

His job, initially as Assistant Proof Officer, included precisely measuring the amount of powder for each test of various guns, up to 14-inch at the time, combined with types of projectiles and armor plating. Careful calibration of pressure for various velocities – for ranging, and proving at low, service and above proof and proof velocities – up to twenty tons per square inch – all were Kirk’s responsibility.55 Kirk impressed his boss, the Inspector of Ordnance in Charge, who thought he “showed strong positive character” and “displayed considerable ability in picking up his new duties quickly.”56 Soon Kirk had a new boss, Commander Ralph Earle, who found Kirk to be “an officer above the average in all respects.” Earle, soon to promote to Rear Admiral and become Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance would remain an integral part in the Kirk gun-professional network.57

It was a dangerous business, made even more lethal with the wide-ranging innovations that had to be tested. Submarine and airplane technology was advancing rapidly, and so too the ordnance they used – early types of torpedoes and depth charges for example. The “Clark Bomb” was designed to be dropped from an aircraft into the water and sink to submarine operating depth before exploding – an early depth charge. Early in 1917, a tragedy led directly to Kirk taking on increased responsibility. Kirk knew his immediate boss, Luther Welch, the proof officer, from the academy. He was a small man, close to 5 foot 3 inches – barely large enough to qualify for service. Because of his small stature he took the place of the man that was sent from Washington to fly as observer because he was too heavy for the aircraft. The flight turned fatal. An

54 Kirk, Reminiscences, 47.
55 Ibid., 48.
investigation revealed that the airflow from the aircraft propellers rotated the bomb propellers during the initial stages of flight – thus arming the bomb. As the plane flew over the target the bomb immediately exploded upon release just feet away from the plane – killing Welch and the pilot. Kirk immediately assumed the proof officer duties. Now as proof officer, Kirk was up for promotion to full lieutenant in April 1917, the same month America joined the war in Europe.58

The war brought an immediate challenge for the Proving Ground. Mongolia, a troop and supply ship, left New York for Europe mid-May. During the crossing, the crew began target practice with their 6-inch gun, and on the third shot, a piece of brass flew into a stanchion and killed two nurses.59 The gun was an older type that had a brass cover surrounding the cartridge case. There was a public uproar and immediate congressional interest. Political pressure intensified when it was learned that the Raleigh Iron Works in North Carolina made the shells, and Josephus Daniels, the Secretary of the Navy, being from North Carolina, came under suspicion as personally responsible for the defective shells. It fell to Kirk to investigate - and quickly - with “everybody screaming for me to get this thing done.”60 After several months of testing and significant expenditure, Kirk found the culprit, a “certain set of fuses bought from a certain company” that were overly “tender” in reaction with the brass cover.61 Kirk did not specify the company, but it was evidently not from North Carolina, as Kirk’s inquiry did not implicate Daniels in any way and nothing became of the matter.

58 Memo to Navy Examining Board 5 April 1917, P/R, Box 2.
59 Naval History and Heritage Command, “United States Navy and World War I: 1914-1922,” accessed 26 Apr 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-world-war-i-redirect.html. Some accounts say the nurses, Clara Ayres and Helen Wood, were the first two women killed serving in the US military although this reference describes them as Red Cross.
60 Kirk, Reminiscences, 55.
61 Ibid. Kirk did not specify the company, but it was evidently not from North Carolina as Kirk’s inquiry did not implicate Daniels in wrongdoing in any way and nothing became of the matter.
Kirk’s most impressive tests, however, came with the introduction of the first 16-inch gun – “and golly, that was quite an affair.” The massive 2000-pound shell could not be stopped with even the most hardened armor plate. “It went through everything, going end over end, chug chug chug chug, down to where everybody was living.” Suddenly the firing range was too small. It amazed Kirk and his crew – 16-inch shells were a new level of destructive power, going through anything, and they were concerned that shrapnel from testing various armor plating would injure people far afield - even in nearby housing. For a time, Kirk had to clear the entire area of people when testing - about once a week. That summer, on June 22, 1917, Kirk received appointment as full lieutenant.

There was a war on and with all production and testing increasing, in the early fall of 1917, Lieutenant Kirk travelled extensively on an inspection and observation tour. On September 24, Kirk witnessed experimental firing at the Army Proving Ground at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. At the end of October he went on an inspection tour to Philadelphia, Cape May, Goshen and May’s Landing, in New Jersey and then back to Reddington PA before ending in Washington D.C. “in connection with inspection of the Proving Grounds belonging to the Bethlehem Steel Company.” All this touring made Kirk feel as if he was missing out on the action. So, during the tour, Kirk forwarded a letter to his commanding officer, H.E. Lackey, in which he “urgently requests to be ordered to sea duty” in an assignment to “any vessel operating in the war-zone.” Lackey forwarded the request “regretting the possibility of seeing this officer detached…” and in his endorsement, Lackey noted that “both as Proof Officer and later as

62 Kirk, Reminiscences, 56.
63 Memo slip from Kirk to Bureau of Navigation on 24 July 1917, P/R, Box 1. Promotion was to start from 5 June 1917. This while at Naval Proving Ground, Indian Head Maryland. H.E. Lackey was commanding officer. See also Memo from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 22 June 1917, P/R, Box 1.
64 Memo from Bureau of Ordnance to Bureau of Navigation 24 September 1917, P/R, Box 2.
65 Memo from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 2 Oct 1917, P/R, Box 2.
Experimental Officer, Lieutenant Kirk’s work has been of the highest order and his loss will be felt very keenly at this Station.” Lackey further insisted that a replacement officer be sent to learn about Kirk’s duties “for there is no officer here who can be spared to take over his work, and it is of too great importance to leave again without a special officer in charge of it.” The request package for sea duty was approved up to the Secretary of the Navy’s office where it stopped in December 1917. The Chief of the Bureau of Ordinance would only approve if a relief was available. There wasn’t, and the response was swift – request denied because there was no relief available.

**Lydia**

To close out the year Kirk attended his pal Theodore Wilkinson’s birthday party in Washington. Wilkinson was a classmate of the same age who worked at the Bureau of Ordnance Experimental Desk. While at the party Kirk was introduced to 21-year-old Lydia Selden Chapin, and they began a “rather difficult courtship, because” Kirk said, “I was immured at Indian Head like a monk in a monastery.” But they had help. Commander Rolston Holmes and Harvey Bundy, and their wives, provided chaperone and hosting services over the course of the next nine months. While Kirk had met Lydia’s father, Captain Frederic L. Chapin, naval attaché’

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66 First endorsement to request letter 22 Nov 1917, second endorsement 7 Dec 1917, Kirk request letter dated 16 Nov 1917, P/R, Box 2. Leadership went out of their way to try – even naming possible replacements in the endorsement memo. But none had willing bosses to let them go to replace Kirk.

67 Memo from Kirk to SECNAV Bureau of Navigation 18 Dec 1917, P/R, Box 2.

68 Memo to Kirk from Bureau of Ordnance 11 dec 1917, P/R, Box 2. Asking for orders to get into action was not unusual – it could boost a career. Disapproval also did not seem unusual. For example, the Navy “plucked” Captain Washington Chambers and kept him in research, administration, and retirement at home. See Stephen Stein, *From Torpedoes to Aviation*, 184-189.

69 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 61. Wilkinson was a WWII Admiral in the Pacific after relieving Kirk as Director of Naval Intelligence in 1941. The party was probably on December 22, 1918. Wilkinson’s 29th birthday. Kirk had turned 29 two months earlier.

70 Ibid. Harvey Bundy’s son McGeorge would become National Security advisor in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Lydia was born in 1896.
in France in 1910, he learned that he had died four years later, soon after becoming ill while
serving as the first commanding officer of *Wyoming*.71 Lydia’s younger brother, Selden Chapin
was a midshipman at the Naval Academy. Selden graduated with the class of 1919 and follow
his father’s interest in foreign affairs, later becoming a foreign service officer - rising to the rank
of Ambassador to The Netherlands in 1949.

One night, soon after he was back at Indian Head, Kirk fell in a hole while returning from
a fire demonstration, suffering a contusion in his lower left chest, and causing enough pain to
prompt a visit to medical the next day.72 He was back in the hospital with tonsillitis on February
1, 1918, the same day he accepted a temporary appointment request to be promoted to lieutenant
commander. His inflamed, painful throat came at the start of what turned out to be a two-year
ordeal of a terrible influenza pandemic that targeted young men of fighting age around the world.
In Kirk’s case, he returned to duty three days later and seemingly skipped the remainder of the
flu pandemic.73

Although a war assignment was out, Kirk managed to return to sea the following month -
even if it was only on temporary travel orders. This time it was to the *Mississippi* to observe gun
firing tests in the Caribbean. The battleship *Mississippi* was newly commissioned in December
1917.74 His old boss, Ralph Earle, now Chief of the Bureau of Ordinance requested he be added
to the examination board since he was “present at the battery tests of the *Mississippi* and was

71 U.S. Naval Institute, “The Ships of the United States Navy,” accessed 26 April 2023,
https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1915/july/ships-united-states-navy. See section on *Wyoming*. Captain
Chapin died December 19, 1913.
72 Medical treatment history summary 17 Aug 1921, P/R, Box 3.
73 Ibid.
74 Memo for Chief of Bureau of Navigation 2 Mar 1918, P/R, Box 3. This was Temporary Duty Orders dated 2
March 1918 from Naval Proving Ground to *Mississippi*. See Naval History and Heritage Command, “Dictionary of
intimately concerned with them.” Commander Ralston Holmes and several others that made up the team went with Kirk down to the ship’s practice area in the Gulf of Guacanayabo, on Cuba’s south coast. Holmes and Kirk developed a lasting friendship. On this trip they would primarily test her guns for “dispersion” or scattering – the precision of shells. The Mississippi’s guns had dispersion problems and the team was to discover why. Kirk’s job was “to lay the angle of the gun by a quadrant sitting on the gun itself and get it to the precise angle which we wanted.”

There was a civilian expert, “Dr. Curtis, who was a dear man,” Kirk recalled, who one day on the bridge thought that a problem’s solution involved “simple harmonic motion” but he but could not recall the equation. “At which point,” Kirk remembered, “a young man who was assistant navigator of the ship said, ‘Sir, I think I can write it for you.’ He wrote it down, and Dr. Curtis looked at it, and looked at him, and said, ‘You’re right, my boy, you’re right!’” He was Roger Lowell Putnam, and Kirk was so impressed with his math skills, and also thought him an “awfully nice fellow,” that he arranged for him to transfer to the Proving Ground to be his assistant. Even this early in his career, it was evident that an important characteristic of Kirk was to seek out quality assistants and staff – and pull strings to achieve this result. Indeed, Kirk got Putnam, who was a mathematics major from Harvard, detached from Mississippi and assigned to him at the Proving Ground. He and Putnam “became warm friends and,” said Kirk, “it’s been quite a joy to me all my life.”

75 Letter of request from Bureau of Ordinance to Chief of Naval Operations 27 Apr 1918, CNO approval response dated 4 May 1918, P/R, Box 3. Kirk was officially appointed by the Chief of Naval Operations in early May to serve on the Board to Conduct Battery Tests on the Mississippi.
76 Kirk, Reminiscences, 58.
77 Ibid., 59, 60.
78 Ibid. Putnam left the naval service and become mayor of Springfield Massachusetts and later ran for governor and lieutenant governor – unsuccessfully (contrary to what Kirk remembered in his oral history, although he may have been thinking of a primary election victory.) Later Putnam re-joined Kirk on his staff in World War II in Europe.
Promotion, Marriage, and Peace

Because Kirk served in a position that merited higher rank and authority, his seniors requested he be awarded temporary promotion, which was effectively limited to wearing the rank without pay. On March 9, 1918, Kirk received final approval for his temporary appointment to lieutenant commander in a memo from the Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels with the beginning date of rank recorded as 1 February 1918.79 Lackey, Commander, Inspector of Ordinance in Charge, officially pinned him a month later. He was lieutenant only one year.80 The summer of 1918 was a quick succession of tests and inspections and tours. In early July, Lieutenant Commander Kirk was sent on temporary duty to Wilmington Delaware “in connection with Flashless Powder Experiments.”81 In early August, he traveled to Newport, Rhode Island, Naval Torpedo Station to observe and study “the loading of aero bombs.”82

Then Kirk took a break. He and Lydia were married on September 14, 1918 in her family’s hometown of Erie, Pennsylvania.83 Kirk changed his next of kin and home of record from his father and childhood home in Beverly, New Jersey to wife Lydia Chapin Kirk, and her mothers’ residence at 238 West 6th Street, Erie, Pennsylvania.84 Lydia came to live with Kirk at Indian Head for the remaining months of his tour.

Then the Great War, the one that was said to end all wars, ended on November 11, 1918. His career and personal life were developing well. Kirk was promoted to the mid-grade ranks, married, and became a recognized gunnery expert who had experimented with the most

79 Temporary appointment memo to Kirk from SECNAV 9 Mar 1918, P/R, Box 1.
80 Acceptance of appointment and oath of office memo From No. 96. from Kirk to SECNAV 24 Apr 1918, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was “pinned” on 24 Apr 1918 at Naval Proving Ground Indian Head MD.
81 Memo from Bureau of Ordinance to Bureau of Navigation 11 July 1918, PR, Box 2.
82 Travel order request memo for Chief of Bureau of Navigation 5 Aug 1918, P/R, Box 2. Quote taken from travel order request.
83 Vital statistics form 1 December 1937, P/R, Box 1.
84 Letter to Bureau of Navigation to request “change of next of kin and usual residence” 14 Sep 1918, P/R, Box 1.
advanced guns and armor. On December 10, Kirk traveled on temporary duty orders to Princeton University from Indian Head to deliver a lecture on naval ordinance to the Naval Unit there (ROTC).\textsuperscript{85} On December 23, 1918, the Inspector of Ordnance in Charge, Naval Proving Ground, Kirk’s boss, received a “commendatory letter” from Admiral Ralph Earle, Kirks’ old boss and now head of the Bureau of Ordnance. He expressed the Bureau’s “high appreciation of the loyalty, energy and efficiency which has been so apparent in the prosecution of the work at these stations during the war.” Earle recognized they had been “operating at the highest pressure and under the most difficult, and even disappointing, conditions, and that they have been denied the privilege, which all eagerly desired, of participating in actual combat with the enemy…” and they “contributed to the victorious conclusion of the conflict.” The letter continued, “You and the officers and men of your organization are warranted in feeling proud of the part that all have taken in this war against the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires.”\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{85} Memo from Bureau of Ordnance to Bureau of Navigation 9 Dec 1918, P/R, Box 2.
\textsuperscript{86} Letter to Inspector of Ordnance in Charge Naval Proving Ground from Chief of Bureau of Ordnance 23 Dec 1918, P/R, Box 2.
Chapter 3

Flexibility and Adaptability: Interwar Years

After World War I, Lieutenant Commander Alan Goodrich Kirk now embarked on mid-career assignments that included increased specialization in gunnery, more responsibility in department head, executive officer, and commanding officer roles, and significant experience in the navy bureaucracy and education centers. His involvement in these positions was characterized by his interests and abilities in diplomacy and staff work. He also continued to build and rely on his professional network in obtaining coveted jobs.

Proceedings Magazine

Before he departed Indian Head in the late spring of 1919, Kirk had to complete new range tables. The Bureau of Ordnance would not let him transfer without resolution in this important task. The old tables were largely based on rudimentary Russian formulas of two decades earlier. Essentially the problem was that the bigger more powerful guns used in World War I proved inaccurate. As is the case in much of military history, the new technology outran the methods to use the new technology. Academics from the University of Chicago had developed a more robust formula. It was left to Kirk to interpret the professor’s notes and specifications and explain it for wider naval use. “I had to put my mind to that in a large and hefty way,” Kirk recalled. He published his report in two Proceedings articles. As the premier professional naval publication, Proceedings began in 1874 as the journal of the U.S. Naval

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1 Kirk, Reminiscences, 62.
2 Ibid.
Institute, founded the preceding year. By the time of Kirk’s articles, published in August 1919 and November 1920, *Proceedings* was focused on lessons learned from the Great War. Articles ranged from the news commentary of angry German reactions to what many considered dishonorable peace terms, to a review of the use of airships or dirigibles in countering the German submarine. Kirk’s articles, “Trajectories and Their Corrections” and “New Methods of Exterior Ballistic Computation” were the more heavily technical contributions in these issues. It is unlikely that anyone but the most devout gunners would have the fortitude to review and understand them. In them he summarizes the recent history of method and calculation developments, shortcomings and modifications in the physics involved, all expressed with algebraic and trigonometric terms, along with calculus – the mathematics of motion. In essence, Kirk provided an updated method for computing trajectories for long range ballistics.

“During the war just ended,” wrote Kirk, “it soon became evident that modern high-powered guns would be fired at elevations considerably in excess of those formally used.” At the beginning of the war, wrote Kirk:

The calculation of the path of a projectile was performed by the method developed by Siacci. In America his method was modified in certain particular by Prof. P.R. Alger, U.S.N., and by Major J. M. Ingalls, U.S.A. Essentially, it consisted of simple analytical equations, requiring a single operation for the solution of the entire trajectory. To accomplish this result it was necessary to replace certain of the variables with constants which represented their best mean values. The two factors of the ballistic coefficient which most affect the accuracy of that expression are: First, the constant of integration and second, the altitude factor…

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A salty read indeed – delving into “the reciprocal of the ballistic coefficient” with plenty of integrals, logarithm, and square of this and that, and double interpolation. But Kirk showed his mastery of the technical and tied them to practical uses based on recent events in war – a fine display of the well-rounded nature of the early 20th century professional. Kirk’s efforts, together with the officers who took over his duties at the Proving Ground, revolutionized the calculations and range tables.5

Kirk also found time for increasingly varied and eclectic reading at Indian Head. Not only did he pursue scientific, mathematical, and historical subjects, he developed a greater love for cultural works as well. His Aunt Sally, who came for several visits with Uncle Fred, brought him Taine’s History of English Literature and other works of cultural repute, like Shakespeare.6 He also continued to study French.7

When Kirk finally received orders to detach from Indian Head on April 23, 1919, the Great War had been over for months and the de-mobilization and disregard for the war professions was in full swing. Funding for operating navy ships quickly became scarce.8 Enlistments ended and fewer were interested in joining the navy.9 Kirk’s career disappointment came quick, but not before there was a mix of personal worry and joy. Lydia, who was eight months pregnant, slipped and fell as she was walking to the dock to depart Indian Head, and Captain Lackey, the Inspector of Ordnance, who witnessed it, “was horrified thinking that some

5 Kirk, Reminiscences, 63.
7 Kirk, Reminiscences, 64.
8 Ibid., 67.
9 Ibid., 68.
disastrous result might occur” on the boat up to Washington.\textsuperscript{10} Lydia returned to Erie, and to everyone’s relief, their daughter Marian, was born in July without complication.\textsuperscript{11}

**Post-War Draw-Down**

Reporting to *Connecticut* as gunnery officer in early May, Lieutenant Commander Kirk discovered his ship was to be focused on transport duties – gunnery was secondary. In fact, during the years 1919 to 1922, Kirk held various gunnery officer and assistant gunnery officer positions in not only *Connecticut*, but also *North Dakota* and *Arizona*, and his experience on these ships was remembered more for the good sports teams they fielded than the improvements of weapon systems and training. For several days in late October 1919, Kirk was asked to give a lecture at the Naval Academy and help with updates to the ordinance and gunnery course. Kirk readily agreed to this special temporary duty – not the last time he found himself lecturing at the Academy on critical changes.\textsuperscript{12}

*Connecticut*, Battleship No. 18, launched in 1904, had been the flagship of the Great White Fleet, and during World War I, was a training ship in Chesapeake Bay for midshipmen and merchant marine sailors. She made four trips to France during the first half of 1919 to bring home troops after the war. *Connecticut* was beyond prime, of pre-Dreadnaught vintage. Her old 12-inch guns were a major step down from the cutting-edge 16-inch ones Kirk was exposed to. It was just as well that she was essentially a transport ship.\textsuperscript{13} So, with a minimal crew, Kirk and the ship made the trip to Brest, France to pick up a load of soldiers for the return home. Kirk got

\textsuperscript{10} Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 65.
\textsuperscript{11} Record of Dependents, Bureau of Ordinance 10 July 1923, P/R, Box 1. Marian Kirk (daughter) born 7 (or 5 on beneficiary form in 1945, P/R, Box 3) July 1919.
\textsuperscript{12} Letter from Superintendent, US Naval Academy to Chief of Bureau of Navigation 22 October 1919, P/R Box 2.
off to Paris again and even toured the front positions of battle trenches. Then he returned to a “pretty dam miserable” jam-packed ship. But when Connecticut returned to the Philadelphia yards, Kirk got up to Erie to see is newborn daughter.

Connecticut was soon scheduled to be scrapped by the end of 1923 to comply with the Washington Treaty for naval arms limitation. The irony of these years was that the navy was preparing for a major period of growth – called for in the Naval Expansion Act of 1916. Kirk expected 10 new battleships, with the most advanced weapons, to be built after the war. But in the spirit of making “The Great War” the “War to End All Wars,” and saving money after such expense during World War I, the naval powers agreed to limit capital ship programs. Even before the time the Washington Treaty was signed on February 6, 1922, many naval officers were confronted with a murky future career path.

Professionally, it was an unsatisfactory period. Kirk felt his assignments stagnating. Fleet readiness, opportunity for advancement and training, were in decline. The low came when reporting in January 1920 to Arizona as the ship’s senior gunnery officer. Arizona, Battleship No 39, launched in 1915, had the more respectable armament of twelve 14-inch guns. She had patrolled off the Atlantic coast in World War I and had escorted President Wilson to France in December 1918. But upon arrival, Kirk discovered he was to be only assistant fire control officer. Interestingly, the Captain was John Dalton, his old skipper from Saratoga and the man who was instrumental in getting him started as a gunnery expert. Why Dalton felt he had to make

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14 Kirk, Reminiscences, 65, 66.
15 Ibid., 67.
Kirk essentially the assistant gunnery officer, an obvious step down from where he was qualified, is not known specifically. But there were simply too many officers and not enough positions. For his part, Kirk had nothing but positive to say about his experience with Dalton and Arizona. “We had a lot of bright boys on the Arizona,” Kirk remembered. “She was a wonderful ship. We had a good football team, baseball team and things like that.” He met and befriended the plotting room officer, D. P. Moon, who later served under him in Normandy. But because of the limited nature of his responsibilities and inactivity of the ship’s routine, he became hopelessly bored.

The slow pace did have one interruption. It seems the Bureau of Ordnance still required his assistance. Kirk was ordered to report to Lebanon operating near Cuba for “additional duty in connection with experimental firing on the Brazilian Battleship, Sao Paulo.” Lebanon, a collier launched in 1894, had been used in the Spanish American War. She was engaged in target towing and repair after World War I. But Kirk was restless and susceptible to a change in direction – an interlude to his gun career. An opportunity immediately presented itself. His friend, Commander Ralston Holmes, had just taken an assignment as captain of the Mayflower, and he asked Kirk to be his executive officer. Kirk agreed. “I thought that that might be a nice break in life, and so I decided to take it,” Kirk recalled.

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18 Kirk, Reminiscences, 67. Bureau of Navigation to Kirk. 23 Dec 1919, P/R, Box 2. The order says for Kirk to on 24 Dec 1919 detach from Connecticut and reported to Arizona as Assistant Fire Control Officer. The ship operated out of New York, drilling in the Caribbean just after Kirk’s departure, and she became flagship of Battleship Division on 7 August 1920.
19 Kirk, Reminiscences, 78. Moon was in command of the UTAH landings in Normandy and later committed suicide with a pistol during preparation for the invasion of southern France in August 1944.
20 Ibid., 68.
21 Letter from Bureau of Navigation to CINC Atlantic Fleet 24 Jan 1920, P/R Box 2. Orders for temp duty.
23 Kirk, Reminiscences, 68.
“rather scornful of this idea of leaving an active battleship and going to ‘the royal yacht,’ as we used to call it,” recalled Kirk. In addition, and understandably, Captain Dalton thought it a bad idea and so “delayed quite a while” signing his transfer orders. Goodrich and Dalton’s perspective may be considered limited as they had yet to experience a major force draw-down, and their view could not have been that of a post-war junior officer. It was an unusual time – the post war. Kirk judged it was the right decision and persisted. He finally detached Arizona at the beginning of May 1920 and reported to Mayflower as executive officer and navigator.\(^2^4\)

**YOTUS**

*Mayflower II (PY-1)* was a steam powered yacht built in 1896 in Scotland. She was purchased by the Navy in March 1898 from the estate of Ogden Goelet, a wealthy businessman and yachtsman from Newport, Rhode Island. The ship was immediately put into action in the Spanish American War and she served as Admiral Dewey’s flagship in 1902. In 1904, she was converted into the presidential yacht. In the late summer of 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt hosted the Russian and Japanese delegations onboard for peace negotiations to end the Russo-Japanese War – gaining the president the Nobel Peace Prize.\(^2^5\) Kirk remembered she had a leaky wrought iron hull and was slow at 12 to 14 knots. But the luxury vessel was “very pleasant at

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\(^2^4\) Memorandum of Record of Service 28 July 1921, P/R, Box 1. Received orders 23 Dec 1919, to report 4 January 1920 to Arizona and May 1920 to Mayflower. Kirk’s role was as executive officer and navigator aboard Mayflower, Washington DC, under the command of R. S. Holmes. Press Release form with personal information submitted 1 Dec 1937, P/R, Box 1. On 17 May 1920 Kirk received orders to detach from Arizona to report to Mayflower as Executive Officer. Letter from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 7 May 1920, P/R, Box 2. Kirk detached from Arizona 15 May 1920 and proceeded to assignment on Mayflower. See N. Nav SP form 17 May 1920, P/R Box 2.

sea” and the presidential quarters was “sumptuous and nice.” It was a pampered life with parties, an orchestra, and staff and servants for the Presidential quarters. “Quite nice,” Kirk recalled.26

Although it was rumored that Wilson had dated his second wife Edith onboard the ship, at Kirk’s arrival in July 1920, the president was ill, and he never visited the ship berthed at the Navy Yard in Washington. So early in Kirk’s tour, the ship rarely left the pier except for several times when an “important person” needed to go for ceremonial visits to Mt. Vernon. In mid-September, Kirk took advantage of the slow pace to take a couple of weeks leave to Erie, Pennsylvania, to his wife and daughter.27

Kirk returned to the ship and got settled in with his personal effects - just in time for them to be destroyed. The fire was largely contained in the officer’s quarters, but it “smoked up a lot of things” since it consisted of woodwork. That gave cause for an overhaul in Norfolk that coincided with the coming of the new president, Warren G. Harding. It was performed, according to Kirk, “in a very nice way.”28 The fire, which erupted about 10:00 am on December 28, 1920, cost Kirk primarily his uniforms and books. The resulting claim he submitted for reimbursement included his blue and white service dress uniforms and connected items such as ties and hats, a sword, and a tennis racquet. He also listed books on naval gunnery, numerous books on explosives and engineering, Watsons’ Physics, Remsen’s Chemistry, Algebra by Hall & Knight, Calculus by Rice & Johnson, and Plain and Spherical Trigonometry by Chauvert. Kirk also lost Military Policy by Upton, both volumes of Psychology by James, and material for a

26 Kirk, Reminiscences, 69.
27 Beneficiary Slip, N. Nav. 521 Jun 1920, P/R, Box 2. Kirk listed his sister Dorothy Whitney Kirk of Beverly New Jersey as secondary beneficiary. Wife Lydia lives at 238 West 6th St., Erie PA. They had one daughter at the time, Marian. Leave slips N. Nav 296, P/R, Box 2. Kirk is on leave from Mayflower 11-22 Sep 1920. Earlier that summer he took days of leave periodically. Leave address was 238 West 6th Steet Erie PA. He and Lydia may have traveled in Canada. Memo Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 3 Sep 1920, P/R, Box 2. Permission given 9 Sep 1920 by Bureau of Navigation to leave country to go to Canada.
28 Kirk, Reminiscences, 69, 70.
Spanish language course. Most of these Kirk had obtained in recent assignments, but the books he had from the beginning of his career were religious – his boyhood Bible, Communion Prayer Book, and Hymnal.29 The total claim was for $476.10.30

“Harding used the ship a great deal,” Kirk recalled, “In fact, in his first twelve months in office he was on the Mayflower enough days to total four out of the twelve months.”31 The ship hosted numerous dignitaries such as key lawmakers and businessmen for trips around Chesapeake Bay and up the coast to as far as New England. One trip had the President arrive at Plymouth Rock Massachusetts aboard the Mayflower during the 300th Anniversary celebrations. Another trip was to an exhibition in New York, which Kirk described as “most diverting.” The President, said Kirk, “wanted to anchor off Atlantic City and go ashore and see the bathing beauty contest.”32 It was the first year of what became known as the Miss America Pageant. It began in Atlantic City on the boardwalk, sponsored by the local newspapers as an attempt to draw tourists to remain longer into the fall.33 The contest judgments among the readership were to be based on personality and social graces among the contestants called “Inter-City Beauties.” The winner would get an all-expenses paid trip to Atlantic City’s Second Annual Fall Frolic as honored guest.34

Leaving Mrs. Harding in New York, the ship got underway and anchored off the New Jersey coast. “Everybody was scared to death,” remembered Kirk, because “the President insisted that he go ashore at 9 o’clock at night, in the dark, in this little boat (ship’s whaleboat),

29 Claim for Reimbursement for Personal Property Lost in a Marine Disaster S. and A. Form No. 377, P/R, Box1.
30 First endorsement on claim 3 Jan 1921, P/R, Box 1. Mayflower was then at Navy Yard, Norfolk, VA.
31 Kirk, Reminiscences, 70.
32 Ibid.
33 See “Miss America” accessed 27 April 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Miss-America-Pageant. In 1923 over seventy women competed attracting three hundred thousand attendees. Results aired on radio nationwide. See also “Miss America: A History,” accessed 27 April 2023, https://www.missamerica.org/history/. Atlantic City business leaders host “Fall Frolic” to attract tourists to off-month of September.
through the surf, up on the sand.” Kirk advised Holmes, “Captain, this is something we just can’t risk…we’ve never practiced going through the surf in this (whale)boat, and in the night; although the sea’s very calm, there’s always surf on the beach, and I just don’t think we can do this.” Kirk knew that “the President was displeased, but he accepted the verdict of the people responsible for his life, and we went merrily on our way.”

It seems unlikely that a president known for his enjoyment of parties and his ample use of the yacht would not provide Kirk with a fair amount of “sea stories,” but here Kirk’s repertoire is rather limited. On another memorable occasion Harding and Holmes went ashore in New York for formal events after Mayflower anchored off 96th street. Nearby, tied up at a pier, was the old wooden Civil War era steamship Vermont. The Vermont was ignited in flames, recalled Kirk, after “somebody in a coal-fired steam launch heaved over the side some ashes from the firebox in which there were live coals. On the surface of the water there was a lot of oil slop and this and that, and it caught fire.” Vermont was engulfed and threatened explosion and the pier caught fire. Kirk and the crew had to act fast to move Mayflower to safety to berthing at 72nd Street – just in time to satisfy Holmes, who was delayed ashore in switching cloths for another formal occasion with the President.

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35 Kirk, Reminiscences, 71.
36 Ibid.
37 Prohibition begins in January 1920 and lasts until 1933. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels was Democrat who helped elect Wilson. The teetotaler Daniels ordered all alcohol banned from naval vessels, yards and stations under General Order No.99 from July 1, 1914. Perhaps because Harding preferred the less official (and Mayflower was the essence of official), the ill-timed (for a partying Commander-in-Chief) start of Prohibition, or just the simple reluctance on Kirk’s part to engage in gossipy tell-all, or a combination of these, Kirk later regaled us with only a couple stories.
38 Kirk, Reminiscences, 72.
Near the Great

Kirk’s political acumen and network grew because of the *Mayflower* assignment. Kirk recalled that “on balance, this *Mayflower* duty, while some of my pals looked at me somewhat askance, was to me a very important thing. I learned not to be scared of the great in office and so on.” He met Herbert Hoover, the Secretary of Commerce and world renown engineer and manager, who, while abord, “all he did was to read detectives” according to Kirk. By his own estimation, Kirk was not very politically astute. “I was pretty young and unsophisticated about political life,” he later said. But he did have a family friend in Senator Harry New of Indiana, the soon-to-be Postmaster General, which is singular in that New was an unabashed Republican, while most political connections in Kirk’s life were Democrats. Kirk’s mother-in-law and Mrs. New “were pals” and through this friendship Kirk learned more about political social culture.

One occasion taught Kirk the quick and nuanced way decisions could be made at high levels of government, and it made him consider the importance of speaking up and persuading powerful leaders at critical times in their thinking. While on the bridge during a ceremony passing Mt. Vernon, Kirk overheard President Harding and two Senators speaking on the flying bridge. One Senator said to the President, “I think it’s a damn shame that (Mt. Vernon) doesn’t belong to the people. It belongs to the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association.” Kirk remembers the President verbalizing agreement, “Yes, I think you’re right.” But then the other Senator (a “very smart fellow who later became ambassador abroad,” said Kirk) spoke up - “Oh, Mr. President, I wouldn’t do that. These ladies run this thing exceedingly well. If that became a government

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40 Harry New was so Republican that he was the Chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1907-1908. New was an army Captain in the Spanish-American war and may have met Fredric Chapin (Kirk’s father-in-law) then.
41 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 73.
institution, park and so on, you know you’d have picknickers, you’d have all kinds of things, probably the building would be burned down, we’d never have anyone, so I think you ought to leave it the way it is.” To this, Kirk remembered the President saying “Well, I guess you’re right – that’s right, Joe.” Kirk remembered and judged that “this remark saved Mt. Vernon from being made a public park, to the gratification and enjoyment of the whole United States ever since. It showed me how those who are near the great at times when decisions are being made often, by an appropriate word, can prevent something very deleterious from occurring that in their absence would have permitted.” It was an important lesson for Kirk – “When they’re dealing hands, you’ve got to be around.”

In the spring of 1921, President Harding welcomed Marie Curie to the White House. The event reflected the growing respect for science and learning. Later in Kirk’s career, Curie’s daughter and son-in-law represented the limits and dangers of science as it relates to war. But at the time, the tremendous advancements in science and education seemed a limitless good. Desirous to keep attuned to developments, Kirk continued to improve his knowledge professionally. He took on another Naval War College correspondence course and received high grades for his excellent work in assignments. “I had time to do them carefully and well,” recalled Kirk, “with mathematical background, logic, and with skill in navigational and drawing and so on. I used to turn in papers that every one of them got excellent on them.” Kirk received a “a special letter” from Admiral William S. Sims on the “excellence of these twelve assignments.”

Sims was a national naval hero after World War I. After promotion to the highest rank and given his choice of any position in the navy – including Chief of Naval Operations, to the surprise of many, Sims chose to be head of the Naval War College – then considered a junior flag officer

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42 Kirk, Reminiscences, 73.
43 Ibid., 75. Interesting note: On 20 May 1921 President Harding welcomes Marie Curie to the White House.
job. Sims brought new stature to the institution and Kirk was eager to profit from the opportunity. So too where Kirk’s near-seniors Chester Nimitz and Harold Stark, who joined the 50 resident students in Newport in 1923. He loved the education but had added incentive in that naval leaders planned to require coursework for command and flag positions. With his initial success now mixed with ambition – Kirk too sought a seat as resident student in Newport. 44

His temporary appointment to lieutenant commander was extended until his permanent promotion was granted. 45 In the summer Kirk requested duty with the “active sea-going vessels of the Atlantic Fleet” as gunnery officer or command of a destroyer. Holmes endorsed the request insisting on suitable relief and not before October 1921. 46 So, in the fall, the interlude between his gunnery officer roles came to an end, and Kirk was sent to North Dakota as (in his words) a “proper gunnery officer.” 47

Battleships

North Dakota, Battleship No. 29, launched in 1908, was also used, just as Connecticut was, for gunnery drills and training off the east coast during the war. The captain was M.E. Trench, who had been executive officer on Wyoming when Kirk’s father-in-law died while in command in 1913. On his arrival to the ship in the Boston Navy Yard, Kirk learned they would

45 Memo from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 4 Jan 1921, P/R, Box 1. The memo is for promotion for Lieutenant Commander Kirk while aboard Mayflower. This was signed by J.S. McCain. This was another temporary promotion to extend his appointment. A 1 Dec 1921 memo from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk recorded his permanent appointment to lieutenant commander was upcoming. This was sent via Commanding Officer of North Dakota, to begin 3 June 1921. Letter from Bureau of Navigation to Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 28 July 1921 and to JAG 28 Jul 1921 for Kirk qualification for permanent promotion. Responses dated 2 Aug 1921, P/R, Box 2. During the summer of 1921 Kirk was being considered for permanent promotion for September 1921. The JAG asked to comment on anything negative in his record for the previous four years. JAG reported “record clear.”
47 Kirk, Reminiscences, 72. On 14 October 1921, Kirk was ordered to detach from Mayflower and report to North Dakota as gunnery officer. Orders memorandum (officers) dated 14 oct 1921, P/R, Box 1.
host “a tremendous military funeral with full naval contingent” in New York for Admiral Cowles, brother-in-law to the powerful Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Trench put Kirk in charge. He did so well, and the ship looked so impressive, that they were assigned as navy representation at the burial ceremonies for the Unknown Soldier. *North Dakota* transited to Chesapeake Bay and up the Potomac (assisted by tugboats) to the Washington Navy Yard. Kirk and most of ship’s company formed a shore battalion. He had his men don white caps (instead of the normal blue). Kirk’s temporary command acted as guards, ushers and directed traffic in and around Arlington. On the day of the ceremonies, November 11, 1921, they “looked and marched very well,” remembered Kirk. “We were under arms from 6 a.m. till 4 p.m., without any of the normal facilities available and no food, no coffee, no nothing. But it was a great show and a wonderful thing, most impressive, at Arlington. Detachments of all the nations were there, and the Army, the West Point cadets, the Midshipmen, and so on, and here were my sailor boys showing off very well. That was nice.”

Kirk appreciated smart appearance and ceremony – traits needed for diplomacy. And impression and diplomacy were important, and important people noticed. John W. Weeks, Secretary of War mentioned Kirk by name in relaying to the Secretary of the Navy, a letter that he’d received from the Commanding General, District of Washington. “The Blue Jacket and Marine Battalion,” wrote the general, “under the Command of Lieutenant Commander Kirk, U.S. Navy, that marched as part of the escort on November eleventh, made a most creditable appearance, and I take much pleasure in bringing this fact to your attention.” The general praised Kirk’s unit, saying that it “performed most fatiguing and difficult duties in a cheerful and energetic manner.” The men, many of whom worked all day without food or rest, dealt with

48 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 76.
49 Memo from Secretary of War to Secretary of the Navy 17 November 1921, P/R, Box 1.
traffic difficulties with “courtesy and patience.” Kirk was congratulated from the Bureau of Navigation on down the chain of command. The Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet, got the praise letter and forwarded to the Commander, Battleship Force. “The Bureau is pleased to add to the Secretary of War’s remarks its own appreciation of the very creditable showing of the men furnished from your command.”50 Captain Trench was congratulated by his boss “on the excellent appearance and attention to duty of the battalion from the North Dakota …”.51 Not a bad way to start a tour of duty.

The ship then transited to Guantanamo Bay for winter exercises, but there was limited money for fuel. With the ship in harbor at Guantanamo, Kirk convinced Trench to let him organize the training of the crew in small arms. He was concerned sailors needed to have much more familiarization with guns – too many “left the Navy and didn’t know how to shoot a gun.” So, the entire ship’s company went to the rifle range. Kirk picked out the best shots and formed a rife team that won the fleet competition – the trophy “pleased the old man very much.”52 Trench commended Kirk, noting that the “success of the North Dakota’s rifle team was due to the efforts of the Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Commander Alan G. Kirk, USN.”53

The Bureau of Ordnance

On May 1, 1922, Kirk received orders to Washington, to the Bureau of Ordnance (BuOrd). He was to relieve Lieutenant Commander Thomas C. Kinkaid in the supply section

50 Memorandum Bureau of Navigation to CINC Atlantic fleet, 28 Nov 1921, P/R, Box 1.
51 Memorandum US Atlantic Fleet to CO North Dakota, 6 Dec 1921, P/R, Box 1.
52 Kirk, Reminiscences, 77.
53 Memorandum Commander Battleship Force to CO North Dakota, 20 Apr 1922, P/R, Box 4. On 20 April 1922 Kirk was commended by his captain (Trench). While at Guantanamo Bay Cuba the North Dakota Rife Team won the Fleet Match winning the Department Small Arms Marksmanship Cup. This was award was given by Commander Battleship Force from flagship Wyoming.
The summer leave during transition included welcoming his second daughter, Deborah, into the world, born June 26. At the bureau, Kirk was paired with a civil service man, and together they were responsible for the ordering and distribution of shells and powder to ships throughout the world. Together they updated and perfected the tracking of inventory and expirations using a card system (the old system was probably a ledger that had been used since the Civil War). Kirk did some traveling for inspection and training. He continued at self-improvement in a War College Correspondence course. But his assignment at the ordnance office did not go entirely smooth. Kirk got himself into “terrible disgrace with the Chief of the Bureau.” It came about because he drafted a memorandum that identified and highlighted a potentially devastating weakness in the reliability of naval gunnery systems. Kirk saw that the annual target practice report “showed that after about five salvos, every battleship lost one gun out of action because of “screw box” trouble or ammunition hoist trouble or handling room trouble or trouble of some kind.” Kirk’s memo concluded that statistically, after about 5 to 10 rounds, the battleships guns

54 Orders Memorandum (officers) 1 May 1922, P/R, Box 1. See also US Naval Message 27 April 1922 from Bureau of Navigation to North Dakota, P/R, Box 2. Kirk ordered to depart North Dakota in Boston and proceeded to Bureau of Ordnance in Washington DC. Kinkaid, the same age as Kirk, became a decorated World War II Admiral in the Pacific theater. The bottom of the memo reads “The Secretary of the Navy has determined that this employment on shore duty is required by the public interests.” This phrase was placed on change of duty memos for shore duty until World War II. It is possible this was an attempt to mitigate lack of sea time and operations before promotion boards. It is unclear if this helped an officer career. See also Memo Bureau of Navigation to Kirk change of duty orders 2 May 1922, P/R, Box 2. Kirk was assigned to the Bureau of Ordnance from 1922 to 1924.


56 Kirk, Reminiscences, 79. See also Orders Memorandum (officers) 25 Aug 1922, P/R, Box 1. While at the Bureau of Ordnance, Kirk was ordered back to Mayflower for temporary additional duty 25 Aug 1922. See also Memo from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 13 Jun 1923, P/R, Box 2. On 5 Jun 1923 Kirk was ordered “temporary additional duty” from the Bureau of Ordnance to Piney Point MD (down river from DC near Chesapeake Bay) to report to the CO of Maryland “for the purpose of conducting and reporting upon the calibration practice of the USS Maryland, to be held about 7 Jun 1923.” See also Memo to Bureau of Navigation from Bureau of Ordnance 9 Jun 1923, P/R, Box 2. This event was cancelled when the officer responsible on Maryland had to depart for father’s sudden illness. Kirk was ordered then to Princeton NJ 13 Jun 1923.

57 Memorandum from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 1 Mar 1924, P/R, Box 1. On 1 Mar 1924 Kirk completed a War College Correspondence course.
would be worthless in battle, and all an enemy ship would have to do would be to wait for these breakages and mishaps to render the American battleship harmless and ineffective. “Well, that raised hell,” remembered Kirk, “the Chief of the Bureau wouldn’t speak to me for weeks.”58 The controversy in BuOrd was part of a growing and cumulative group of concerns about fleet preparedness in 1922. The General Board was conducting hearings at the time, and Admiral Charles B. McVay, Chief of BuOrd, was focused on turret modernization – specifically, increasing the elevation of gun ports to achieve greater range. But the General Board was inspiring realistic assessment and feasibility in numerous innovations – propulsion, armor, and aircraft – to name a few.59 Feathers were bound to be ruffled. It is interesting to note that soon after Kirk’s memo controversy, the navy embarked on twenty-one large-scale exercises called “Fleet Problems” beginning in late February 1923 and lasting until the start of World War II.60 Problems identified were not just with guns. Fleet Problem One, for example, simulated a successful attack from the air on the Panama Canal.61 Fleet Problem Two highlighted the fleet’s vulnerability to submarine attack.62 Antisubmarine and amphibious operations were added to the test mix in succeeding years. The summer of 1923, when Kirk took several weeks leave to see his family in Erie, had national news that President Harding was found dead at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco and the Teapot Dome oil lease scandal was brewing hot.63

58 Kirk, Reminiscences, 80. The oral history interviewer, Mason Brown Jr, tried to make the point that surely Kirk’s candor was appreciated by someone. Kirk did not express this was anyone’s thinking. “I wasn’t very popular,” was all Kirk said.
61 Ibid., 33.
62 Ibid., 79.
63 N. Nav 234 (Nov 1917) Leave Request form, P/R, Box 1. Kirk requested 20-days leave starting 25 Jul 1923 to go home to 238 West 6th Street Erie PA whose address is Mrs. F. L. Chapin, Kirk’s mother-in-law. On October 22, 1923, Senate hearings began in the Teapot Dome oil leases that became a scandal.
West Coast Sailing

One day Kirk’s old executive officer from Utah, Frank Clark, came by to see him. Now, as Captain Clark of the navy’s newest battleship Maryland, he personally offered Kirk the gunnery officer position. Kirk jumped at the opportunity. Maryland, launched in 1920, was the second built of the Colorado class, which had the navy’s first 16-inch guns, and included a seaplane catapult. She participated in the 1923 fleet exercises near the Panama Canal Zone, then joined the west coast Battle Fleet. It was a plumb job for a gunnery officer – and Kirk jumped at the offer. In the summer of 1924, even though he and Lydia had just purchased a house in Georgetown and had made themselves “very neat and tidy” with their two little girls, they immediately sold their house and moved to the west coast, to Bellingham, in the state of Washington. Lydia, “being a good Navy girl, swallowed the anchor,” recalled Kirk. On arrival, he was quite taken with the scenery of the northwest – “I’d become enamored of the trees.” One day on the quarterdeck he spied Mt. Rainier “growing out of the mist in the south, a snow-covered cone.” Kirk and his family enjoyed trips to the Olympic Mountains and Victoria, Canada. During prohibition, “in Canada you could get a drink,” and Kirk remembered a boat with a message on the bow – “You may be the land of the brave. We are the land of the free.”


66 Kirk, Reminiscences, 82.
“The Maryland was a very fine ship. We had an awfully good gang of officers on her, and a fine captain, Captain Clark,” Kirk recalled. Kirk’s tour was certainly about the gunnery profession, but it was also very much a diplomatic and social exercise. The ship performed practice and drills during the winter and set off for a cruise to Australia – and Kirk loved it. He remembered the trip as “a grand time.” They pulled into Hawaii, and he met his sister and her naval officer husband and met “some beautiful people” through Lydia’s Junior League network. Founded in 1901, the Junior League was a network of young women, usually from elite and well-educated backgrounds who volunteered for community improvement efforts. Like many in their generation, the Kirks tapped into these social networks for support. As the ship proceeded over the equator, Kirk participated in the crossing-the-line ceremony for the first time – “they slatted me and beat my behind as I ran through the gauntlet, and shaved me with tar soap, and what not,” he recalled. At Sidney he found “the most magnificent harbor you ever saw.” Kirk was delighted with the Australian welcome. Little sailboats and fishing boats came out to welcome the American fleet. The Governor of New South Wales was British Admiral Dudley de Chair who, back in 1887, was saved from a Cairo mob by Kirk’s uncle Caspar Goodrich, the American observer, during the siege of Alexandria. The Governor was “very nice” to Kirk and invited him to tennis during a tea party.

Kirk and other officers, including the flag secretary (to Admiral S.S. Robinson, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Battle Fleet) Regie Kaufman, enjoyed Australian hospitality – from night clubs and polo matches to countryside estate visits by train. “It was really wonderful,” remembered Kirk. Lydia, again, helped with social connections and prepared and deepened

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67 Kirk, Reminiscences, 83. Kirk’s sister’s husband became the naval attaché to London in the early 1920’s, a position Kirk held during World War II.
68 A slat is a narrow strip of wood.
69 Kirk, Reminiscences, 84.
relationships – “My wife had done me very well,” he recalled, “I still have friends among those people.” Then the ship transited to New Zealand where Kirk found the people, unsurprisingly, “awfully nice” but also very pro-British. “They were more English than the English. They were very reserved, and it took a little while before you really got to know them at all,” remembered Kirk. They attended the “trots” or trotting races, and again they meet and socialized with people they stayed in touch with – several military officers and a doctor – for years to come.

Maryland went on to Samoa and then Hawaii before returning to the west coast – this time to Long Beach and San Pedro, California. Upon return to the states Maryland welcomed a new captain – Thomas T. Craven (T.T. Craven also known as ‘Tireless Tom’). His was a rare character. Rare because Kirk did not like him. “He had a habit of sapping everyone’s confidence, so instead of being a very high-standing ship, everybody kind of got uneasy that nothing went off terribly well.” Maryland was employed in more exercises and fleet problems near the Panama Canal. Kirk enjoyed some time ashore in Panama but remembered it was “terribly hot” and he became sick with an inner-ear condition that confined him to bed for about ten days. While on the trip back to Puget Sound the ship stopped in San Francisco to unload ammunition. They were scheduled to remain four days, so the crew worked hard to accomplish the off-loading tasks in three days so they could get a day off on the town. Kirk remembers Craven insisted on getting underway. He had to tell the captain “I wouldn’t do that, captain, after all, everybody’s worked like a dog to get this stuff out and you ought to give them a day off.” Kirk remembers Craven was furious, but reluctantly consented to give the extra day. “Well,” Kirk recalled, “that wasn’t

70 Kirk, Reminiscences, 85.
71 Ibid., 87.
72 Ibid., 89.
73 Ibid., 90.
74 Ibid., 92. Perhaps this was Meniere’s disease, with periodic dizziness, tinnitus and hearing loss.
one of the happiest cruises I ever made, I must confess, with Craven.” The feeling was apparently mutual. Craven had nothing great to say about Kirk in his performance review and marked him lower than his average in most categories – especially in “justice and discipline of subordinates.” Kirk did enjoy his family, however, who arrived in September 1924, taking up residence in Long Beach, California.

In March 1926, after two years as gunnery officer on Maryland, Kirk requested sea duty with the “Scouting Fleet, preferably in the Light Cruisers.” To ask for more sea duty was unusual but probably the best way to detach from an atmosphere of discouraging morale. There was no other boss in the whole of his early career, that frustrated and displeased Kirk as much as this one. It was hard to see a great ship experience brought low – and he wanted out quick. The response from the Bureau of Navigation was to confirm with Kirk that he understood his sea duty would be extended an extra year for a total of two more years of sea duty. Kirk replied - he would “be pleased to remain at sea for two years.” So, in April, Kirk was able to get reassigned temporarily - to became navigator on Arkansas – a “rather unique” assignment since the ship was in the Philadelphia drydock and he therefore had opportunity to spend time with his family. Lydia and the two girls moved back to Erie, Pennsylvania during the temporary

75 Kirk, Reminiscences, 93. An example plot was made for Hollywood in John Ford’s 1955 movie Mister Roberts starring Henry Fonda, Jack Lemmon and James Cagney.

76 Fitness Report 10 Jun 1925 – 30 Sep 1925, P/R, Box 4. See also Application for Transportation of Dependents and A Form 33 dated 19 Sep 1924, P/R, Box 1. See also Leave Request form 9 Jan 1925, P/R, Box 2. Kirk took leave the last day of the year (1924) into the new year month of January.

77 Letter of Request 11 Mar 1926, P/R, Box 1.

78 Letter from Bureau of Navigation to CO Maryland 27 Mar 1926, P/R, Box 1.

79 Letter from Kirk to Chief of Bureau of Navigation 12 Apr 1926, P/R, Box 2.

80 Kirk, Reminiscences, 93. See also Orders Memo 24 Apr 1926, P/R, Box 1. See also Bureau of Navigation change of duty letter to Kirk 27 Apr 1926, P/R, Box 2. Kirk was temporarily ordered to Arkansas as navigator (from Maryland).
After several months Kirk was offered orders to his first major staff as Scouting Fleet Gunnery Officer.\textsuperscript{82}

The Scouting Fleet Staff

In the interwar years the navy was divided into four functional fleets. On \textit{Maryland}, Kirk had been part of Battle Fleet, based in the Pacific, consisting of the battleships and aircraft carriers whose mission it was to dominate at sea by overcoming all competitors during conflict. The Scouting Fleet, home ported on the east coast, was to seek out enemy units, identify threats and assess weaknesses and relay battlespace information for the big fleet engagement to come with Battle Fleet. The two other fleets, Control Force and Fleet Train, consisting of small ships, submarines, and amphibious units, were to maintain and supply the navy once sea control was won by Scouting and Battle Fleets.\textsuperscript{83}

Kirk officially detached from \textit{Maryland} June 5, 1926, and took 30-days leave to Black Point Connecticut.\textsuperscript{84} By the time Kirk checked onboard, Scouting Fleet was commanded by Vice Admiral Ashley H. Robertson.\textsuperscript{85} Robertson was “a fine sailor in the old days, and we had a wonderful staff,” Kirk recalled. The Scouting Fleet Operations Officer, Captain George B. Wright, was key to Kirk’s continuing education and next career steps. Wright “was one of the brainiest men the Navy ever had,” recalled Kirk, and “under his guidance I learned a great deal

\textsuperscript{81} Navy Message Request for Dependent Travel 12 May 1926, P/R, Box 1. Upon orders of transfer from \textit{Maryland} to \textit{Arkansas}, Kirk moved his wife and two children to Erie PA from Bremerton Washington in late May 1926.

\textsuperscript{82} N. Nav. 17 Form Report of Compliance with orders 4 Sep 1926, P/R, Box 2. From 3 Sep 1926 Kirk was assigned as aid and additional duty as Fleet Gunnery Officer.


\textsuperscript{84} Memorandum from Kirk to Bureau of Navigation 12 Jun 1926, P/R, Box 1.

about strategy, tactics, and naval history, world politics and so on.”

Wright was a fine professional mentor to Kirk and played a key role in his further education.

At the time of Kirk’s arrival on staff, Wyoming, the flagship, was at the Philadelphia Navy Shipyard, and the city of Philadelphia was hosting the Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition to celebrate 150 years since the Declaration of Independence. The Commander-in Chief of the British North American West India Squadron, Admiral Sir Walter H. Cowan, unlike his predecessor 150 years earlier, arrived in peace to the city to participate, and Robertson’s staff was made busy with hosting. When the flag lieutenant had to excuse himself as guide for a medical reason, Kirk took his place in performing diplomatic duty. Kirk relished the opportunity and excelled at the task. Philadelphia, after all, was his boyhood hometown. From October 11 to 16, 1926, Kirk was made Special Aide to Cowan during the visit of His Majesty’s ships Calcutta and Capetown, both light cruisers. Kirk’s duties were as an aid and liaison officer. Cowan had commanded Princess Royal, a battlecruiser, in the famed Battle of Jutland, and was called, remembered Kirk, “Old Blood for Breakfast.” Cowan’s flagship, Calcutta, was commanded by his chief of staff, Andrew B. Cunningham, “with whom I became fast friends,” recalled Kirk, “This lasted me in good stead all the rest of my life.” Kirk arranged for parties and took him to a football game at Princeton. He also escorted Cowan to a reception at Edward T. Stotesbury’s palatial estate, Whitemarsh Hall, probably to view the large collection of British portraiture from before the American Revolution. On the drive through the manicured estate grounds Cowan,

86 Kirk, Reminiscences, 94.
87 Letter from Commander Scouting Fleet to Kirk 5 Oct 1926, Temporary Duty orders, P/R, Box 2. The flag lieutenant had a carbuncle growth on his neck at the time. The 150 year of independence celebration was a flop according to Variety which reported a loss of $20 million. But the Navy used it to celebrate the opening of Mustin Field, a naval air facility named after the Navy’s third pilot, with a naval air show.
88 Kirk, Reminiscences, 94.
recalled Kirk, turned to him, and said, “I say, Kirk, I don’t see any sheep cropping these lawns!”

Kirk responded, “Admiral, I’m afraid that’s not the custom in the great places outside Philadelphia.” Kirk explained it was probably mowed, to which Cowan replied that “in England we would always employ sheep for that.” When the festivities were over the British thought to gift their American assistants alcohol, but Prohibition made that difficult. Cowan delighted Kirk with a gift of his photograph and his staff presented him with a small flask with their names on it – jokingly telling him “Dare we fill this for you?” Cowan wanted to give the two motorcycle police who had been assigned to him some money, but Kirk recommended against this. Could he give them whiskey? “Admiral,” advised Kirk, “through the medium of some other hands than your own – yes.” The officers were delighted with their gift of Scotch. Kirk had a natural knack for building and maintaining solid social networks. An example is that he prized his relationship with Cowan so that they stayed in touch through letters and personal visits until Cowan died in 1956. Cowan, “was a terrific fellow,” said Kirk, and was a “wonderful, wonderful old friend to have.”

The year 1926 ended with time off with his family and a consideration review for promotion.

In March 1927, Kirk came down with the flu and mild bronchitis, perhaps slowing him down enough to hear of the newly published tell-all memoir of former President Warren Harding’s lover. He recovered in time to serve on Rear Admiral Montgomery M. Taylor’s Fire Control Board and fulfill temporary duty orders to Texas. Texas, Battleship No 35, launched.

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90 Kirk, Reminiscences, 95.
91 Ibid., 96.
92 N. Nav. 296 Report of Leave Absence 1 Feb 1927, P/R, Box 2. Kirk took a 10 day leave period at end of 1926 from 26 December to 4 January 1927. See also Letter to Bureau of Navigation to President of Board of Medical Examiners 7 Apr 1927, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was looked at for promotion while assigned to Scouting Fleet. See also Letter from Bureau of Navigation to Judge Advocate General 5 Apr 1927, P/R, Box 1. Kirk had no legal problems.
93 Medical history sheet 6 Mar 1927, P/R, Box 3. Kirk was assigned to Texas 1 Mar 1927. On 6 March 1927 Kirk was down with flu and mild bronchitis. He was discharged 16 March 1927. On 25 April 1927, Lieutenant Commander Kirk was given temporary duty (from Texas in North River NY) and was appointed as a member of...
1912, had received a major modernization overhaul in 1925, which included the latest fire control systems. She was operating on the east coast in the spring and summer of 1927 in preparation for a transfer to Battle Fleet in the Pacific in the fall. Kirk met her in New York before she transited to Guantanamo Bay for exercises. While there, Kirk was given a full physical and on May 7, he was promoted to commander. The 39-year-old Kirk was just under 69 inches tall and weighed 150 pounds.

On return to the flagship in Philadelphia, Commander Kirk considered his next assignment move. Captain Wright was working on getting Kirk a seat as a resident student and a follow-on tour as instructor at the Naval War College. But Kirk now had another desire - no doubt resulting from the great time he had with the Brits. There was no guarantee of the student slot. If the Naval War College did not work out, he wanted to go to the London attaché office. In late November he formally asked, in writing, to be assigned as Assistant Naval Attaché in the American Embassy London, England. For his part, Robertson considered Kirk “exceptionally well qualified” for attaché duty and supported the request whole-heartedly. The Bureau of Navigation forwarded the request to the acting Director of Naval Intelligence who responded that Kirk would be considered when the transition of the current assistant naval attaché was “taken

“Fire Control Board” headed by Rear Admiral Montgomery M. Taylor at the New Navy Building Room 3646 in Wash. DC 6 May. See also Navy Message 25 Apr 1927 from Bureau of Navigation to Commander Scouting Fleet, P/R, Box 1.


95 Promotion Acceptance Memo form N. Nav. 96 from Kirk to Secretary of the Navy 7 May 1927, P/R, Box 1. On 6 May 1927 the Bureau of Navigation sent Kirk a Memorandum of Appointment as Commander to start 4 Mar 1927. Kirk was given the oath of office acceptance form 7 May 1927 for promotion to commander from 4 Mar 1927. Kirk is indicated still a citizen of New jersey. On 15 Apr 1927, while assigned to Texas, Kirk had a medical exam in Guantanamo Bay Cuba. Physical Examination Sheet Form H 15 Apr 1927, P/R, Box 3. Commander Kirk was just under 69 inches tall, weighed 150 pounds, and had blue eyes. He was Episcopalian. His wife Lydia lived at 2204 R St., NW, Washington.

96 Orders letter from Commander Scouting Fleet to Kirk 13 May 1927, P/R, Box 1. On 13 May 1927 the flag was transferred, so Kirk was ordered from Texas in North River, New York City, to Arkansas in Philadelphia Navy Yard. Orders letter from Commander Scouting Fleet to Kirk 9 Dec 1927, P/R, Box 1. On 19 Dec 1927 the flag was transferred again, this time from Arkansas to Wyoming.
Clearly Kirk wanted to be transferred to London – it was the second official request he made. But approval was not forthcoming. In hindsight, if the attaché assignment came at this point, more than ten years before it did, Kirk’s career trajectory would have been significantly different because of the critical position he held and the relationships he developed at the start of World War II.97

War College Problems

The year 1928 was a raucous one for America. Charles Lindbergh flew his Spirit of St. Louis airplane to Washington to give it to the Smithsonian and was awarded the Medal of Honor after making the historic non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic the year before. Kirk and his generation was poised to become world travelers by air. Joseph P. Kennedy was gaining notoriety as a businessman-investor involved with film-making and whisky distribution – and making millions in the stock market. Kennedy used some of this money to donate to political campaigns, setting the stage for his diplomatic career, crossing paths with Kirk. Kirk started the year with a bout of “tonsillitis” and was treated to a tonsillectomy on the Mercy. Built in 1906, she was the first of the three hospital ships named Mercy. He soon received orders to depart his Scouting Fleet staff post by the summer.98 Many on staff transferred that spring and Kirk was

97 Endorsement to Kirk letter of request 29 Nov 1927, P/R, Box 1. On 29 Nov 1927, Kirk sent a letter asking to be assigned to attaché duty. The office of navy intelligence had to forward to the Bureau of Navigation and Office of Naval Intelligence. Endorsement to Kirk letter of request 29 Nov 1927 and Second Endorsement 6 Dec 1927, P/R, Box 1. Kirk’s request was on letterhead of “United States Fleet, Scouting Fleet, U.S.S. Arkansas, Flagship.” The Commander, Scouting Fleet (A.H. Robertson) recommended approval. R. H. Leigh, Chief of Bureau (of Navigation) forwarded to Director of Naval Intelligence to get recommendation. Letter to Bureau of Navigation from Director of Naval Intelligence 7 Dec 1927, P/R, Box 1. Acting Director of Naval Intelligence, D. M. LeBreton, noted request and said it would be given consideration when discussions for transfer of the current Asst. Naval Attaché in London, Commander Beardall “is taken up.” Kirk’s first attempt at attaché duty failed and he had to wait for the third opportunity coming over a decade later.

98 Medical record summary sheet 2 Nov 1934, P/R, Box 3. On 17 Jan 1928 Kirk’s annual physical noted defective hearing 9/15 both ears (assigned to Wyoming). Medical record summary sheet 2 Nov 1934, P/R, Box 3. On 12 Feb 1928 Kirk had “Tonsillitis” and was treated aboard Mercy and he was given a tonsillectomy. Kirk returned to duty 19 Feb. Mercy was built in 1907 and was the first in the Mercy ship series.
asked to delay his departure until the summer for continuity. George Wright, before he transferred to the staff of the Naval War College, helped Kirk secure orders to come up also as resident student - then went on ahead.99 Kirk took advantage of the slowing pace at work to take leave mid-May, and again the second half of July, to rest and get his family situated at their getaway at Black Point, Connecticut.100

For Kirk it was a welcome long-sought assignment close to his heart. The U.S. Naval War College was established in 1884 - four years before Kirk was born. His uncle Casper was one of the three founders triumvirate – Luce, Mahan, Goodrich. Its’ purpose was, in the words of Admiral Harris Laning, college president at the time of Kirk’s staff tour, “to develop in the higher officers of the navy the skills in the use of their ships and weapons that will permit them the utmost power should war befall us.”101 So Kirk had two great incentives – honor the family legacy and prepare for senior rank and responsibility. For the first year onboard, Kirk was a student. Then he transitioned to staff at the end of May, 1929, and served as instructor until the spring of 1931.102 He started out, he remembered, in “the senior class” working “some rather simple problems on the so-called war game board.” They reviewed historical studies and scenarios such as the naval actions near Detroit during the War of 1812 and then moved forward in time and to more complexity and scale, until “finally we came to the main event of the year, which was the study of the Battle of Jutland.” This one battle was a game board maneuver that

100 Memorandum Kirk to Bureau of Navigation giving leave address 13 Jul 1928, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was on leave May 12 – 17, 1928 while assigned to Wyoming, flagship Scouting Fleet. Kirk takes leave 13-31 Jul 1928 while between assignments to the Naval War College to Black Point Connecticut.
101 Harris Laning, An Admiral’s Yarn (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1999), 261. Admiral Harris Laning was President of Naval War College from 1930-1933.
102 Orders Memorandum (officers) 16 Apr 1928, P/R, Box 1. On 16 April 1928, Kirk was ordered from Vice Admiral G. H. Robertson’s Scouting Fleet staff to the Naval War College as student then instructor. Orders Memorandum (officers) 16 Jan 1929, P/R, Box 1. On 16 Jan 1929, Kirk was ordered to be reassigned as instructor and staff at the Naval War College. He switched from student to staff 28 May 1929.
lasted three months. It consumed student’s lives. Chester Nimitz’s wife Catherine said her husband told her he knew the battle by heart – reading nights in bed when a student six years before Kirk arrived. Wargaming was developing quickly, becoming increasingly elaborate and physically large with actions tracked on large tabletops and eventually checkboard flooring.103 Jutland “was one of the classics, the pro forma battle of the day of the supremacy of the battleship,” said Kirk. There were, said Kirk:

> a good many criticisms of design of ships and function of the guns and exploding capacity of projectiles. The great menace of the torpedo still was evident. In fact, it played a very high part in the final decision of Admiral Jellicoe to turn away, at a critical point in the battle. I used to think, and I still think, that the British naval superiority in the world passed its zenith when he made the signal to turn away.104

Kirk and his classmates had numerous writing assignments. Kirk weighed in on the issue of American isolationist policy, expressing the view that the time had come to change and become more engaging internationally. Most classmates had a Pacific navy and east leaning perspective on future conflict. The majority Blue-Orange games of the college had a Pacific focus. Kirk’s academy classmate, friend, and fellow student, Commander J. B Oldendorf, stood out by taking a different approach – seeing Europe as the focus of concern.105

Kirk was naturally strong in his diplomatic characteristics - impressing others by being “tactful, and of fine presence.” But he was more than looks and charm. He also got high marks in Strategy and Tactics.106 And, just as he had done in other assignments, but now with much wider

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103 Kirk, Reminiscences, 98. See also John Hattendorf et.al., Sailors and Scholars: The Centennial History of the U.S. Naval War College (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1984), 139, 142.
104 Kirk, Reminiscences, 98.
106 Fitness Report back period 1 Apr 29 to 30 Sep 29, P/R Box 4. Kirk’s fitness report of period 1 Aug 1928 to 31 Mar 1929 indicated he was under instruction in the Senior Course, his place of residence was 2204 R St. Wash. D.C. and he took French language and received a 3.2, International Law 3.5 and had a better Strategy and Tactics score of 3.8. His highest marks were for Tact, Cooperation, Loyalty and Attention to Duty, Neatness of Person and Dress.
selection, Kirk took advantage of reading books from the large school library and he “found out a lot of interesting things which stood (him) in very good stead later on.” Undoubtedly, much of what he read was about the British - feeding his growing interest for attaché duty in London.

After graduating, Kirk joined the staff as an instructor in the operations division involved with gaming, under his friend Captain Wright, who was supervisor to the instructors. A fellow instructor was Benjamin Dutton, who would go on to command *Wyoming* and then become naval attaché to Berlin in 1935. Together they rewrote a few of the problems to make them more realistic, and they also outlined courses for simplicity and understanding. Wright came up with several “most ingenious situations” that were approved by the Presidents, Admirals J.P.R Pringle and Harris Laning. Kirk and the staff were inspired to place new emphasis on tactics because the instruments of war brought about by recent innovations, primarily in aircraft and submarines, were yet untested. Uncertainly rose to the point that the primacy or even need for the battleship was in question. Kirk was a judge (or umpire) of the game board. In this role he “allowed” ship maneuver and certain capability. On one occasion, Kirk judged that some submarines could run on the surface at high speed toward enemy ships. Students protested strongly that this was unlikely and unrealistic. Students also raised strong protest at his judgment when he allowed, in another game scenario, aircraft to attack destroyers with bombs. Kirk was vindicated on both accounts years later when, during World War II, such scenarios played out routinely, with submarine and air attacks on ships. Kirk and his colleagues were prescient. Kirk was at the

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While still in top categories, Intelligence, Force and Endurance were lower. The next fitness report from 1 Apr 29 to 30 Sep 29 showed French dropping to 3.0 and the comments reiterated that he was “tactful, and of fine presence.”


college at the right time – a critical period of experimentation and learning that had enormous ramifications in naval warfare.

Meanwhile, the world was given a financial shock with a stock market crash in October 1929, and the resulting economic turmoil was clearly and deeply felt by many, as the Great Depression took hold by the time Kirk’s tour at the college was up. Kirk’s life, on the other hand, was anything but depressed. He enjoyed the school. Lydia became pregnant with their third child and Kirk took a long summer leave in 1930 - just down the road in Black Point, Connecticut. Roger was born November 2. What’s more, Kirk was given orders at the beginning of 1931 to prepare for his first command assignment. The 1930’s depression years were for Kirk, satisfying, and his command and staff tours were the height of a typical naval officer’s career.

**Skipper of Schenck**

On August 18, 1931, Kirk was given his first command, the Schenck. Schenck, Destroyer No. 159, was launched April 23, 1919. She was named after a naval officer who served in California during the Mexican War and was noted for his exploits during the Civil War under Admiral Porter. She had just returned to her homeport of Charleston, South Carolina from operating with the fleet in the Caribbean for Fleet Problem Twelve. Fred Rogers, who Kirk

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110 Report of leave of absence N. Nav. 296, 16 Jun 1931, P/R, Box 2. Kirk takes leave 28 May – 13 Jun 1931 after he detached from the Naval War College on his way to assignment as “senior officer present afloat” on Schenck.

111 Letter from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 18 Aug 1931, P/R, Box 1. Kirk’s first command was a Wickes class destroyer (DD-159) that later saw action in World War II as a convoy escort.

considered a friend, was division commodore, and William (or Bill, later known as “Bull”) Halsey was squadron commander. Kirk’s interactions with Captain Halsey at the time must have been limited, since he says little more about him except to say, “he was always called Bill Halsey,” never ‘Bull’ which was “purely a newspaper invention.” The comment is suggestive of how Kirk viewed flashy personas – with disfavor. The first months in command were drills and port visits along the east coast – summer in New England and, as winter approached, operations further south toward the Carolinas. But plans to bring his family to Charleston that winter was preempted by navy planners. Japanese expansion in Asia was concerning. A new, more powerful “United Sates Fleet” was to be formed in the Pacific. This called for moving the majority of the Scouting Fleet from the east to the Pacific coast to merge with the Battle Fleet. Kirk performed the transition well. Near the end of his first command tour, Halsey noted after an inspection that Kirk deserved “special credit” for the excellent condition of his ship.

Grand Slam on West Virginia

Not long after Schenck arrived in San Diego via the Panama Canal in March 1932, Kirk was asked to serve as executive officer of West Virginia. The message came by telegram from the Bureau of Navigation, and because it was important for his career to have a leadership tour on a battleship, he immediately accepted the transfer. Battleship No. 48, launched 1921, West Virginia was a “super-dreadnought” which had, along with 16-inch guns, the latest

Application for Transportation for Dependents, 9 Sep 1931, P/R, Box 1. The Kirk move entitlement was $82.24 and he spent $99.91.

113 Kirk, Reminiscences, 103. Kirk said Halsey was always known as “Bill” but later got the moniker “Bull” from the press during World War II.

advancements in water-tight compartmentation and armor protection. Without hesitation, Kirk joined the flagship of the battleships in Long Beach. His commanding officer, Walter S. Anderson, ran a tight ship and Kirk fit in nicely as his right-hand man. He worked hard – only seeing his family weekends at their house in Pasadena. But, Kirk recalled, “that was one of the happiest cruises I ever made…it turned out to be dandy.” The ship won the gunnery, engineering and communications trophies, and the coveted Battle Efficiency banner. The crew even won the Iron Man athletics competition. “It’s called the Grand Slam,” Kirk remembered, “and we won it two years in succession.” Other ships copied West Virginia’s soft ball league that Kirk organized.

Kirk was commended by Commander, Battle Force, who noted that the ship was in difficult shape when Kirk arrived and made the crew busy with drills and tests and inspection getting the ship up to standards. “Commander Kirk definitely and markedly contributed to the winning of the Gunnery and Battle Efficiency competitions by (West Virginia). Commander Kirk reported on board the ship at a time when it faced the strenuous duty of firing practically the

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115 Naval History and Heritage Command, “Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships,” accessed 15 Feb 2021 and 29 April 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhbc/research histórias/shhip-histories/danfs/w/west-virginia-ii.html. West Virginia was heavily damaged in the attack on Pearl Harbor but was raised and repaired and sent into service. Naval Message from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk aboard Schenck, Orders 30 Mar 1932, P/R, Box 1. On 30 Mar 1932 Kirk was ordered to report to West Virginia (and transfer to the West coast) as executive officer and to report 9 April.

116 Kirk, Reminiscences, 105.
117 Ibid., 106, 109. The ship won the Battle Efficiency Pennant for battleships in 1925 and 1927 but not again until 1932 and 1933, when Kirk was executive officer. See Press release information from 1 Dec 1937, P/R, Box 1. Kirk had a successful tour as executive officer of battleship West Virginia, leading his ship to winning Battle Efficiency, Gunnery, Engineering and Communication trophies for the two years assigned. Kirk received letters of commendation from the Secretary of the Navy for both years. See S. and A. Form 33 (Revised Jun 1930) Application for Transportation for Dependents, 5 May 1932, P/R, Box 1. Kirk sent family (except Roger) to Long Beach, CA in June 1932. Somewhat rushed, Kirk, aboard West Virginia, had not the time to coordinate with wife on this move. Memo from Kirk to Chief of Transportation Section, Bureau of Supplies and Accounts 9 May 1932, P/R, Box 1. In memo 9 May 32, for Chief of Transportation Section at the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts, Kirk asked that someone call his wife and coordinate with her directly her transportation plans because “being on the West Coast and having had sudden change of orders, I am uncertain as to her exact plans.” Letter to Lydia Kirk from F.B. Upham Chief of Bureau 25 May 1932. Address for Lydia was 2204 “R” Street, N.W. Washington D.C., P/R, Box 1. F. B. Upham, Chief of Bureau, sent Lydia a letter with instructions and a check to cover costs on 25 May 1932. Letter from Secretary of the Navy to Kirk 14 Nov 1932, P/R, Box 1.
entire yearly gunnery program in about two and a half months. From the very first, Commander Kirk was a vital force both as an advisor and assistant to the Commanding Officer and as an advisor and leader of the subordinate officers and men.” Captain Anderson was very pleased – showering Kirk with praise, characterizing him as a “very efficient executive officer” and “an officer of very fine ability.”

Kirk’s penchant for efficiency, refinement and etiquette made meals in the wardroom special occasions. Better food was served at lower cost. At times the fanfare included Kirk carving the steaming roast himself – after scraping knives together to begin the show. The officers of the ship, including the admiral’s staff, loved it.

In Washington, on July 28, 1932, the “Bonus Army” consisting of World War I veterans, who had created a protest encampment in Washington parks lobbying for early bonus payments, were forced out by army units led by General Douglas MacArthur. Many considered it a national embarrassment. Meanwhile, Kirk began suffering from a painful swelling in his right groin. Diagnosed as an inguinal hernia that had grown to the “size of a hen egg,” by the end of August, doctors admitted their patient for surgery at U.S. Naval Hospital Puget Sound in Bremerton. A successful surgery put him on a path to recovery to leave the hospital a month later, on September 27, after which the doctor ordered an additional fifteen days of sick leave at home in

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119 Kirk, Reminiscences, 108.
Pasadena. By mid-October, Kirk returned to West Virginia at sea off the coast of San Pedro, California.

**Director of Ships**

In 1933, Prohibition ended. The depression however, continued with no end in sight. Pay was temporarily cut 15 percent. That summer Kirk transferred to the Navy Department Ships Movement Division (later known as the operations center for the Chief of Naval Operations) in Washington. He worked with Captain J. C. Townsend - “a very fine man” with whom he had worked before at sea. Their job was to plan the mileage of the fleet for optimum maintenance and training. Money was tight. Congress limited spending for fuel oil and “it was a rather sore point,” Kirk remembered, because during his three-year tour (1933-1936), ships were confined to home waters. The lack of familiarity with foreign waters “turned out to be a very serious handicap later on” he reasoned, referring to the coming world war.

Kirk soon had another diplomatic assignment in conjunction with his work with the CNO’s staff. While they continued to vacation in Black Point Connecticut, the Kirks made their

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120 Form M memo from the Board of Medical Survey to CO West Virginia 15 Sep 1932, P/R, Box 1. See also Naval Message from West Virginia to Bureau of Navigation 1 Sep 1932, P/R, Box 1. Kirk went to Naval Hospital Puget Sound, Navy Yard, Bremerton, Washington 31 Aug 1932 – 28 Sep 1932. Diagnosis number 2003 1033. Naval Message from Naval Hospital Puget Sound to Bureau of Navigation 24 Sep 1932, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was sick for six weeks in hospital and on home sick leave for 15 days. See Medical history sheet 1 Sep 1932, P/R, Box 3. On August 31, 1932, Kirk had painful swelling in his right groin and was admitted, diagnosed with a right-side inguinal hernia. The doctor noted it was the “size of a hen egg.” Memo from Kirk to Bureau of Navigation 7 Oct 1932, P/R, Box 1. Kirk resided at 441 South Catalina Ave. Pasadena, CA while on sick leave.


122 Letter from Kirk to Bureau of Navigation 21 Apr 1933, P/R, Box 1. Kirk put in a travel request for family (Lydia, daughter 13, daughter 10 and son 2) to go from Pasadena CA to New London CT in June 1933. Kirk was ordered form West Virginia to Washington D.C. 26 April 1933. See Navy Message 26 Apr 1933 from Bureau of Navigation to West Virginia, P/R, Box 1. See Cross ref sheet 5 May 1933, P/R, Box 1. Commander Shafroth was Kirk’s relief. Kirk was assigned as Assistant Director Ships Movements, Naval Operations from 1933 to 1936. He detached 24 June 1933 to report to Washington. See Memo request for leave Kirk to CNO via Director Ships Movements 20 Aug 1934, P/R, Box 1. Kirk’s leave request 22 Aug 1934 was for three weeks in Niantic Connecticut. His chain of command was Director of Ships Movements Division (J. C. Townsend) and then CNO.

123 Kirk, Reminiscences, 111.
home again in the city of Washington just northwest of Du Pont Circle, an area known for its diplomatic flavor – the famed Embassy Row. They were certainly favorable to diplomatic life. On December 9, 1934, the Cuban Ambassador, Dr. Manuel Marquez Sterling, died. Kirk’s willingness and knack for international relations was again called upon when he was assigned to have the remains of the ambassador transported to Havana aboard Trenton. Again, Kirk showed success in such matters. Admiral William Leahy, the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, sent Kirk a memorandum relaying a letter of “appreciation of naval cooperation in funeral arrangements and services for the late Cuban Ambassador.” The interim Charge’ d’Affairs, Jose’ T. Baron, sent a note of appreciation for the “splendid military honors” at the funeral service. Secretary of State Cordell Hall informed Secretary of the Navy Claude A. Swanson of the note of thanks and pointed out Kirk specifically in his letter saying “I have been informed that the officers of your Department, especially Commander Alan G. Kirk, were extremely obliging and helpful in arranging for the funeral services and transportation of the remains to Cuba.”

**Commanding Officer of Milwaukee**

Kirk let it be known he wanted command at sea for his next assignment, and that he would take anything – even a tanker. He hoped for a cruiser, and “as luck would have it,” he got one. Milwaukee, CL-5, launched in 1921 at Seattle, was the third ship to be so named and was one of the handful of 6-inch gun cruisers built. Lydia and the children once again made their way

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125 Letter from Charge’ d’Affaires Cuban Embassy to Secretary of State 12 Dec 1934, P/R, Box 2. See also letter from Secretary of the Navy to Secretary of State 20 Dec 1934, P/R, Box 2.
126 Letter from Secretary of State to Secretary of the Navy 15 Dec 1934, P/R, Box 2.
west via Chicago - proceeding this time to San Diego, Milwaukee’s new home port. Kirk met the ship in Portland, Oregon and assumed command August 3, 1936. The dignity of the occasion was answered with indignity, when, on September 16, Kirk sprained his left ankle while stepping into the motor whaleboat and lost his balance. He suffered severe and painful swelling. Now on crutches, Captain Kirk oversaw ship exercises. Early ones with weapon systems went well, but they “stripped a turbine” and endured engineering problems. This frustrated Kirk because full power and maneuverability were degraded. The ship was later repaired and sent to Asia to deal with increasing tensions – but Kirk would not be going.

Milwaukee did win one award. Acting CNO, J.O. Richardson, congratulated Kirk and his ship for being awarded a commendation for Communication Efficiency. Before his ship pulled into San Diego for repairs, they participated in a search for a downed navy aircraft off the coast of La Jolla, California. Kirk was commended for his sharp and quick action that “resulted in positive identification of the plane with a minimum of delay and resulted in the ultimate recovery of the bodies of both the pilot and radioman.” These accolades came at good timing in the spring of 1937 as Kirk was being considered for promotion back in Washington.

127 Leave request letter from Kirk to Chief of Bureau of Navigation, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was on leave 1-29 Jul 1936 in Niantic Connecticut, and then from 20 Jul - 3 Aug enroute to Portland Oregon.
128 Medical Record Summary Sheet 2 Nov 1934, P/R, Box 3.
130 Naval History and Heritage Command, “Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships,” accessed 15 Feb 2021 and 29 April 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/m/milwaukee-iii.html. The ship departed San Diego 3 Jan 1938 to cruise to southeast Asian waters including stops in Australia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Guam because of increased tensions following the Panay incident on the Yangtze near Hankow 12 Dec 1937. In April 1944 the ship was transferred to the Soviet Union under lend-lease, then scrapped on return in 1949.
132 Letter of Appreciation from Commander Aircraft, Battle Force to Kirk 2 Dec 1936, P/R, Box 4. On 2 Dec 1936 Kirk was commended for 30 Nov search for a downed navy aircraft just north of San Diego.
133 Letter from Commander Cruisers, Battle Force to Chief of Bureau of Navigation 3 Feb 1937, P/R Box 1. While aboard Milwaukee Kirk was considered for promotion to captain. The Commander Cruisers, Battle Force sent for instructions on conducting the examination for promotion Feb 1937. See also letter from Chief of Bureau of Navigation to Commander, Cruiser Division Three 21 Jan 1937, P/R, Box 1. See also letter from Chief of Bureau of
**Staffer Once Again**

Officers of flag rank recognized Kirk’s record as a valuable staff officer, and they made unofficial inquiries into his availability and willingness to serve on their staffs. The first came from Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn, the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Fleet. Would Kirk come to his staff as Plans Officer? It was an important assignment, and Kirk both liked and admired the admiral, but he didn’t want plans. If he was to go to staff, he thought, it had to be as an operations officer. Kirk let it be known that he needed to remain in his command at sea job. Then, about eight months after assuming command of *Milwaukee*, Kirk was offered the opportunity to become operations officer on the staff of Admiral C. C. Block, who was in command of the battleships. Kirk knew Block from the Bureau of Ordnance days and accepted the move. It was good timing because Block soon was promoted to Hepburn’s position and Kirk became U.S. Fleet Operations Officer – a job he found “pretty fascinating.” True to his character, Kirk worked very well with others on staff. Kirk’s boss, the Chief of Staff, was Captain H. F. Leary, “a very competent man” in Kirk’s estimation. He appreciated Forrest Sherman, an aviation officer (who later become Chief of Naval Operations). Together they planned and held creative and unique exercises – many with an air element. They organized a
Fleet Air Review, a type of air show of force, with Vice Admiral Ernest J. King who oversaw carriers in San Diego. The result was a “great demonstration” in which seven hundred aircraft flew north over the anchored fleet near Long Beach.\(^{136}\) Block’s staff organized the fleet exercises near the Hawaiian Islands in 1937, and once again Kirk was impressed with not only what King’s aircraft could do at the time, but with how close it came to enacting what the Japanese would do four years later. King’s carriers (the “Black Fleet”) snuck north of the islands and launched a simulated air attack in bad weather and appeared over the fleet “to the startled consternation of everyone concerned.”\(^{137}\) Known as Fleet Problem Eighteen, the May 1937 exercise was grand in geographical scope from the west coast to the Aleutians and Midway to Hawaii. It incorporated 152 ships and 496 aircraft. Vice Admiral Ernest King and Captain William Halsey were key leaders, and the experience led to significant revisions of the Orange Plan for operations against Japanese forces in the event of war.\(^{138}\)

On June 25, 1937, Kirk reached the pinnacle of a typical naval career by being promoted to Captain.\(^{139}\) Some historians argue that World War II began two weeks later, on July 7, when war broke out between Japan and China.\(^{140}\) In October 1937, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, the former King, and the former Mrs. Simpson, visited Nazi Germany at Adolf Hitler’s invitation. Captain Kirk spent the remaining days of the year in late December confined to his rack on California, sick with the flu.\(^{141}\) Also that December, Kirk was asked to fill out a press

\(^{136}\) Kirk, Reminiscences, 115.
\(^{137}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{141}\) Medical History Sheet 30 Dec 1937, P/R, Box 3. Kirk was assigned to California when sick with flu 30 Dec 1937 and he was confined to his rack over New Year’s Day. He was better by 2 Jan 1938.
release form that is revealing. His listed social organizations that undoubtedly assisted in his professional network connections. They were centered in Washington and New York power centers. He was a member of the Army and Navy Club, the Army and Navy Country Club, and the Chevy Chase Club in Washington D.C., as well as the Ends of the Earth Club in New York.\textsuperscript{142}

He received orders at the end of January the following year (1939) to detach from the staff, but before he departed, there was one more big exercise – one Kirk enjoyed most.\textsuperscript{143} It was the fleet movement exercise through the Panama Canal to the Caribbean in the spring of 1939. Stealth and speed were of the essence. They sailed out of Long Beach in the middle of the night and tried to maintain radio silence (with mixed results). At the canal Kirk found it humorous that two British warships were told to wait for the American fleet to pass before it was their turn – “somewhat galling to their pride.”\textsuperscript{144} The fleet pulled into the North River in New York – an impressive grand display that made for “a very picturesque affair.” The flagship then had business at Annapolis, and that is where Kirk disembarked for an assignment as naval attaché to Great Britain.\textsuperscript{145}

The 51-year-old Captain Kirk’s career now made a decided turn. The gunning and ship-driving was ended. His contributions in staff work and diplomacy was just beginning. His technical and analytic mind, further trained in tactics and strategy, was ideal for intelligence work. His professional network helped him land assignments to make him a top ordnance man

\textsuperscript{142} Vital Statistics form 1 Dec 1937, P/R, Box 1.
\textsuperscript{144} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 117.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
and the Naval War College and personal studies had made him a confident tactician and
strategist to prepare him now as naval attaché in the most vital center of world naval power.
Chapter 4

An American at War: London Attaché Duty

In 1939, Captain Alan Goodrich Kirk’s naval career, although moving in a new direction, increasingly built on his skills, interests and abilities. He had a proven knack for technical detail as gun expert. He had excelled in diplomatic skills necessary for professional advancement. He was a naval scholar with the latest understanding in cutting-edge technical innovations as well as strategic theory. These combined with experience, made him a formidable organizer and administrator on staff, and prepared him well for upcoming challenges. Kirk stayed current on the design and capabilities in the ever-developing field of new naval weapon systems. His natural bent toward interacting with others professionally and socially – especially those his senior, honed his diplomatic and staff skills while building his professional network. Kirk was well prepared for the most important field job in the Office of Naval Intelligence.

Naval Attaché in London

Kirk’s third official attempt at attaché duty proved successful. He long wanted the job. By the spring of 1939, Kirk had a network of senior friends that could orchestrate the move with ease – his preparation and network made the assignment seem natural. Ralston Holmes, his skipper from *Mayflower*, was just leaving his role as the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), and Walter Anderson, his boss of glorious *West Virginia* days, was just coming onboard to replace him.¹ What’s more, Anderson’s rise to DNI came after he himself was London attaché.

The position of attaché in London was career enhancing. The renowned Admiral William S. Sims held the job as a lieutenant from 1897-1900 and again as a rear admiral from December 1917-March 1919. Kirk’s interest in being a naval attaché was also a family calling. His father-in-law, then Lieutenant Commander Frederic L. Chapin, was attaché to Paris from January 1908 - February 1911. Kirk’s network of friends and associates extended to the state department. One friend was Max Pruitt, onetime head of the Shipping Board. Here Pruitt interacted with other members including U.S. Ambassador to Britain Joseph P. Kennedy. Kennedy’s staff included Kirk acquaintances Herschel Johnson, Rudy Schoenfeld and Vinton Chapin, cousin to Lydia.

Orders came February 1, 1939 “to duty as Naval Attaché and Naval Attaché for Air to the American Embassy in London, England, as relief of Commander William K. Harrill, U.S. Navy.” He was to report the beginning of June. He spent a good deal of April sick - in and out of the Naval Hospital in Washington. By May, Kirk was well and preparing for his coming assignment, working temporary duty at the Office of the CNO. Then, on May 31, 1939, Kirk took passage aboard Manhattan out of New York bound for Plymouth, England. He went alone. His son Roger had the Mumps and so would come with his mother two weeks later. Deborah and Marian came when there were breaks in school and college. Kirk’s arrival in London coincided with the recent demise of the Munich Agreement. Hitler’s subjugation of the remainder of

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3 Kirk, Reminiscences, 122.
4 Letter to State Department form Acting Secretary of the Navy William D. Leahy 1 Feb 1939, P/R, Box 1. See also Letter from CNO to Bureau of Navigation 18 Apr 1939, P/R, Box 1. The formal Navy Department request for Kirk assignment to attaché duty came in the Spring of 1939 (28 Apr 1939). The attaché title was divided into Naval Attaché and Naval Attaché for Air to open the position up for two officers, but this was apparently normally not the case as a single individual filled this position in the cases of Harrill and Kirk.
5 Memorandum from US Naval Hospital CO to Bureau of Navigation 2 May 1939. Kirk was detached from Staff, CINC US Fleet and reported to Office of CNO 10 Apr just before reporting to hospital. Kirk was sick in US Naval Hospital Washington D.C. from 11 Apr 39 to 25 Apr 39 when discharged.
Czechoslovakia on March 15 ended any further peace efforts between Adolf Hitler and Neville Chamberlain, their agreement lasting only since the previous fall. Der Fuhrer had just published Mein Kampf in an English edition. Back home, John Steinbeck published his epic American novel The Grapes of Wrath.

Royal Welcome

Lydia and Roger arrived in Southampton on the America. Kirk surprised them by catching a ride with the harbor pilot and sailing with them into the harbor. “It was a joyful meeting,” Lydia remembered. His attaché assigned Buick limousine, an enormous car that felt bulky in central London, with chauffeur, Timms, took them to London to their small apartment on St. James Street. The next day Lydia met Catherine Robson, candidate for Roger’s nanny and housekeeper. She was a “strapping young woman” with a heavy New Zealand accent, who, according to Lydia, “turned out to be a treasure.”

The Kirks were thrilled to learn they were to attend the annual formal court ritual of the presentation of diplomats to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. Coming so soon after their arrival made for a busy several weeks. In late July the time came for the grand parade at Buckingham Palace. Timms drove the Kirks to the Kennedy’s ambassador residence for a

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8 Lydia Chapin Kirk, edited by Roger Kirk, Distinguished Service: Partner in Diplomacy 1896-1984 (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 55. Kirk, Reminiscences, 124. Kirk noted that this occasion at the end of July 1939 was the final Court held by King George VI and his wife Queen Elizabeth.
rehearsal the day before the event. Lydia found Mrs. Kennedy “a small, very pretty woman who seemed curiously shy.”9 The next day was spent preparing, and by eight that evening “we were entirely ready, Alan in uniform, the girls powdered and lipsticked, even our gloves on,” recalled Lydia, who thought she “looked like a pseudo-empress Josephine waiting for her husband Napoleon.”10 Upon arriving at the palace and being ushered into the waiting area the Kirks were amused by a last minute hassle that Mrs. Kennedy endured. She had on blue gloves and was told she must have white gloves. After a commotion, just before entering to see the King and Queen, Lydia saw she had them on just in time. Lydia remembered she “felt overcome by the sheer fairylike beauty of it all, the utterly astonishing color, the pageantry, the ordered, magnificent movement.”11 Kirk though it simply “a gorgeous affair.”12 The Kirks loved it.

Kirk soon attended a luncheon and listened to a speech by Prime Minister Chamberlin. His’s unease with the direction of events deepened as he listened. Chamberlin seemed weak and unsure. Newspaper reports about Hitler’s actions were increasingly alarming. He told Lydia they needed to consider moving their household out of London to the country.13 Apprehensive at first, his wife went along with the idea, knowing her husband had more information than most. She ended up being delighted with their move to Holyport House in Berkshire, about 30 miles west of central London.14 With “a certain amount of American gin” and their daughters joining them, the Kirks made “rather an explosive introduction into that English village.” With plenty of young men for teams, the Kirk family enjoyed baseball and softball in the village park.15

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10 Ibid., 67.
14 Ibid., 59.
After quickly settling in and participating in the highest of diplomatic theater, it was time to get down to business. Kirk was excited to get to work – although a bit apprehensive about performing well in the increasingly tense environment. Kirk’s office was at the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. He was to regard the ambassador as his superior officer. But Kirk had direct responsibility to the Navy Department, to the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). The head of ONI, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), was his friend Arthur Anderson. Anderson had been naval attaché in London from 1934 to 1937, and was Kirk’s advocate, reporting senior and boss. He was an experienced and effective administrator. Kirk emulated him. He effectively ran his office, and throughout the late spring and summer of 1939, he sent reports, letters, and messages to ONI, all chronicling the growing hostility in Europe.

**Preparing for War**

On August 18, Ambassador Kennedy asked Kirk for an emergency plan in case Britain went to war. Within days, on August 23rd, Kirk delivered a broad workable plan to keep Americans and their property in Britain safe. This included a plan for evacuation. Then he set about drawing up more detailed plans for the expansion of attaché capabilities which included recalling to active duty those U.S. Naval Reserve officers already in Britain. Tasked to develop the United States Navy interests in Britain, Kirk also ran a program where a group of observers assisted him by participating in, and evaluating, British naval operations – a manpower need that quickly mounted. All the while Kirk built a network of British contacts at the Admiralty that

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intensified intelligence gathering. The diplomatic part of his duty was to perfect relations between the United States and Britain. Kirk relished this task and jumped into building personal relationships and networking. He was especially charmed by Rear Admiral John H. Godfrey, head of British Intelligence Division. To Kirk’s great delight, Godfrey gave him a tour of the bomb-proof operations center including the “Code and Signal Room.” Impressed, and led to believe he would have future access, Kirk wrote Anderson telling of this sign of increased collaboration. Anderson, wishing to have cooperation continue to develop, arranged for British representatives to tour air operations on Saratoga.

Soon after he arrived in London, Godfrey’s man at the American desk escorted Kirk to meet senior officials of the British Navy, including The First Lord, the Earl of Stanhope, Winston Churchill’s immediate predecessor. Kirk renewed his acquaintance with the Second Sea Lord, Sir Charles Little, who he and Lydia had met in America. Little was “friendly” and “kind” and Kirk interacted with him often.

Keen to observe, Kirk worked to collect information about British perceptions of the likelihood of war and any actions in war preparations. Informal conversations with friends he made in the Admiralty proved helpful. He was, after all, and according to Lydia, “a gregarious man and a real sea dog, he made good contacts, indeed friends, among the British naval officers in England.” Not all the British were cooperative. Some of the British officers, Kirk found, thought the Americans were upstart – inexperienced and unrefined in their newfound naval power. Kirk knew many British leaders were concerned that Kennedy was prone to being

18 Memorandum CNO to Secretary of the Navy 6 Jul 1948, P/R, Box 1.
19 Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945* (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 252. Dorwart says Kirk was “impressionable” and especially “enchanted” with John H. Godfrey whom he conversed on a great variety of subjects.
impressed by the Germans and doubted that the American ambassador had their best interests at heart. The U.S. Ambassador was convinced the situation was increasingly grim. But Kirk had to be careful not to be seen as contradicting the embassy reports in his “supplemental military information.”

Kirk tried to get information on British advancements in radar technology with only limited success. It was still a very secretive project. Even though both sides were cautious, Kirk was generally pleased with the information exchange.

In the summer of 1939, Kirk was designated to oversee the evacuation of Americans from Britain - should the need arise. There were about 1,400 Americans in the London area, and up to 8,000 throughout Britain, that could need evacuation if war came. Kennedy asked Kirk to survey the ports in the west of Britain for safe evacuation sites that were less vulnerable to possible air attack. His family provided good cover as tourists as he explored the area up to Liverpool. They traveled with several embassy staff. They took account of facilities and accommodations for potentially large numbers of American refugees. They also toured cathedrals and castles along the way.

In August, Kirk took Lydia and their girls on more combined business and leisure trips from London. They explored Dover area port facilities. On one trip to the Bristol area, Kirk took his family to the Valley of the Wye near the Welch boarder to tour the ruins of Goodrich Castle, which had been visited and photographed by his two uncles in his youth. The family was very proud to say they had a castle, and that the Goodrich name was from ancient aristocracy. Kirk proudly announced “Now, girls, we’ll show you a British castle. This is the old family home!”

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24 Ibid., 20.
They arrived in heavy rain, which dampened the spirits as they trudged around the ruins. Kirk mentioned to a tour guide “You know, we hold in our family that this castle, named Goodrich, bears our family name, and they must have lived here and built it and so on.” New information from the guide added to the disappointment in seeing only unimpressive fragments of the original building. “Oh, no. I’m sorry, Sir, oh no, Sir. This castle belonged to the Duke of Pembroke.” The guide explained that the duke built numerous castles and named this castle after the stone mason who built it. Kirk’s wife and daughters “were rather scornful” as the new truth soaked in. To forever cap the disastrous outing, Kirk forgot and left his prized Briggs umbrella.27 By the time they returned in late August, there was news that Hitler and Stalin had signed a non-aggression pact – leaving British ally Poland in jeopardy. The Kirks decided it was best to send Marian back to college in the states early, and to not unpack their shipment of belongings that had just arrived in London.28 With war looming, Kirk extended his work hours and spent more evenings at the office.

**War Begins**

On Friday, September 1, 1939, Hitler’s forces invaded Poland. At noon on Sunday, Prime Minister Chamberlain, before Parliament, declared war on Germany. Although they were from a neutral country, Americans in London found that they shared the fate of those around them. As if on cue, the air raid sirens sounded moments after the speech. Kirk and embassy staff descended into the bomb shelter. The ‘all clear’ soon came – it was only one airplane whose pilot failed to send proper signals.29

Arriving home late that night, Kirk told his family that England and France were mobilizing for war and Londoners would start evacuating their children the next day. “Dinner that evening was not too cheerful an affair,” Lydia recalled. The next day came early. Awakened after midnight by the ringing telephone on the hallway wall, Kirk learned from the embassy that the Athenia, a passenger liner, had been sunk - possibly by a U-boat torpedo. Again, the phone rang – this time it was the White House directing Kirk to fly to Galway, Ireland, to interview survivors to confirm the torpedo attack, and to account for American survivors. Flying out of Reading airport at 9 a.m., the plane landed in a Galway cow pasture then serving as the airport. Upon landing however, Kirk and his party were hustled off to the local jail by a group of Irish Republican Guard. It was the first and only time he was jailed. The sight of stone walls and sound of iron gates closing behind left him with a most sinking feeling. Kirk sternly explained he was not British but American and pointed to the star on his uniform sleeve (Lydia had rightly insisted he wear his uniform to mark him as American). His ordeal soon ended, and he was released just in time to meet the first boats loaded with survivors. Athenia’s officers and several passengers confirmed the torpedo attack. Kirk made a list of American survivors and headed to the embassy in Dublin where he reported back to the White House staff directly. Of the approximately 1,300 passengers, 112 lives were lost – including 28 Americans.

Ambassador Kennedy oversaw the compiling of details about passengers. After several days this task was more challenging because survivors were separated, with some in Galway, some taken back to Glasgow, and still others taken aboard the City of Flint which, after rescue,

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continued to Halifax, Nova Scotia. With staff working at peak, the ambassador sent his son, John F. Kennedy, then 22 years old, on the overnight train to represent him and assure the survivors that they would get help returning to the United States. Young Kennedy was a Harvard student and had been not only visiting his parents but traveling extensively in mainland Europe.32

Another early fright came in a battle at sea in mid-September involving Britain’s highly prized aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*. The ship narrowly escaped submarine launched torpedoes and returned safely to port. Soon there was a German air raid in Scotland, and a German pilot claimed to have sunk the *Ark Royal*. Kennedy asked Kirk to go personally, and the Admiralty happily sent Kirk to the ship to confirm to Washington that it was indeed unharmed. The BBC radio news service reported Kirk’s trip, and German press responded by running a cartoon of a blindfolded American naval attaché in a rowboat with only the *Ark Royal’s* stern visible, implying Kirk was dupped.33 The DNI sent Kirk a private message warning him about the press, sharing a Washington political concern about visibly favoring the British in the war. Kirk thought this was a rather “curious” note but understood the problems of neutrality and indeed the influence of American isolationism.34

**Intelligence Reporting**

For the next several weeks Kirk collected and sent off valuable information regarding war operations, providing the U.S. Navy with important lessons-learned by the British. The CNO would call these reports “of unestimable value to the U.S. Navy in developing its own combat

33 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 139.
34 Ibid.
readiness.” Kirk passed information on British war preparations, provided ongoing analysis on happenings in ports, lessons learned from British pilots in combat, and effectiveness of antiaircraft guns mounted on ships.

Later in the fall Kirk continued a round of duties – traveling to various British ports with Timms the chauffeur in his large car and checking in with American observers which included, on one occasion, bailing two agents out of a Dover jail after they aroused suspicions of British security police. The two were American military “observers” who were supposed to coordinate with the embassy. One had a name to cause suspicion – ‘Toohey’ Spaatz, and the other had, according to Kirk, “a fierce black moustache” and they “on their own,” on a Saturday in civilian clothes, decided to go to Dover to see the bombing results firsthand. The submarine war was increasing in intensity and Kirk’s attention focused on learning as much as he could on the new magnetic mines the Germans used. He and his staff dug for any information. British intelligence ran quickly ahead of the Americans since they were on a war-footing. Due to US neutrality and lack of an agreement, cooperation with the British at this stage was limited. The British did release some findings to Kirk about captured German magnetic mines, resulting in the development of countermeasures that included lining the ship hauls with copper. Dubbed the “chastity belt,” the British kept the information to themselves for a time – hoping the Germans would see no need to reengineer the weapon. Kirk’s success in gathering information on mines

35 Memorandum CNO to Secretary of the Navy 6 Jul 1948, P/R, Box 1.
36 Kirk, Reminiscences, 140. Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 252. Kirk and his small staff had to check on ship damage and confirm sinkings by physically going to ports and observing first-hand. The name “Toohey” probably refers to Air Force General Carl “Tooey” Spaatz who became commander of U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. Kirk refers to him as a friend and was later amused in his oral history to say, “So my friend Toohey Spaatz had the pleasure of being bailed out of the British brig by the intervention of the American Naval Attaché.”
was not matched in other areas, however. Kirk blamed poor security in Washington for British reluctance to share.37

The British refrained from sharing anti-submarine warfare (ASW) information.38 This proved damaging as the U.S. Navy later struggled to catch up in this effort.39 It was a great disappointment. Even though Kirk became friends with British officers, personal trust was not enough. ASW intelligence remained dear.40 For his part, Kirk wanted to give the British information on the Norden Bombsight, as well as permission for an increase in naval observers of U.S. fleet exercises. Kirk worked for increased sharing, but there remained limits on both sides.41 The U.S. was still officially neutral, so cooperation was hampered.

Kirk tried to express solidarity as best he could. As the British began sending soldiers to the continent during the especially cold winter of 1939, Kirk made sure one of the Guards Regiments of the British Expeditionary Force, just sent off to France, had with them American softball and baseball equipment to enjoy in their down time and to keep morale and physical activity up. It was, as his wife Lydia later commented, quite “subversive” in that it caused dissention among loyal British cricketers.42

The first naval battle of World War II occurred on December 13, when HMS Exeter and two accompanying British light cruisers engaged and damaged the German pocket battleship

37 Kirk, Reminiscences, 143.
39 Ibid. Cohen and Gooch wrote a chapter entitled “Failure to Learn” in their book Military Misfortunes about American anti-Submarine Warfare at the start of the war.
40 Ibid. See also Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 252. Dorwart says the British kept important information from Kirk about the safety of the Ark Royal, their prized “battleship” (it was an aircraft carrier). Dorwart also seems to have the chronology wrong. When he says that soon after assuring Kirk the anchored ship was safe from submarine attack, a message he relayed to ONI, the ship was torpedoes and sunk by a German submarine. The ship was in fact safe when Kirk saw it in September 1939, and it was not sunk by a torpedo until November 1941.
41 Kirk, Reminiscences, 144, 145. See also Dorwart, 252, 253.
42 Kirk, Reminiscences, 146.
Graf Spee near the mouth of the River Plate in South America. The victory was the source of great national pride and helped boost Winston Churchill’s stature as war leader. Churchill had, just two months prior to the battle, been appointed First Lord of the Admiralty – the job he held previously during World War I. Just before Christmas, Kirk had a scheduled 20-minute interview with Churchill - then First Lord of the Admiralty, which ended up lasting an hour. Churchill “received me in his office, at his desk, in a big room in the Admiralty,” recalled Kirk. “And he pulled out of his desk drawer the same chart that he had used in the other war, the First War, the 1914-1918 War, to show the periods of activity of the German submarines. As he described it to me, this rose to a peak, then it fell off, then it rose to a peak again. It was just like respiration. They would come and go, come and go, and you could count on it. He felt that in that war, and in this war too, the Germans did things pretty much by method, and if you could get the rhythm, you’d know how you should handle it.” But in this new war, when submarine warfare was extended in distance and time at sea, this notion of Churchill, Kirk later observed, did not entirely hold up. Rumor of Churchill’s selection as next prime minister was spreading, and Kirk left the meeting with a good impression.43 In the tumultuous year’s remaining week Kirk suffered from a bad case of the flu. It was more than a month before he fully recovered.44

1940

As his health improved, Kirk worked harder than ever, providing Washington information on British training procedures, equipment, and technology. Kirk went to Plymouth

43 Kirk, Reminiscences, 150.
44 Western Union Telegram London to Washington 3 Jan 1940, P/R, Box 1. Kirk, Reminiscences, 142. Report of Civilian Medical Treatment, NMS Form U, 2 May 1939, P/R, Box 2. Kirk had a heavy cold in the chest or Bronchitis with signs of pneumonia and he required the emergency treatment of a British medical team on December 30th. A Western Union telegram sent from London to the CNO (OPNAV) Washington, informed them Kirk was sick with influenza and was expected to be back for duty on January 10. He was diagnosed with influenza, and treated at home with eight doctor and nurse consultations lasting to February 19, 1940.
to tour HMS *Exeter* and note battle damage. His visit was arranged by Lord Astor and Lady Astor and they were given a two-hour tour of the damage by the Commodore and the Captain - who were careful not to discuss tactics used and details of the battle. The Commodore was newly arrived, but Captain Frederick Bell, injured in the face, had led the heavily damaged ship in continued fighting and could provide first-hand account. Kirk focused and observed intently. He was quite pleased with himself when later, while on the return train to London, he recalled and wrote from memory a detailed account of the hits and locations which allowed him to reconstruct a plausible scenario of engagement maneuvering. Of course, Kirk was in his element. His report was quickly sent to ONI and passed around to senior staff. Later, after America joined the war and became a full partner, the British in Washington got hold of Kirk’s report, made copies, and forwarded it to London where it was highly praised as a model of what could be observed on short visits.45

About this time Kirk met British Admiral Bertram Ramsay, who was recently recalled to active duty and made Vice Admiral, Dover. Ramsay began the year giving high profile briefings and escorting visits to his Dover Castle headquarters and area defenses from Churchill and King George VI.46 Kirk visited Ramsay in Dover several times – observing defenses and starting what he thought was the beginning of a friendship.47

45 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 157. This was Waldorf Astor and wife Nancy, who was the first woman to serve in the House of Commons. Younger brother William “Vincent” Astor of New York was a friend of FDR and son of John Jacob Astor who died on the *Titanic*. Vincent Astor acted as FDR’s personal spy during the time Kirk was Director of Naval Intelligence.


**Grim Reports**

Events sped up in April when Hitler ordered invasions of Denmark and Norway. On the 9th the Kirks saw the newly released production of “Gone with the Wind” and went to bed late. The next morning, arriving at the Embassy at 9 am, Kirk found Kennedy “tearing his hair.” Off their guard, Norway and Denmark were in the process of falling to Hitler’s forces. The British were surprised and unprepared as well. A British led force landed in and around Trondheim to assist the Norwegian resistance, but because of incompetent British generals and the swift German advance, the invasion failed.\(^{48}\)

In early May, the Germans invaded Holland and Belgium. Kirk attended a luncheon hosted by the Dutch naval attaché while blitzkrieg enveloped his country, soon forcing his queen and government into exile with him in England. To be safe, Kirk decided to box up his office codes and ciphers and have his aid, Lieutenant Commander Bill Mailliard sequester in an upper room of his personal residence in Holyport. Supplied with two pistols and an axe, Mailliard was to safeguard and destroy the items in his care if Germany invaded Britain. On May 11, Winston Churchill became prime minister – just three days before Germans broke through allied defense lines in Belgium.

Kirk convinced Lydia to take Roger and go to Ireland to stay with a relative, Aunt Bessie in Londonderry, where they thought they might stay until the end of the war. Timms drove them to Liverpool where they caught a night flight to Belfast. But within a week, Kirk had arranged passage to America for them. Meanwhile, Kirk helped arrange evacuation of other Americans the same way - by flying them to Ireland and sending them home by chartered passenger liners.

exclusively for American refugees. In London Kirk kept track of travel and meal expenses in monthly reports for his office to be reimbursed. These charges to the Bureau of Navigation give overview of his mobility. They reveal Kirk routinely traveled around England from the time he arrived, but during the spring and summer 1940, he was too busy keeping up with events to leave the office.

Kirk applied for transportation back to the states for Lydia and Roger on May 18. They were to congregate with other Americans in Belfast, Ireland, and prepare for passage on the SS President Roosevelt, scheduled to sail on June 2. The ship, designed for the comfort of 250 passengers, took on board 750, mainly American wives and children from the Embassy and others from all over Britain, including many businessmen’s families. They felt safe from German submarines as they would be flying the American flag and sailing from an Irish port. While this evacuation was taking place, Operation Dynamo, the dramatic evacuation of British forces from

50 Series of monthly form reports from Kirk to Bureau of Navigation, P/R, Box 1.
$12 “subsistence and incidentals” and $14.75 “transportation” in July 1939,
$12 “subsistence and incidentals” for August,
$36 in September as well as $65.10 in transportation,
None in October 1939
$3.48 transportation November 1939,
None for subsistence and $3.64 for transportation December 1939
$12 for subsistence and incidentals January 1940
$12 subsistence and $15.92 transportation February 1940
None for March 1940
None for April 1940
None for May 1940
None for June 1940
$72 subsistence and $60.39 transportation for July 1940
None for August 1940
$6 subsistence for September 1940
$36 subsistence and $31.05 for October 1940
$30 subsistence and $38.64 transportation for November 1940 (signed by W. B. Ammon for Kirk)
None for December 1940 (signed W. B. Ammon for Kirk)
51 Application for Dependent Travel 18 May 1940 and S. and A. Form 33, P/R, Box 1. The cost was $474.63 for passage on the Roosevelt for Lydia and Roger.
52 Kirk, Reminiscences, 152.
the continent at Dunkirk, reached its climatic days between May 27 and June 4. On June 4, the
defiant and encouraged Churchill, now Prime Minister, gave his rousing “we shall fight on the
beaches” speech in the House of Commons proclaiming, “we shall never surrender.” Kirk
thought that although the rescue operation at Dunkirk was a “most remarkable feat, a beautiful
job,” the loss of all the equipment and supplies left Britain very vulnerable. Kirk later remarked
that despite Mr. Churchill’s marvelous appeal, in his opinion, “there wouldn’t have been
resistance” if the Germans invaded.53

A New Relationship

British reluctance to share information with Kirk changed when Churchill became prime
minister and the country recognized an emergency in barley surviving the harrowing Dunkirk
rescue and then, several weeks later on June 25, the shocking news of the fall of France.
Churchill immediately communicated to FDR the dire need for ships and supplies. Roosevelt
was eager to assist. Lend-Lease planning ensued. Kirk was “instrumental in arranging from the
London end for the exchange of fifty over-age destroyers with Great Britain in the summer of
1940 in return for the lease of British bases in the Western Atlantic to the United States.”54
Anything official with Lend-Lease had to wait until after the November election. American
isolationism was strong and high-risk political maneuvering and secrecy were paramount. Lend-
Lease became law March 11, 1941.

Meanwhile the British opened the spigot of information – some of it undoubtedly crafted
to influence Kirk’s and his country’s perceptions of the critical need for aid. The new British

53 Kirk, Reminiscences, 149, 152. Kirk was most impressed with the secrecy in which the rescue operations took
place.
54 Memorandum CNO to Secretary of the Navy 6 Jul 1948, P/R, Box 1. Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of
the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 253.
leadership increasingly disfavored Ambassador Kennedy and worked behind and around him to build American support. Godfey and his NID Deputy, Captain W. D. Stephens, cultivated a better relationship with Kirk. They provided German U-boat intelligence and worked to give Kirk a more frightening outlook – perhaps overdone in hindsight. Given the lackluster support and defeatist outlook of Ambassador Kennedy, from the British perspective, using Kirk to instigate Washington to act was a reasonable strategy. Kirk was not naive and suspected as much. But he did warn Anderson of overall weak defenses, growing “fifth column” activity, and he even anticipated martial law in Britain.\footnote{Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 253. Dorwart may overstate Kirk’s concern and outright panic in his decision to send his household goods on the return trip without completely unpacking. Susan Ronald, The Ambassador: Joseph P Kennedy at the Court of ST. James, 1938-1940 (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2021), 326.}

Kirk’s reporting continued all the while. The late spring and early summer effort focused on the lessons learned in British experiences in Norway. His reports were of great interest and value, especially his evaluation of the failures of the lack of coordination with air power. The British had not yet integrated air force units into operations of land and sea.\footnote{Memorandum CNO to Secretary of the Navy 6 Jul 1948, P/R, Box 1.} Top navy officials praised Kirk for his organization skill and strengthening ties to the British Navy. As far as gathering news and technical information about the war and machines of war, Kirk’s London office was the most beneficial of all the naval attaché offices anywhere else in the world.\footnote{Ibid. See also Dorwart, 249.}

By the end of June, after France fell, all Britain was in hushed anticipation of a coming German onslaught of some sort. Kirk was evaluating stark predictions of imminent German invasion of Ireland for staging and preparation for ultimate invasion of Britain. Kirk thought it a
distinct possibility. Fear of German bomb attack from the air impressed him less however, telling Lydia in a message not to worry –“think of pigeons, how rarely they drop anything on you.”

Still, Kirk himself evacuated Holyport house and moved into a communal residence at Englefield near Runnymede, about 25 miles west of central London. He soon learned the air attack was indeed the biggest threat.

**Battle of Britain**

The Battle of Britain began mid-July and lasted over three months. German bombers at first focused on air defense targets during daylight raids but by September they engaged in a massive bombing campaign at night on cities including London. From Englefield, at night beginning in July, Kirk witnessed the bombing of airfields and then the attacks on London with anti-aircraft guns blazing. In the mornings, he inspected the damage first-hand during the commute to Grosvenor Square. In spots there was “desolation” he noted, but he was impressed by “the spirit of the people” and the “cohesion of national will.” He was even more impressed with how the collective experience melted class differences. “Everybody turned to, high, low, rich and poor, and did all that they could, to help the sufferers and restore the damage,” he observed.

Kirk was with Air Vice Marshal Baker (whom he referred to as “a friend of mine”) in the war rooms after one furious night in late September where the British tallied 187 German aircraft destroyed. He learned that essentially, Royal Air Force Fighter Command was fully employed, with only two Spitfires in reserve. The hope was that they had just seen the worst.

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60 Ibid., 160.
London Bridge was under attack, Kirk had to have emergency treatment of a personal nature. He suffered a broken dental bridge that had been “firmly fixed” before leaving for London in May 1939. British tea and scones with ample sugar made an impact. In pain and gum irritability, he went to a doctor in Berkshire for emergency repairs.61

During the September air raids Kirk wrote Lydia. On the 16th, he told her in one letter, bombing began about 9 p.m. and continued until 5:20 a.m. and resulted in many fires, “one of them being the well-known Navy tailoring establishment of Gieves, where a brand-new uniform of mine gave an added luster to the flames!” While the folks at home in the U.S. listened to live reports of the London Blitz dispatches of broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, Kirk, on several occasions, watched the bombing from the embassy roof when working late. Looking up, he never saw planes, but reported plenty of flashes of light outlining barrage balloons. By late October, Kirk noted there had been over 260 air raids in London. They then averaged four or five a day.62

The Admiralty asked Kirk to tour a spot on the south coast and observe and report on invasion defenses. At the next day’s end, he gave his opinion – that defenses “were completely inadequate” and lacking in ground forces and that “the beach defenses were not adequate to prevent a landing in full force at all.” Kirk’s army counterpart, Brigadier General Raymond E. Lee, the acting military attaché, came to see him after his report. “My goodness, you certainly raised hell!” he told Kirk. Kirk’s comments, said Lee, had “thrown the War Office into a spin.” Kirk replied “Well, I’m awfully sorry, Raymond, but I only reported what I saw, and from a sailor’s point of view, the Germans could land anywhere around that particular part of the south

61 NMS Form U Report of Civilian Medical, Dental and Hospital Treatment 22 May 1941, P/R, Box 2. The broken bridge was treated in August 1940, by Mr. John Barnes, 16 High Street Maidenhead, Berkshire.
coast, and that’s that.” A short time later the British Army generals in charge were relieved of command – one being replaced by Bernard Montgomery.\(^{63}\) Kirk made more trips with Timms around England. He was impressed with people’s excellent morale. He was equally impressed with the ongoing construction projects in shipyards – all continuing as normal.\(^{64}\)

In late October, Ambassador Kennedy, who had lost the confidence of Roosevelt and Churchill months before, was finally replaced by John Winant. Kirk moved his staff, which had grown to about 20 persons, to Barley Mow, a pub near Englefield Green. Several newly arrived experts focused their efforts studying anti-submarine and mine warfare. That fall Kirk still found some time for leisure. On the golf course he passed signs reading “UXB” marking the place for unexploded bombs. One UXB sign found on the links had the added posting “A ball falling in this area may be considered to be replaced without a loss of stroke.”\(^{65}\)

Ghormley

To Kirk’s “chagrin,” Rear Admiral Robert Ghormley arrived in August from the CNO’s office with a small support staff with instructions that he was to act as attaché. Kirk was embarrassed. There was no organizational structure to Ghormley’s role – he did not replace Kirk, nor was he overseeing him. Kirk thought this was “a little awkward” to say the least. Rumors suggested Ghormley was a personal spy for President Roosevelt, who had lost trust in Ambassador Kennedy. For his part, Kirk reckoned Ghormley an “old friend” and “a very fine man.” But the doubling up of attaché’s was “perfectly silly” from Kirk’s perspective, believing

\(^{63}\) Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 164. Lee was two years Kirk’s senior. He would next be assigned as Assistant Chief of Army Intelligence whereas Kirk would be assigned as Director of Naval Intelligence.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 165.

that “the Department” had done this because they thought the British wanted an officer of flag rank. On a personal level, insisted Kirk, the two men “never had any friction of any sort.” But it was another matter amongst their staffs. In a phone call to General Lee, a Ghormley aide praised the army for staying in London and complained of the more limited hours of Kirk’s staff because of their daily commute.

Kirk didn’t need to take it personally. Lee had to deal with the arrival of General Strong as well. Both men had warning. At a cocktail party hosted by Kirk a month prior, they learned rumor of the visit. Ghormely and Strong were to focus on the “bases for destroyers” deal that Roosevelt and Churchill prioritized – leaving Kennedy cut out. Ghormley and Strong also brought an enigmatic Colonel Donovan with them to meet secretly with the British Chiefs of Staff. Colonel William J. (“Wild Bill”) Donovan later became head of the soon to be created Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The secrecy was important as to not alert and stiffen American isolationism in the face of the coming presidential election. Also, there was a matter of trust between Washington and its’ embassy. Embassy reports represented Kennedy’s unfavorable bias toward the British and needed confirmation.

Contrary to the way he may have felt, Kirk received high praise. He was performing his duties so well that the Chief of Bureau of Ships, S. M. Robinson, went out of his way to let Kirk know the “unusual degree of diligence and initiative” he found in Kirk’s reports by way of ONI. “This Bureau wishes to express its appreciation of the general excellence of the reports which

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66 Kirk, Reminiscences, 167. Ghormley was also a personal friend of President Franklin Roosevelt, who later assisted in his selection to command in the south Pacific where he was later heavily criticized for failures – some may be attributed to a tooth abscess which caused extensive pain – likely brought about by sugar in tea and scones during London duty. As the Naval Dental Corps suggests – “can’t bit can’t fight.”


68 Ibid., 29, 52. It appeared Lee had only limited interaction with Kirk, but if there were attempts at building a positive relationship – it was at Kirk’s instigation in holding the cocktails. See 140-147.
have been and are being submitted...they are of the greatest value. They are being given the

closes study, and in numerous cases have resulted in immediate action being taken.”

69 Ghromley himself, soon re-named Special Naval Observer, London, forwarded his support for Kirk’s
promotion to the CNO and Director of Naval Intelligence. Kirk, said Ghromley, “is performing
the strenuous and important duties of Naval Attaché, London, in a most excellent manner,
displaying unusual judgment and initiative in carrying out these duties. His leadership and
cooperation are all that could be asked of anybody. He is loyal, unswerving, and tireless in his
determination to carry out the duties assigned him in the best manner possible.”

70 Meanwhile, just before the end of his time as Ambassador, Kennedy asked Kirk for an
assessment of Japanese capabilities and potential in taking control of southeast Asia. His report
to Kennedy was quick and direct. Kirk concluded the Japanese were quite capable and British
defenses were inadequate – especially in Singapore. He took heat for this from embassy political
staff but stood firm. About a year later, when Kirk was proved accurate after the Japanese
successfully captured Singapore, Kennedy remembered and praised Kirk for his prescience.

71 All along however, Kirk strongly favored the priority of the European theater of operations over the
pacific.

72 Modern Intelligence and James Bond

The attaché in Britain was the most important and highly regarded intelligence
assignment in the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). As attaché, Kirk was a known spy in the

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69 Letter from Chief of Bureau of Ships to Naval Attaché, London 24 Sep 40, P/R, Box 1.
70 Letter from Ghromley to CNO 11 Oct 1940, P/R, Box 1.
71 Kirk, Reminiscences, 167. This could be one element in JFK choosing Kirk for the Taiwan ambassadorship in
1962.
72 Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD Naval
Institute Press, 2019), 245.
sense that the British knew Kirk reported all he learned about them back to Washington. That he
delt in secrets was a secret to no one. But in the fall of 1940, demand for secrecy and spying, and
its’ clandestine aura, grew substantially. Kirk’s senior in the chain of command, Arthur
Anderson, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), was acutely aware of the increase in
demands on his organization. He had been attaché to London as well. As if he was already
preparing him to continue in his career footsteps, Anderson told Kirk that he found the director
job quite interesting. However, the DNI found that plans for staff expansion was delayed for lack
of funding. The lack of funding was due to strong political winds toward isolationism.\textsuperscript{73} The two
shared a precarious position representing a neutral American government.

Leading up to the summer of 1940, the DNI was ever hungrier for combat information –
especially regarding submarine warfare, and “fifth column” activities.\textsuperscript{74} Kirk’s reports were
largely pessimistic. In one he told Anderson of an “undercurrent of apathy and distaste for the
whole war” in England. In another he warned the DNI that England was “no more fortified or
prepared to withstand an invasion in force than Long Island, New York.”\textsuperscript{75} It was in Kirk’s
character to be harsh in characterizing readiness. Just as his frankness got him into trouble
before, as in the case while on staff at the Bureau of Ordinance when he offered the blistering
battleship gun testing report, Kirk found resistance to his clear unvarnished opinion. He had
maintained his view of British weakness – not even withholding from the British themselves – to
their annoyance. The American military (army) attaché sent more positive and uplifting reports,
prompting the British head of naval intelligence, Rear Admiral John H. Godfrey, to believe
defeatism was more the spirit of the naval people than the army people at the American

\textsuperscript{73} Jeffery M. Dorwart, \textit{Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945} (Annapolis, MD Naval
Institute Press, 2019), 33, 234.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 239 - 241, 250.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 242.
Embassy. Godfrey kept watchful eye over the information passed to the American attachés. He sought to curate all the information Kirk received – such was the necessity of official channels under the strain of a neutral partner paradox.

Kirk described Godfrey, officially Director of the Naval Intelligence Division (NID) of the British Admiralty, as “perfectly civil and perfectly nice” although he was “never what you might call a really warm and outgoing person.” Godfrey was more than an administrator. Kirk judged that he “was always by nature inclined to be crafty.” Commander Ian Fleming, already at work as his personal assistant, thought him a pirate. Godfrey was part-inspiration for the future novelists’ “M” character. Fleming had also met Robert Harling, the typographer and part-inspiration for his future “James Bond,” in the summer of 1939. Fleming poached Harling from the royal navy to work for him in the Inter-Service Topographical Division, and relished Harling’s detailed and flamboyant reports while undercover in exotic foreign lands – sometimes involving sexual encounters with attractive women. Harling was part of Fleming’s growing personal network, whose information he cultivated and harvested for the Weekly Intelligence Report, or WIR. American officials soon became envious of the WIR, and U.S. service chiefs soon invited Fleming’s topographic experts to brief them as well.

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77 Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 244.
78 Kirk, Reminiscences, 122.
Donovan

Kirk knew of growing intrigue and sought to mitigate undue British influence. For example, Anderson wanted to employ Wallace B. Phillips, a former American intelligence officer during World War I and now head of a rubber products company in London. Kirk advised against hiring him because he thought him a possible British agent. But Anderson hired Phillips anyway. Phillips later worked for the mysterious Colonel “Wild Bill” Donovan as his British operations head.\(^80\) In July 1940, Donovan was given a presidential assignment to travel to London to assess the situation – to discover how dire the plight of the British, determine if Britain would fight the Nazis, and if so, assess if they could win, or would they negotiate a peace. Months earlier Donovan was encouraged to see FDR by two New York political friends, the Dulles brothers – Allan (future head of the Central Intelligence Agency in the Eisenhower’s administration) and John Foster (who later served as Eisenhower’s Secretary of State). The three men knew war would come, but what kind of war, with Britain an ally or sidelined? They arranged for Donovan to then met the new Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox in Washington and discussed the British situation during the week of his Senate confirmation hearings. Knox, a newspaper publisher, and close advisor to the president, arranged a meeting with Roosevelt.\(^81\) Roosevelt wanted clear reports. He did not trust Ambassador Kennedy. On July 1, as if on que to highlight the problem and provide urgency, DNI Anderson, who was also Donovan’s friend, provided a confused report to the Senate Naval Affairs Committee about the British situation.\(^82\) Knox asked Donovan to go to London immediately. Donovan agreed provided he had support in

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\(^80\) Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945* (Annapolis, MD Naval Institute Press, 2019), 237. Donovan became Coordinator of Strategic Information.


making the trip look like private business and that Kennedy would not be told about his mission.\textsuperscript{83}

Anderson sent Kirk instructions through secret channels to assist Donovan in every way, to keep his dealings secret and to arrange access to British intelligence officials.\textsuperscript{84} Donovan arrived July 14, and soon he and Kirk conversed about British chances. They cooperated all through the Battle of Britain or “Blitz”. Donovan asked Kirk’s opinion about the prospects of the Royal Air Force. Kirk told him that although data suggests the Germans have the upper hand, the morale of the young pilots was amazing, and so they would probably win in the air.\textsuperscript{85} Kirk arranged for Roscoe Hillenkoetter, his counterpart in Paris, to come to London to meet Donovan to explain German intentions for France and explain how the Germans used their “fifth column” to secure France. The fifth column methods and activities were vigorously studied in countries the Germans had vanquished.\textsuperscript{86} Much of the concern over “fifth column” activities later proved overblown, but at the time it was an ominous menace for England. Upon his return to Washington, Donovan wrote to Kirk that “I think that so far as the restoration of morale here was concerned the trip was worthwhile. I found that in general the morale was pretty low and there was a feeling of helplessness insofar as England was concerned.” Donovan returned to England December 14, and Kirk and Lee met him at Waterloo Station.\textsuperscript{87} But Kirk’s interaction with Donovan on this second trip was limited, as he was days away from traveling back to the states for consultations.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 210, 211.
Reporting Home

Washington officials were starved for first-hand accounts of the situation in Europe. They were also determined to be supportive and optimistic regarding British survival. Kirk found his own reputation was being challenged in a city rife with rumor. Lydia, serving as unofficial intelligence gatherer for her husband back in Washington, wrote to him explaining her sources - family and friends of the powerful in the navy and elsewhere, told her in social settings that navy leaders were complaining Kirk was overly pessimistic and that the situation just couldn’t be as dire as he made out. Did Kirk spread a pessimism contagion to Kennedy or visa vera? Kirk believed this feeling was due to his report, before the Blitz, that suggested that “the British had lost control of the English Channel.” This was what they questioned. How could arguably the strongest naval power not control home waters? “It was true, but it wasn’t very palatable in Washington,” Kirk remembered, noting the German installation of large guns on the French side, and engaging in bombing Dover and all along the coastline of England. Kirk’s daughter was getting married, and this provided a perfect cover story. On October 10, 1940, Kirk was given classified confidential temporary duty orders to return to Washington D.C. for duty with the CNO from mid-December to mid-January 1941.

In the weeks leading up to the November election, FDR and Churchill communicated in a flurry of telegrams – some sent over Kirk’s attaché circuit with the label “former naval person” to identify the president. Kirk had sensed considerable angst among the British about losing Roosevelt. Churchill worried that FDR, running for an unprecedented third term, would lose the election of 1940. He noted Roosevelt’s victory was the cause of “considerable gratification all through the British Isles and even in the Home Fleet, where I happened to have gone at the

88 Kirk, Reminiscences, 168.
By late November Kirk’s office was so flooded with messages that he “brusquely” told Lee, much to the military attaché’s annoyance, that he would no longer send cables for his army office by way of his mechanical ciphering machines. Also, Kirk’s temporary duty orders were modified to extend his stay in the U.S. indefinitely, so he arranged his affairs as though he would not be back. Lee, also recalled to Washington, found transport booked solid until late December. In the third Roosevelt administration isolationism no longer held sway. All sensed the dramatic rise in urgency.

Before leaving London, Kirk was given a letter from Ambassador Kennedy. Kennedy said he wanted “to thank you (Kirk) again most sincerely for your wholehearted and splendid cooperation which I value and appreciate more than I can tell you.” Kennedy appreciated Kirk and his staff and gave an assurance that their professional (political) relationship would continue. “This is not goodbye but only au revoir, I hope, for you are indeed a swell fellow, and that is the way I size you up. Your competence, popularity, initiative and resourcefulness, especially under trying and difficult conditions, always came to the rescue and make you the kind of man that one would like to have handy at all times for the benefit of your sound judgment, ability and readiness to cooperate.” To his salutation he adds extra flare of the personal to the requisite “with my warm regards and hearty good wishes for your continued success and happiness” with which he punctuates the point “believe me, dear Captain Kirk…” The Kennedy charm came all out for Kirk. That Kennedy meant what he said is evidenced much later by a family network that

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91 Raymond E. Lee, edited by James Leutze, The London Journal of General Raymond E. Lee: 1940-1941 (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1971), 140, 147. Lee wanted to go with Kirk, but Kirk had booked well in advance and before the election. Lee noted Kirk’s arrangements were made earlier to attend his daughter’s wedding, showing the army not only bought the cover, but was delayed in arranging Washington consultations.
called on him to one day be Ambassador to China (Taiwan), asking for assistance on another island at risk on the opposite side of the earth 20 years hence.

It is possible, even likely, that some of the more critical, “pessimistic” reports Kirk submitted were used by Kennedy to accentuate the negative for political purposes, but Kirk had only high regard for Kennedy. Kirk later recalled his relationship with Kennedy “couldn’t have been better, each way. I mean, I was loyal to him and he was very loyal to me. I have nothing but the warmest recollections of his conduct in our official relationships.” Kirk knew Kennedy “was always somewhat skeptical of their (British) capacity to withstand the war which we all saw approaching.” Kirk also knew the British “always felt he (Kennedy) was a little anit-them. He was of course, of Irish decent…” If Kirk had political views about Kennedy, he never expressed them, insisting “his (Kennedy’s) political sentiments may be of one order of magnitude,” and it was not important to their relationship.93

Kirk traveled on the Atlantic and Dixie Clippers. He was driven to Bournemouth to catch the British seaplane flight to Lisbon. It was quite the adventure – to fly across the Atlantic on a Pan-American clipper plane – not only because the novelty, but also the danger of contested sky over the Bay of Biscay. He learned one of his fellow passengers was the Canadian Minister of Munitions. He noticed several Norwegian colonels and a couple of American journalists onboard as well. In Lisbon he checked into a hotel awaiting transfer to American Export Line (later renamed Pan American). 94 The next day Kirk went into the gaming establishment for a chance at roulette and was surprised when the proprietor would not exchange his pound notes. Evidently this Portuguese bet on Britain’s failure. The seaplane flight to the Azores was aborted mid-flight. Kirk noticed one of the four engines had stopped and alarm bells went off for all the passengers

94 Ibid., 170.
to hear. They made a successful, albite risky, night landing. Repairs made, the plane continued to
the Azores and then Bermuda with about a day’s stopovers at each place. Kirk played bridge
with the Norwegians and one of the journalists, at one point reminiscing with them of his visit to
Stockholm during his young officer tour of the Baltic in 1911. That city had the most beautiful
women he had ever seen, he told them. Upon landing in New York’s harbor and pulling into La
Guardia Airport marine terminal, he noticed that there was a big red-carpet reception with a
crowd of dignitaries and state department people. “What’s this all about?” he asked of the two
navy intelligence officers that welcomed him. “Oh, that’s for you,” they responded, obviously
having a bit of fun at his expense. One of the Norwegian colonels was Otto, the Crown Prince of
Norway! Kirk remembered his conversation about women and realized Otto’s wife was a
Swedish princess. No diplomatic error after all, he assured himself. 95 Reporters did question
Kirk, but he had no comment. The navy intelligence officer took possession of the classified
papers he had with him and then he turned to private matters.

It was December 20, and when he was joyfully reunited with his entire family, they
began a flurry of activity. They made final preparations for his daughter Marian’s wedding,
planned for January 4th. He headed to Brooks Brothers to buy a new suit. Journalist questioned
him about this – trying to fit it into a narrative that perhaps his cloths were lost in the London
bombing. He tried to dissuade them of this notion, although it had happened to his prize uniform
when the upscale clothier Gieves was damaged during bombing and resulting fires. 96
On the train to Washington D.C, they had dinner in the dining car. Kirk greatly enjoyed the
reunion, and more domestic concerns, which sparked to life when 10-year-old son Roger blurted

95 Kirk, Reminiscences, 172.
96 Lydia Chapin Kirk, edited by Roger Kirk, Distinguished Service: Partner in Diplomacy 1896-1984 (Syracuse,
NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 101. Kirk, Reminiscences, 173. These upscale businesses are still open. See
out “Say, Pop, did you hear about Grandma’s bed-bugs?” and the surrounding tables filled with laughter.⁹⁷

With the prospects for US intervention in the European war looming, Kirk’s combined strengths of careful and detailed analysis and honest assessments, along with an understanding of strategic thinking and extensive personal networking, were needed for the intelligence gathering and senior staff leadership to come. An analyst, strategist, administrator, and diplomat – qualities Washington was actively looking for, and with which Kirk was soon put to the test.

Chapter 5

Undeclared War: Director of Naval Intelligence

Captain Alan Goodrich Kirk brought the war home with him because his arrival home coincided with beginning of the third Roosevelt administration, one that was no longer hampered by the isolationist cause. America now cautiously but firmly ramped up support for Britain. Kirk had helped with the administration’s lend-lease plan now before Congress. Now, at the start of 1941, as a witness to war, he provided American leaders with a personal account, with explanations and recommendations. His experience, abilities and skills were tested. In Washington, a bureaucratic war was raging and getting worse. To this Kirk seemed largely unaware. For Kirk, as for many, the year 1941 was fraught with tumult, warnings, and life-altering events. At a time of life most officers slip into calmer pre-retirement assignments, Kirk found himself taking on “heavy rolls.”

Kirk arrived back home on a career high. The Director of Naval Intelligence, Arthur Anderson, gave him high praise for his efforts as attaché, calling him “an officer of the highest type” who would “make a fine flag officer.” Anderson was most impressed with Kirk’s ability to organize and expand his office, shine in the high profile and successful efforts during the *Athena* sinking, and maintain consistent excellent reporting on high-value, and often very technical, information on the conduct of the war in Europe and weapons used.1

Meetings, Briefings, and Conferences

Kirk began 1941 with a hectic schedule of meetings and consultations. On leaves’ end he spoke at the Naval Academy Round Table on 21 January 1941.² Kirk was impressive. The round table chairman, Captain J.A. Logan, told his boss, the superintendent, that “the members were all tremendously interested and, as a result, have a much clearer understanding of the situation abroad. The ease and clarity of presentation was most delightful, and the members are also most grateful for his patience and willingness to give so much of his time in answering questions.”³ The superintendent noted that Kirk performed “an entirely voluntary service” by addressing staff and students about war developments in England and “held the close attention of the meeting, attended by practically all officers on duty at this station, for a period of about two hours.” Kirk’s “delivery and platform presence were excellent, and his address was keenly interesting to all concerned.”⁴

Thanks primarily to Kirk’s efforts, a series of fourteen meetings, called ABC (American-British Conversations) meetings, began in Washington on January 29. They were secret, and included no civilian, to keep the sensitive nature of American neutrality from being politicized. Kirk, Ghormley, and Rear Admiral “Kelly” Turner, among others, represented the U.S. Navy. General Raymond Lee and his boss at Military Intelligence, General Sherman Miles, were U.S. Army representatives. Kirk was acting secretary for several initial meetings and got them off to a strong start as an effective advocate for stronger defense ties. ⁵ These meetings were

² Cross Reference Sheet 7002, 17 Jan 1941. From CNO to Superintendent USNA, P/R, Box 1.
³ Letter to Superintendent USNA from Chairman Round Table (Logan) 24 Jan 41, P/R, Box 1.
⁴ Letter from Superintendent of USNA to CNO 29 Jan 41, P/R, Box 1. F. Vossler was Superintendent of Midshipmen.
⁵ Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 257. Dorwart says, “It was fitting that Kirk serve as acting secretary and speak for the strengthening of Anglo-American defense measures during the initial session, for no U.S. official had labored more diligently than the naval attaché to prepare groundwork for such conversations.”
foundational to Anglo-American cooperation. General Sir John G. Dill, the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, viewed the meetings “of paramount importance” in setting a cooperative tone and building trust. The British delegates were of one mind and strategic outlook, and Dill, concerned not to repeat Great War hurts in relations, made sure they were clear and forthright. The Americans, however, were stuck in interservice rivalry and suspicion. Nevertheless, the meetings were a strong positive foundation for strengthening cooperation. They agreed to increase the participation of the US Navy in protecting Atlantic shipping as well as opening up of repair facilities in US ports to the Royal Navy. They considered the possibility of widening conflict with Japan, and agreed in any case Germany remained the primary adversary. They were a guide for Roosevelt policy and were the basis for the allied grand strategy of “Europe first” in the coming war.6

In early February Kirk traveled to Newport, Rhode Island, to talk with staff and students of the Naval War College. Admiral Eric Kalbfus, President of the Naval War College, praised Kirk’s talk as “not only pertinent and instructive, but his fund of knowledge and his analysis of events observed at first hand, under conditions of daily personal peril, were of the greatest value to the audience. These facts, coupled with his poise and his modest and unassuming manner of recital, have left a decided impression on those who were fortunate enough to listen.”7

Rumors swirled that Kirk was to be the new Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI). The Conference Board was quickest to acknowledge Kirk was replacing Rear Admiral Walter S. Anderson as Naval Intelligence Division representative.8 The Conference Board, officially the National Industrial Conference Board, Inc., was founded in 1916 “by a group of CEOs

7 Letter from President of Naval War College to Chief of Bureau of Navigation 10 Feb 1941, P/R Box 1.
8 Letter from Conference Board to Chief of Bureau of Navigation 10 Feb 1941, P/R Box 1.
concerned about the impact of workplace issues on business, and with a desire for greater cooperation and knowledge sharing among businesses.” The New York based organization was dedicated to helping business connect with government - fostering networking with key officials. The DNI was a member. Kirk was accepted in Anderson’s place on February 27. With this new node, Kirk’s professional network grew substantially. The Chairman was B.F. Goodrich (no known relation to Kirk’s Goodrich family) and other members included J. F. Drake, president Gulf Oil Corporation of Pittsburgh PA, Edgar M. Queeny, president of Monsanto Chemical Co of St Louis MO and Edward F. McGrady vice president of Radio Corporation of America or RCA and F.W. Lovejoy, president of Eastman Kodak Co. The connection to the Conference Board contributed to professional connections in foreign affairs and academia, including former ambassador to Britain, Alanson B. Houghton, former ambassador to Germany, Jacob Gould Schurman, and Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University.10

Getting Attention

When Kirk arrived in Washington, he was one of very few senior officers who had personal experience with the war in Europe. Kirk was in high demand. There was significant interest in learning what he knew about captured German weapons like the magnetic mines and first-hand accounts of damage to British ships.11 On temporary orders as a consultant, Kirk made rounds in Washington, briefing key leaders and policy makers – including President Franklin Roosevelt. His old friend Admiral Ralston Holmes, who, as former DNI, was a veteran briefer to

the president, took him to see Roosevelt. Holmes warned Kirk that the president led most conversations and that since his time was limited, the president may have to be interrupted. “You may think this is something that you shouldn’t do,” said Holmes, “but I warn you, President Roosevelt loves to talk, and he will begin on almost anything when you sit down, and he’ll talk for twenty-five minutes of your half hour.” Kirk was in awe of the occasion. “President Roosevelt was seated, of course, behind his desk,” Kirk recalled, “with his long cigarette holder and so on. He threw up his hands and said ‘Alan, my boy, I’m glad to see you back!’ Then he launched into some long discourse, I forgot what it was.” Sure enough, after several minutes of Roosevelt’s charming but off-the-subject banter, Kirk interjected –

“Sir, I really have some things I want to tell you about.”

“Oh,” the president said. “Well, go ahead.”

Kirk launched into his points – the most important being the need for an organized scientific effort to counter the Germans. “Sir,” said Kirk, “the way this war is developing, it has become a test of scientific knowledge and know-how.” He noted that the Germans had developed impressive capabilities in magnetic and sonar mines and battery technology for planes and ships. In Kirk’s mind, the speed of technological and scientific advancement as it applied to war was outpacing expertise that the navy could draw on – especially in sonar and mines. Kirk warned the president that America’s military and scientific establishment were behind and were not presently “sufficient to combat” the German threat. Kirk made an impression on the president in his account of how the British used top scientists and engineers for the war effort. Whether his talk was key or one of support for action, Kirk could reflect on the fact the president listened. Not long after his meeting with Roosevelt, Kirk was gratified to learn that the president charged Vannevar Bush with establishing a committee to consider how scientific knowledge

Interjected amongst the high-level meetings was an important private one. The Scarsdale Inquirer proclaimed, “A wedding of interest to society here and in Washington was that of Miss Marian Kirk…” naming the groom Dr. John Wilberforce Appel and the place “the historic Church of St. John in the capital.” The ceremony included Brahms and Bach and the “quaint church was decorated with white roses, lilies and pale-yellow snapdragons…” all simple, elegant, and traditional. Kirk was in full dress uniform, including sword and gloves, when he presented his daughter. Marian wore her grandmother’s (Mrs. Frederic L. Chapin’s) wedding gown and carried her prayer book. Marian’s sister Deborah was maid of honor. Jane Acheson, daughter of Dean Acheson (future Secretary of State) and Ann Wilkinson, daughter of Captain Theodore “Reg” Wilkinson (academy classmate who succeeded him as DNI), were bridesmaids.\footnote{\textit{Scarsdale Inquirer}, Volume XXII, No. 50, 10 January 1941, Page 7. This article also proudly noted that Marian was recently presented to the King and Queen of England. Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 176.}

\textbf{Director of Naval Intelligence}

The next Kirk talk was a formal briefing for the Navy General Board and Navy Secretary Frank Knox and Undersecretary James Forrestal. “I made them quite a speech,” he recalled. In all these sessions he pointed out singular problems with fatigue of air and submarine crews, and the necessity of anti-aircraft guns to defend against low flying aircraft – bombers like the Stuka and torpedo planes. He also provided information to feed the controversy over armored deck
design of aircraft carriers – top deck like the Brits favored, or hangar deck as on U.S. ships. But the main lesson he wanted others to know was that the nature of this war was increasingly based on competition in technological and scientific advancements. Kirk strongly and consistently recommended organizing and funding scientists and groups that fostered technological development. Kirk’s briefings and presentations continued with Admiral Harold Stark, the CNO, and his operations division. Knox and Forrestal were so impressed with Kirk that they determined to appoint him Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI).

Anderson was leaving to sea duty as commodore of cruisers. He warned Kirk he was being considered as replacement. Not entirely pleased, Kirk insisted he was “a blue water sailor” and had no ambition for “the cloak and dagger trade.” Although a DNI assignment was considered a position for a senior captain or rear admiral, Kirk was concerned that he needed to get back to sea for career progression – after all, he had already been ashore in an intelligence role. But he was now expert in European developments and Europe was high priority. His experience and ability as administrator, and his connections with British navy leaders, made it a convincing match. “It appeared that Mr. Knox and Mr. Forrestal had been so impressed by my speech before the General Board and all the high brass of the Department that they’d decided they were going to make me the Director of Naval Intelligence,” said Kirk. Civilian leadership was very enthusiastic about Kirk’s appointment - navy leadership was ambivalent, reflecting the institutional bias toward sea duty and lack of regard for the DNI role. His orders came quick.

16 Memorandum from Chief of Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 23 Jan 1941, P/R Box 2. This is a Change of Duty Memorandum from C.W. Nimitz ordering him to detach as Naval Attaché in London and report to the CNO for duty as Director, Naval Intelligence. It has the old phrase “The Secretary of the Navy has determined that this employment on shore duty is required by public interests.” See also Darwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 231.
Office of Naval Intelligence

Established in 1882, six years before Kirk’s birth, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) was a product of the growing professionalization of the era. It began small - headed by a navy lieutenant. After a series of mid-grade officers, the director position was established as a captain’s billet by the turn of the century. Then, after World War I and the Washington Naval Conference, a rear admiral held the position until the mid-1920’s when it again was filled by mainly captain ranks. Kirk friends and mentors Ralston Holmes and Walter Anderson were Rear Admirals. It was long his strength to make friends of his seniors, and this networking resulted in the unique fact that he could list two that preceded him as DNI. Like their protégé, Holmes and Anderson came to the job after attaché duty – Holmes in Rome, Anderson in London (from 1934-1937). With this renewed focus on intelligence, Kirk could reasonably assume promotion if he took on the job. However, advancement beyond that was questionable for, even in later days, Directors of Naval Intelligence (DNI) did not for the most part, promote higher. So, the moment he acquiesced to taking the assignment, Kirk began planning an escape from it. So, in the spring, he assumed duties as DNI and hoped it would be a short tour.

The British Model

It was reasonable to assume that, with Kirk the helm, naval intelligence would have continuity if positive changes were to be made. Kirk was ideal. He had first-hand knowledge of not only American, but also British intelligence organization. He was following in the footsteps

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of his mentors Holmes and Anderson. Both men were aware of and near to British intelligence organization efforts. Kirk learned not only from them, but also directly from Godfrey himself in England on how to organize and manage an intelligence organization. The navy had a conservative reputation, but Kirk proved he was capable of “bucking the system.” Was it his job to reorganize ONI to fit into an American version of Godfrey’s combined intelligence office? Evidently. Godfrey showed up at Kirk’s door immediately with this objective in mind.

One primary reason for Godfrey’s trip to Washington was to get the Americans to see the benefits of a Joint Intelligence Committee – a national unified effort that could be modeled after British intelligence organization. This British model called for sharing between US agencies – including the navy, army and the FBI. He was forewarned of challenges. In mid-May, before he left for D.C., Godfrey came to see General Lee. Lee, who thought Godfrey “capable and colorful,” encouraged him to emphasize the benefits of a Joint Intelligence Committee but warned that Kirk and the Navy may not cooperate. “Of course,” wrote Lee in his journal, “the navy is very closed mouthed and I should think that Kirk would be slow about going in on something of that sort.”

This was unfair. Kirk was, at first, open to change. Why else were meetings with Godfrey first on his agenda? Yes, Kirk did find the British spymaster sly – a trait quite unlike himself, but he had enormous respect for him and the intelligence organization he led. Godfrey brought along Commander Ian Fleming, his trusted and influential assistant. Fleming, who later penned the popular James Bond novels, described his boss Godfrey as a “pirate,” “dynamic” and “demonic,” and partially based his enigmatic “M” character on him. Unbeknown to Kirk, Fleming’s focus

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was to help Colonel Donovan plan the creation of a new secret intelligence organization separate from the existing American ones.\(^{20}\)

Kirk was an excellent host, arranging for tours of ONI and even set up a meeting with J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI. Tours and discussions continued throughout American intelligence agencies. When over, the resulting British assessment was bleak. Godfrey saw that ONI lacked institutional integration and respect, quite unlike the British counterpart, NID. Fleming’s fictitious character, James Bond, reported to “M”, the master of intelligence. Kirk envisioned an equivalent “M” counterpart role for the United States. But American intelligence was complex. British intelligence had gone past its stage of bureaucratic infighting and uncertainty by the time Kirk arrived as attaché. The American organization effort was in the very beginning stages and was fraught with mission misalignment, overlapping responsibility and authority, and legal concerns.

**Organization Disorganization**

Kirk became quite ill and was sick in bed the first week of his tenure – delaying his effort in reorganization based on Godfrey’s advice. By the time he got to work, there was simply so much going on that he shelved the reorganization plan indefinitely.\(^{21}\) To make matters worse, ONI’s institutional knowledge largely evaporated with a wave of transfers. Kirk’s middle management departed for sea duty leaving unfilled deputy positions and new inexperienced crew.\(^{22}\)


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Kirk had turmoil from his first day. The unusual period of growing world tension resulted in significant bureaucratic expansion, leading to interagency competition and in-fighting. In March, Congress passed aid to Britain while maintaining an official neutral status. Kirk had assisted in developing, and strongly supported, this aid. Roosevelt’s new ambassador to Britain, John Winant was a like-minded supporter of the war effort. The Nazi menace grew from Yugoslavia to cross the Mediterranean into Egypt. Japan expanded in Asia. Lend-Lease was extended to China and the Soviet Union to shore up defenses. Plans for defense funding indicated dramatic increases.

The navy was increasing activity in answer to these world events. From April 1941, and through the summer, the navy expanded its secretive war on German submarines by practicing locating and tracking them and reporting their locations. The general security emergency became increasingly acute – especially domestic or “internal” security. At one point Kirk warned the vacationing Roosevelt (through the treasury secretary) that Italian ships were in danger of sabotage, which may lead to damaged or degraded harbors. Reports of spies on fishing boats near naval facilities flooded in – most notably near Pearl Harbor.

Then, in May, President Roosevelt declared a State of National Emergency. ONI was to be greatly expanded - immediately. Kirk was hard pressed. There was a critical need for more observers in Britain, the Mediterranean and Moscow. He worked to increase staff in existing attaché offices around the world. He opened new ones as fast as he could. That was not enough. During a conference with Secretary Knox, the subject of activities in Bulgaria were raised.

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26 Ibid., 264, 265.
Bulgaria has just joined in alliance with Germany, becoming an Axis power in March. Turning to Kirk he asked, “Who’s your naval attaché in Bulgaria?” Kirk replied “Why, Mr. Secretary, they have no navy. We’ve never had a naval attaché there.” Knox shot back “Get one, get one right away!” So “we increased our capabilities everywhere,” Kirk recalled. Roosevelt’s emergency declaration opened reserve manpower, but there was a problem. Kirk complained bitterly at the quality of officer available for some of these posts. In one instance he was sure the Bureau of Navigation sent over a mentally ill officer to fill an overseas attaché role. “You can’t give a man like this to me. He’s just out of St. Elizabeth’s. He’s a paranoid!” St. Elizabeth’s was a Washington D.C. Psychiatric Hospital.

**Intelligence Bureaucracies in Turmoil**

It was an oppressively hot and miserable summer in Washington. Temperature and tempers tracked together in the nation’s capital. In addition to the efforts in dramatic expansion, Kirk had to defend ONI’s mission and function from other agencies – and even from the president himself. The president, the FBI, army intelligence (MID), and other agencies within the Navy, all vied for a piece of the intelligence action. Contrary to predictions of interservice rivalry, Kirk’s relationship with MID remained calm in comparison to the conflict within the Navy Department. Soon Kirk was able to resolve one fight in his favor. Code breaking was proving successful against Japan. The Office of Naval Communications (ONC) received and recorded Japanese transmissions. Two experts from ONI broke a Japanese code after receiving the raw transcript from ONC. The Director of ONC, Lee Noyes, insisted on briefing leadership on the result, but Kirk insisted that was in his purview. It “was a little awkward” for Kirk, but he

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27 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 178, 179. Perhaps Knox felt an attaché was needed in Bulgaria because it was an Axis ally as of March 1941.
soon “surmounted that difficulty” and it was he, as DNI, who briefed his staff’s work along with intelligence from codebreakers at ONC. Most other conflicts remained unresolved and built on one another - fostering chaos.  

Kirk’s roughest relationship was with Rear Admiral Richmond “Kelly” Turner, the Director of War Plans in the CNO’s office. Kirk knew Turner as a “very forceful character,” and a “very strong personality” who had the ear of both Stark and assistant CNO, Rear Admiral Royal Ingersoll. Turner wanted ONI to report through him and maneuvered to take Kirk’s role in advising senior leadership. Kirk and Turner had spats continually – especially over the Japanese threat. Turner was confident in his knowledge of the Japanese. As skipper of Astoria, he had transported the body of the Japanese ambassador back to Japan in 1939. Kirk thought Turner overconfident in his two-week experience in Japan. Kirk insisted Turner was wrong in his assessment that Japan was more interested in military adventurism in Russia than southeast Asia. Turner resented Kirk’s direct appeals to Stark about these differences. But, in the end, Kirk was unable to counter Turner, his senior. To Kirk, Stark largely favored Turner and he began to wonder if the conflict was too costly, because even though there was no proof, Kirk suspected Turner was at least partly responsible for blocking Kirk’s promotion to flag rank that spring. Not only was there a personal cost, but in-house squabbling sapped energy for dealing with trouble beyond the navy.  

Kirk sought help from J. Edgar Hoover, head of FBI, but soon found himself in a bureaucratic turf war with their agencies working at cross purposes and overlap.  

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held weekly meetings with agency heads including Hoover and was highly impressed with the FBI boss. Cooperation between the two and their departments developed quickly. But this led Anderson to become involved ever deeper into “internal” spying and espionage at home - at the expense of foreign intelligence gathering. In fact, it was the growing internal threats that caused the most division. For example, there were multiple overlapping files on Nazis, fascists, communists, and Japanese imperial agents. The problem quickly expanded because of limited sharing, resulting in concern over missing information on fifth column activities in shipyards.  

It turned out that these concerns were overblown, but the Roosevelt administration’s policy of wholesale Japanese American internment during World War II confirms this bias.

Roosevelt

Kirk’s difficulties also stemmed from the president himself. When Kirk became DNI, Roosevelt had just begun his unprecedented third term. Roosevelt was taking full advantage of his much less politically constrained position. Experienced and powerful, he was master of the executive branch of government. Federal departments and agencies are prone to grow and develop – and challenge other agencies over areas of responsibility and authority. Turf battles were nothing new. But the president exacerbated these conflicts by design. A self-described “juggler,” Roosevelt boasted that he would never let his right hand know what his left hand does.  

Federal intelligence agency stability came in 1947 when President Harry Truman oversaw the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency.

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It was FDR’s style to appoint people with overlapping responsibilities, and then get these to compete to get the job complete. This was anathema to Kirk. He operated within his area. He respected rules. In his view, one is given the responsibility with the authority to match, and then one was expected to efficiently and effectively accomplish the mission. Roosevelt was fascinated with not only naval matters but also the world of spies. In Roosevelt’s view, this world included both foreign and domestic jurisdictions. In 1939 he gave the DNI, Holmes, added responsibility for internal security. With new focus on domestic threats, and an all too slowly expanding budget, foreign intelligence gathering suffered. Holmes drafted a plan for the dramatic increase in resources, but it remained unimplemented for lack of funds when Anderson took over in June of 1939. The mismatch in authority and responsibility festered – and worsened.

In addition, FDR kept his own private and unofficial intelligence network. Personally loyal spies supplied him directly with intelligence – even on Kirk. Journalist John “Jack” Carter was considered an aid to the president but acted as FDR’s spy on his spies, to include his wealthy friend William Vincent Astor, Colonel William Donovan, and Kirk. Roosevelt insisted that Donovan and Astor be given official intelligence responsibilities. Astor was a wealthy Roosevelt family friend from New York, and he enjoyed his role as presidential spy. Astor used his yacht for pleasure as well as work while observing central pacific island facilities. Roosevelt wanted Kirk to make Astor official, with great authority, but wanted his friend’s intelligence reporting to go directly to him, bypassing Kirk. Roosevelt asked Kirk to the White House. The president wanted him to arrange for Astor to be given the job of Coordinator for

35 Ibid., 238.
36 Ibid., 231.
37 Ibid., 230, 270.
Intelligence in the New York area. This position would normally report to Kirk, but Roosevelt wanted Astor to be his personal spymaster in the key office. Kirk discovered Carter’s activities spying on spies and warned Astor. But Astor was not long for the job. His health declined and Roosevelt began to favor Donovan.

Donovan understood and was comfortable with Roosevelt’s management style – pitting people and agencies against each other for the sake of competition. He favored the approach. Donovan cultivated the personal confidence of the president. Both men enjoyed the Darwinian struggle in government. Donovan debated well. Roosevelt rewarded debate – famously choosing General George Marshall as Army Chief of Staff after he voiced lone dissenting opinions to others in government – including the president. Donovan cleverly positioned himself as intermediary between British Intelligence and Roosevelt. Ian Fleming lodged at Donovan’s home and the two drafted memorandum on intelligence organization and reform. He also quickly developed a wide-reaching network of agents. At one point he tried to recruit novelist John Steinbeck’s services as spy while in Mexico.

Intelligence agency consolidation efforts began to favor Donovan. He was able to gain support of the army in the creation of his Coordinator of Information (COI) agency and the army turned over undercover intelligence operations to him in the fall of 1941. The navy was slower – but not much. Without the army as ally, Kirk was alone. Kirk knew Donovan to be “a very aggressive fellow” and “quite a friend of (Secretary of the Navy) Frank Knox.” Wallace B. Phillips, commander of the naval intelligence office in NYC, resisted giving up activities to the

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39 Jeffery M. Dorwart, Dorwart’s History of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1865-1945 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 159, 277. Coordinator of Information (COI) was another name soon adopted, a precursor to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), 288.
COI. When Donovan threatened to inform the president of the navy’s foot-dragging, Kirk agreed to turning over assets to COI. By October, Donovan had control except for Hoover’s FBI, which did not cooperate with Donovan’s COI at all.42

Due to the preponderance of other intelligence players, Kirk had less access to FDR than his predecessors - Holmes and Anderson. Anderson had met the president up to three times per week – no doubt passing along information from his London attaché. But Kirk had strong competitors for the presidential confidence, and as Roosevelt empowered Donovan as an intelligence official, he secured top agents away from ONI in Europe and North Africa. 43

Kirk, as navy captain, was up against others who had outsized advantages. Turner was his senior and had the ear of Stark. Hoover was in his sixteenth year as the agency’s powerful founding director.44 Donovan’s poaching, along with his now close ties with Churchill’s intelligence officials like Fleming, sunk his directorship. So, less than six months into his three-year tour of duty, Kirk asked Forrestal for transfer to sea duty.45

Kirk seemed to know ONI needed a flag ranked officer to defend and advance its’ mission. He turned over to senior classmate “Reg” Wilkinson who had just made flag rank. Wilkinson tried and failed to adjust, even attempting to have Donovan’s organization placed under ONI. But these efforts faded quick. Soon, Wilkinson struggled with guilt and regret of the Pearl Harbor surprise attack.46

44 J. Edgar Hoover would continue as director of FBI until his death 32 years later, in 1972.
46 Ibid., 280.
Although Kirk had grit, he was not a forceful personality. He was not a bully or showy prima-donna. Kirk was an organization man in a period of disorganization. He was ambitious and thus sensitive to move into positions that would favor higher rank, but he felt delayed and endangered in the DNI role. “It wasn’t a very happy time there for me. I couldn’t really persuade people,” Kirk later recalled.\textsuperscript{47} He was doomed from the start. Even if he had flag rank, it is very unlikely Kirk could have withstood the powerful political forces tugging at ONI including Hoover, Donovan, Turner, and President Roosevelt himself. Naval Intelligence historian Jeffery Dorwart notes that Kirk’s tenure as DNI was “a period punctuated by the complete breakdown of U.S. neutrality, a proclamation of unlimited national emergency, and a paralyzing internal conflict within the Navy Department itself. Thus, the usual period of adjustment was more disoriented and traumatic for Kirk than for any previous director in ONI’s sixty-year history.”\textsuperscript{48}

The job made Kirk the least happy of any he had. Kirk hated the infighting within the government intelligence sphere.\textsuperscript{49} He does not address these months much in retrospect – as if he wanted them gone from his memory. Certainly, there was classified and sensitive information that limited his discussion about the months in early to mid-1941, but there seems to be a ‘blocking out’ of this period in his remembrance. He spends just six pages on it in his lengthy oral history. His wife Lydia seemed to add more than her usual. She and her husband were, after all, together during this time enjoying a rare “normal” home life. It was a Dickensian best of times, worst of times. The role suited him, and many knew it. But the times which brough so much chaos did not. The timing in organizational upheaval was unfortunate. Areas of authority

\textsuperscript{48} Dorwart, \textit{Dorwart’s History}, 259.
and responsibility were incessantly questioned. Stark, as CNO, did not settle it and FDR made it infinitely harder as an actively involved commander-in-chief. Bureaucratic infighting not only disappointed Kirk, but it must also be considered a significant factor to any review of causes of the intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor.

**Warnings**

There were two main threats of interest in the summer of 1941, one was the internal security threat of Italian saboteurs and the other was a likely attack by Japan somewhere in the south pacific. Kirk’s quick work to improve the domestic intelligence network soon proved valuable. Since the previous June (1940), when Italian dictator Benito Mussolini officially aligned with Hitler in attacking France, Italians in the US were considered potential belligerents. Kirk’s people in Baltimore informed him Italian crews were at work sabotaging their own ship’s machinery. The fear was that they would sink them and clog the harbor. Kirk alerted the Coast Guard and asked Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau to inform the White House and the president, who was in Florida. Kirk sent out the alarm to all naval districts – which had some delay. He was embarrassed and furious at his duty officer, who did not know the proper coded reply to his alert call that Saturday night. Assessment reports later showed that some sabotage did occur, but it was greatly limited from what could have resulted in disaster. But this episode exemplified an area of Kirk’s domestic intelligence activities that were stiffly challenged by Hoover. Kirk considered Hoover a friend and the relationship withstood the tension, but Hoover insisted that the FBI oversaw domestic intelligence. 

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Later in the summer Kirk warned of the Japanese threat. He wrote papers warning of Japanese interests and capabilities in taking control of points in southeast Asia – specifically in Burma and Malaysia. He directly warned the CNO of the possibility of an imminent Japanese invasion in these areas. These assessments were not widely accepted by navy officials. Turner at War Plans was indeed angry with Kirk’s assessment, but Kirk held his ground and insisted this was the case.  

Kirk continued the daily task of administration, recruiting staff and operatives – and answering politicians. For example, on July 18, 1941, Kirk received a letter from Representative J. G. Scrugham, of Nevada, a member of Committee on Appropriations and Navy subcommittee chairman who wanted information on the status of Mr. Wallie D. Warren’s application “for a commission in the Intelligence Division of the Naval service.” Warren was delayed because of a hernia but had undergone successful operation and “his disability has been removed,” insisted the Congressman. Kirk scrawled a handwritten note - “Application has apparently never been received in Bureau…all we have is a letter of inquiry back in March 1941.”  

The bureaucratic burden and politics combined with chaos and hardened Kirk’s determination to get back to sea.  

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Flag Rank  

That summer Kirk found out that he came within two lineal numbers – two individuals – of being selected for rear admiral (lower half), making him one of the navy’s senior most captains. Kirk relied on a network of friends to navigate professional advancement. Making flag rank was an important professional goal – now just within reach. An old friend from Utah and

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52 Kirk, Reminiscences, 182.  
53 Letter to Kirk from Congressman J.G. Scrugham 18 July 1941, P/R, Box 1. Letters from members of congress are known as “congressionals” that are handled with special care.
the Naval War College, Admiral Adolphus Andrews, who was assigned to the admiral promotion board, came to see him. Andrews told Kirk he was unlikely to make flag rank unless he got back to sea. With the combination of staff and attaché duty, Andrews assured him it was just too much time away from the sea and the flag board was carefully scrutinizing records. “I advise you to get out of here and get back to sea as fast as you can get there,” said Andrews to his friend. Kirk took it to heart and was grateful for the strong advice.54

The timing was right. He let his seniors know it was high time he got back to sea. Kirk went to see Admiral Stark, “who didn’t seem to have an opinion much one way or the other.” He even lobbied Secretary Forrestal to speed the process along. “Well,” said Forrestal, “I think you can get it. That will be done. All right.” The secretary was ready for a change, ready for fresh blood, but assured Kirk his service was appreciated. “So I politely bowed my head,” said Kirk. Kirk went to see Admiral Chester Nimitz, the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. Nimitz agreed to proceed with orders and arranged for Kirk’s friend, newly promoted Rear Admiral “Reg” Wilkinson, who was due to rotate ashore from sea duty, to come as his relief. Wilkinson was Kirk’s classmate who was number 1 in class ranking. “A very brilliant officer, and a fine one,” said Kirk. His transfer orders to take command of destroyer squadron 8, then on convoy duty in the north Atlantic, was approved. Kirk departed ONI on October 1, 1941. In this capacity his reporting senior was Admiral Richmond, commander of the Atlantic destroyers, who in turn reported to Admiral Ernest King, commander of the Atlantic fleet.55

55 Ibid.
**Pearl Harbor**

In assessing Kirk’s experience at ONI in the turbulent months before Pearl Harbor, it is important to consider the powerful forces at play in an unusual time. It is unlikely anyone could have helped matters at ONI. The President was the boss. Roosevelt’s comfort with bureaucratic infighting and chaos drove directly against Kirk’s strengths as organizer and administrative operative – traits better suited to honing and refining – not bombastic and aggressive agency kingdom building.

His departure came two months before one of the greatest known intelligence failures in American history. Was Kirk partly responsible for the Pearl Harbor disaster? Why was he not held to account for failures in intelligence? Kirk was not culpable. There are several points to consider. Although diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and Japan ran high in the period between his departure and the attack, there was no surprise attack plan to discover. Indeed, Japanese Admiral Yamamoto (who had been naval attaché to the U.S.), kept the attack plan largely to himself until General Tojo became prime minister two weeks after Kirk transferred.\(^{56}\) Second, the Roosevelt administration and navy department were both Euro-focused. The main threat was thought to be German ambitions. Kirk was selected for DNI because of his knowledge and experience in Europe. He was relied on for European theater intelligence by his seniors - up to the president. The third consideration is that the lack of organizational cohesion within America’s intelligence services served to defuse personal responsibility. Kirk, along with others in senior leadership, could not be spared. There was a war on, and his skills would be needed. The same was true for those around him. Even the CNO,

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Admiral Stark, was reassigned into an important role. Finally, it was determined sufficient to make Admiral Husband Kimmel and General Walter Short scapegoat enough for institutional integrity.  

Only two months after Kirk left naval intelligence, the Japanese navy struck Pearl Harbor. If Kirk had still been DNI, could it have ruined his career? His friend Wilkinson, even though not held directly accountable, nonetheless suffered at his own judgment that he could have done something to prevent the attack. If Kirk had remained, he would have had a longer tenure, and thus perhaps, more culpability. Would his career have ended? It is possible, but unlikely for the reasons already mentioned. However, it is reasonable to assume that the event may very well have damaged his own psyche, and he could have punished himself more severely, and in a career ending way, had he not departed when he did.

In her memoir, Lydia Kirk offered a quote she says her husband told the Navy Department before he departed:

Do not put your ships together, do not put your planes together, double your guards on Sundays. The enemy is no respecter of the Sabbath, and, above all, do not trust the Japanese already on a war footing in the East.  

The bureaucratic mess led to the massive intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor, but by then Kirk was already deeply involved with undeclared war in the north Atlantic.

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Chapter 6

Reliable, Experienced, and Versatile: Amphibious Command

Captain Alan Goodrich Kirk was at war well before most of his countrymen. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, and the subsequent German declaration of war against the United States four days later, December 11, marked the beginning of overt American war effort on a global scale. Unlike his experience in the Great War, where he was in stateside support roles, Kirk was fully engaged in action throughout and from well before the official start of the new world war. He experienced the London bombing attacks, interviewed survivors of attacks, prepared damage reports, and studied German technological advances. Back in America, the war continued for Kirk in his intelligence role as he sought to limit damage of saboteurs and divine the intentions of potential adversaries. Almost two months before Pearl Harbor, Kirk was already in a shooting war with German submarines in the stormy north Atlantic. The Battle of the Atlantic was underway. Just as so many of his peers, Kirk was needed, not in big battleships, but in specialized vessels addressing new threats and needs in anti-submarine and amphibious warfare.

Convoy Commander

In the summer and early fall of 1941, two related events occurred that showed America was engaged in undeclared war. In mid-June, President Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Marines to relieve the British forces in Iceland. On September 4, the destroyer *USS Greer*, in coordination
with a British aircraft, tracked German submarine U-652. The German submarine engaged *Greer* with two torpedoes after the British plane dropped depth charges. *Greer* avoided being hit, but it gave Roosevelt the opportunity to warn off German aggression in the waters west of Iceland.¹ The U-boat attack on *Greer* enabled Roosevelt to feel secure in public support for protecting convoys with a “shoot on sight” policy toward German submarines.² The *Kearny*, another destroyer attacked later that month, suffered 11 sailors killed. Thus, the U.S. Navy went to war before the rest of the country. These U-boat attacks changed the rules of engagement. German submarines were fair game in Roosevelt’s view, and Congress made it legal in November.³ These battles were a cat and mouse hunt, requiring different tools and tactics than the big guns Kirk was expert in.

Kirk transitioned into his new assignment as commander of Destroyer Squadron 7, on duty in the north Atlantic, on October 1ˢᵗ. His boss was Admiral Richmond, commander of Atlantic destroyers. Admiral King was in command of the Atlantic fleet.⁴ Kirk was a convoy commander, and from aboard his commodore’s flagship, destroyer *Plunkett*, he was charged with protecting shipping to and from Britain to about the half-way point just south of Iceland. *Plunkett* (DD-431), commissioned July 17, 1940, was a *Gleaves*-class destroyer that saw action not only on Atlantic convoy duty, but also in the coming invasions of Sicily, Italy, Normandy, and

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⁴ Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 183. In the oral account Kirk says, “Squadron 8” but in Brown’s *The Atlantic War Remembered* it says, “Squadron 7.” It appears “Squadron 7” is supported by his service record including his fitness report. The difference may be because his promotion and squadron reorganization. See Memorandum from Commander Task Force FOUR to Commander Destroyers Atlantic Fleet 29 Dec 1941, P/R Box 1. Kirk was ordered to detach from being Director of Naval Intelligence on 15 Oct 1941. In December 1941 Kirk was on leave 5 days from 17-22 December in Washington D.C. at 1410 34th St., NW. The Kirk home was about three blocks east of Georgetown University and their phone was DUpont-3515.⁴ DuPont Circle is just northeast of Foggy Bottom. Kirk was commander of the destroyer squadron from 18 Oct 41 to 16 Dec 41.
southern France. Kirk’s orders were to sink all German submarines, even though America was still officially neutral.⁵

On one voyage his ships sheltered near Reykjavik and regrouped for the return trip after handing over to the British escorts. Kirk learned a lesson in communications when he received a signal from a seaplane spotter, a large twin-engine F5L flying boat. There was no “wireless” so signaling was by blinker light. He wanted to know when the next convoy arrived in the area, but sent a signal “Have you seen convoy?” When they got the message, the plane crew signaled simply – “yes,” with no other information on distance and direction.⁶ He blamed himself for not being specific enough, but this incident showed the US Navy was in need of developing its wartime procedures.

The stormy North Atlantic lived up to its reputation. The weather was “horrible.” Even though his handful of destroyers were made more stable by removing one of their 5-inch guns, they rolled significantly - side to side. Kirk recalled a 40-degree roll! “You couldn’t eat anything except soup or stew, (and) coffee,” he remembered.⁷ The 53-year-old Kirk worked and slept strapped to his chair at his cabin desk and ate meals from a large well-secured cup – a strain indeed! He was made acutely aware of age since he then also learned he had become a grandfather.⁸

Kirk was no sooner settled in when the already heightened tension shot up significantly. On October 31, the destroyer Reuben James (not in Kirk’s command) was blown in half, sinking

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⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kirk’s daughter Marian delivered a daughter, Deborah (named after her aunt) in November. See Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 105.
with 100 crewmen killed. “Everything was a little jittery,” observed Kirk. A few Atlantic destroyer sailors were not happy about “getting into the war by the back door,” and ships assigned to convoy duty left behind an average of between 5 and 10 men who “were deliberately over leave.”

Then, on December 7th, Kirk received the ALNAV (all navy) message “Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. This is not a drill message.” Instantly the attitude changed, Kirk remembered, to something “quite a bit more confident and more alert. Needless to say, from that time on, we never had anybody overstaying his leave.” Once back at Argentia, Newfoundland, Kirk met with Admiral Richardson. Kirk, and nine other officers (including Captain Thomas Kinkaid), were told they were to be reassigned. They were simply too old for destroyer duty. The British naval leadership had advised the Americans that convoy duty was a young man’s job. “It really was a rugged life,” admitted Kirk. “Tom Kinkaid and I used to call ourselves ‘the nine old men’.”

Dubbed Task Unit 4.1.4, Kirk’s squadron of five destroyers and one ex-Coast Guard cutter had, by mid-December, sustained no losses, although five sound contacts were made with one being judged to be a submarine and one “doubtful.” Kirk’s ships followed procedures and warded off attack. His immediate boss, A.L. Bristol, Commander Task Force FOUR of Support Force Atlantic Fleet, judged Kirk’s performance to be excellent, and “although new to modern

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9 Kirk, Reminiscences, 184. See also Gerhard Weinberg, A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 244. Isolationism was strong in the United States at this point.  
10 Kirk, Reminiscences, 186.  
11 Ibid. Kirk believed Richardson (and the Navy Department) was warned by British Admiral Louis Mountbatten that younger men needed to be assigned to destroyers. The “nine old men” at the time was a reference to the U.S. Supreme Court.
antisubmarine warfare and escort-of-convoy, handled his escort assignments efficiently and successfully.”  

Still concerned about promotion, Kirk sent a formal request to the Secretary of the Navy to be “ordered to a combatant command afloat.” He gave four points in his favor: his duty as naval attaché from June 39 to Jan 41, gave him “unusual opportunity to observe modern warfare at first hand”; his recent two-month experience in convoy operations; his previous combatant command of a light cruiser for six months in 1936-1937; and lastly, his seniority on the captain’s list.  

Meanwhile, Admiral Nimitz, the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, sent Kirk orders to Norfolk, Virginia, to report as Commander, Transport Division Three. Unimpressed, but grateful for sea duty, Kirk took leave that Christmas with his family in Washington, then proceeded to Norfolk.  

1942

Kirk reported December 27, and checked in with his new boss, a fellow gunnery trained officer seven years his senior, F.L. Reichmuth, Commander Train, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Knowing the flag officer selection boards were to meet January 19, Reichmuth, who was also newly reported from destroyers, submitted a special fitness report characterizing Kirk’s performance and strongly recommending his promotion. He wrote Kirk’s “grasp of his profession is broad and firm. His judgment is sound. He is a splendid seaman. He is courageous, loyal, forceful and

12 Memorandum from Commander Task Force FOUR to Commander Destroyers Atlantic Fleet 29 Dec 1941, P/R, Box 1.
14 Memorandum for Change of Duty from Chief of Bureau of Navigation to Kirk, 15 Nov 1941, P/R, Box 2. On 15 Nov 1941, Nimitz, the Chief of Bureau of Navigation sent Kirk a change of duty order to detach as Commander, Destroyer Squadron Seven and proceed to Norfolk and report to the flagship of Commander Train, Atlantic Fleet, for duty as Commander, Transport Division Three. Kirk was on leave for Christmas Dec 22-26, 1941.
extremely efficient. He is splendid material for selection and promotion to flag rank, for which I whole-heartedly recommend him.”

Kirk was selected. He was elated and gratified the board picked him – also notably because it was the last flag promotion board “under the old law” so that his flag rank was established on a permanent basis. Officers were now given temporary “wartime promotions” and they, unlike Kirk, would be unsure of the lasting nature of their flag rank.

Kirk’s flagship was the McCawley. His transport ships were soon tasked with taking a division of soldiers from Texas to relieve the Marine Corps Second Regiment in Iceland. The Marines were being reassigned to the Guadalcanal campaign in the Pacific. “The escort commander was Admiral Hewitt, who also was an old friend of mine,” recalled Kirk. They had good weather most of the way, but as they approached Reykjavik the winds grew fierce, forcing them to remain off the coast. Kirk remembered “I’d stopped smoking at that time, and I saw these ships, this armor plate on their topsides, transports with armor plates and landing craft, heavily overweighted, and I thought, ‘Well, I don’t know whether we’re going to roll over or not.’ So I said, ‘Gimme a cigarette.’” They survived the night and pulled into the harbor and unloaded troops and cargo the next morning. While ashore Kirk found it amusing that, as a working party of sailors “manhandled” cartons of beer through the soaking rain bound for the officer’s club, the cartons began to disintegrate, resulting in beer cans rolling down a nearby hill. “Well, needless to say, the sailors - to them this was a godsend. They got themselves plenty of beer. Of course, we’ll say nothing about that.”

Kirk received new orders while on his return

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16 Kirk, Reminiscences, 190.
18 Kirk, Reminiscences, 187.
19 Ibid., 188.
trip. He was to be transferred back to London – he assumed to relieve Ghormley. So, back ashore, he left immediately to Washington before traveling on to England.

**Back To Britain**

On March 4, Kirk reported to the CNO staff. There he learned of a major shuffling. Stark was to be assigned Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe. What Kirk remembered as a “promotion” for the CNO, others viewed as a “firing” due to the Pearl Harbor attack. Stark’s reassignment to a top position in a war zone had its prestige and indicated U.S. commitment to Britain. But it was away from the powers of Washington with some interpreting the move as a firing or reassignment for “cause.” Unlike General George Marshall, Admiral Stark, CNO, was held more responsible for the lack of preparedness at Pearl Harbor. It was hard to forgive the head of an organization that had invested so much time and effort in War Plan Orange, and still failed to be ready. Regardless, Stark was sent to Europe. Kirk was surprised, and a bit disappointed, to find he was the top candidate for Stark’s chief of staff.

The naval officer culture insists on command at sea and action – not paperwork and meetings. But Kirk had proven his worth on multiple staffs. His selection by the outgoing CNO, to be his top staff officer in a critical new theater of war, speaks to Kirk’s reputation and ability. Kirk’s familiarity with London and the professional network of American and British officers that he cultivated, was an advantage, and was valuable to Stark as well. What’s more, the

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20 Naval Message from BUNAV to COMTRANSDIV THREE, 4 Mar 1942, P/R, Box 1. In Feb 1942 Kirk was on temporary duty orders to OPNAV (CNO staff).

current attaché, Captain Charles A. Lockwood, was due for relief—so Kirk would assume additional duty in his old job as Naval Attaché. In March, while Kirk made preparations to go to London, advising and consulting with the CNO and DNI staffs, he received wartime authorization to “assume the rank and wear the uniform of a Rear Admiral” - several months before official promotion. In early May, Kirk, this time unaccompanied by family, again traveled to London, reporting on the 12th to his dual assignments. Kirk and Stark were given a great welcome, with the First Sea Lord, Admiral Pound, ordering that full access be given to the Americans. Soon Stark and Kirk were invited to an extensive briefing at the Admiralty’s underground bomb-proof Intelligence Center.

All that summer, Stark and Kirk and other senior staff worked to iron-out their first move against Germany. Commander (later Admiral) Jerauld Wright, Kirk’s planning officer, strove at a hectic pace. Meetings were highly contentious, with many political and military pressures and variables considered from multiple perspectives. Stalin wanted a western front. American officials, concerned over the loss of the Soviet ally, wanted a landing in France soon. The British were more cautious, open to a new front but with a focus on the periphery of the German

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22 Memorandum to Liaison Officer Department of State from ONI Admin Officer, 4 Apr 1942, P/R, Box 1. On 1 April the VCNO directed that Kirk be assigned as both Attaché and Chief of Staff for the time being. See also Memorandum from VCNO to Chief of Bureau of Navigation 1 Apr 1942, P/R, Box 1.

23 Report of Compliance with orders 12 May 1942, P/R, Box 3. Kirk detached from Train Squadron Three 26 Mar and reported to CNO 30 Mar then detached CNO and assigned as Chief of Staff and Aid and Naval Attaché at the American Embassy London reporting May 12. On 14 Apr 1942 while assigned temporary duty to the Office of Naval Intelligence Bureau of Navigation sent Kirk a memo authorizing him to promote to Rear Admiral. See Memorandum from Bureau of Navigation to Kirk 14 Apr 1942, P/R, Box 1. On 21 Apr 1942 Kirk is promoted to rear admiral (temporary appointment date of rank back to 24 Nov 1941 “for the purpose of establishing your order of precedence” not for anything else like pay and time in grade credit). See Letter of acceptance of temporary promotion 21 Apr 1942, P/R, Box 1. By 18 May 1942 Kirk’s permanent promotion was being routed. See Memorandum from Chief of Bureau of Navigation to President Board of Examiners 18 May 1942, P/R Box 1. Kirk’s date of rank for permanent promotion purposes of pay was 30 Jun 1942. On 2 July 1942 Kirk was found physically qualified for rear admiral. See telegram to NAVCOM London from BUPERS Washington 2 Jul 1942, P/R, Box 1.

occupation. General Dwight Eisenhower and Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham lead the effort in consolidating a plan from Norfolk house in London, and Generals Marshall and Patton among others, stopped in for conferencing. Then, on July 25, the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided on an invasion of north Africa. Meanwhile Kirk went on several trips around the British Isles that summer and fall carrying out duties and getting a solid sense of naval infrastructure. On October 2, Stark handed Kirk his permanent flag promotion at his office at 20 Grosvenor Square.

**De Gaulle**

Meanwhile, Stark and Kirk worked toward French support, since it was their colonies that were to be invaded. It was a complex and delicate matter. France was occupied and divided by the Germans, and expatriate figures contended for leadership. Personalities, sovereignty, and empire clashed. The British favored General Charles de Gaulle as expatriate leader when his organization, the French National Committee, was recognized as representing the free French. The Roosevelt administration was less inclined to support de Gaulle. On August 3, de Gaulle lobbied Stark and Kirk in a formal meeting to ask for full recognition and cooperation. The German backed Vichy government cut diplomatic relations with the United States the same day. But secret negotiations with Admiral Jean Darlan of Vichy France, was important to the coming

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27 Memorandum Chief of Naval Personnel (CNP) to Kirk 25 Sep 1942, P/R, Box 1. On Oct 2, Stark handed Kirk his signed permanent commission as rear admiral. On 18 Sep 1942 rear admiral promotion regular commission is signed by acting Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal for the President for date of rank of 30 Jun 1942. Kirk is then Chief of Staff and Aid, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces in Europe at the London Embassy. The commission is signed by Harold R. Stark on 2 Oct 1942. Kirk’s office was 20 Grosvenor Square London.
invasion codenamed TORCH. Darlan’s cooperation was vital to prevent Vichy French troops from firing on allied landings. Kirk and his staff assistant and point man on this issue was Lieutenant Commander Tracy B. Kittredge. During the summer and fall, Stark, Kirk and Kittredge made themselves French experts and one of their main jobs was to placate the increasingly difficult de Gaulle. The Frenchman had substantial French civilian support but had little influence over the French army leaders in north Africa – so he was kept in the dark regarding invasion plans.28

TORCH

Allied landings in north Africa, commanded by Rear Admiral Kent Hewitt and Kirk’s academy pal Rear Admiral Monroe Kelly, began November 8. Hopes of peaceful entry were lost when pockets of fierce fighting erupting with French forces. In London the next day Stark meet de Gaulle “with tears in his eyes” according to de Gaulle, “deeply upset by the Franco-American struggle, which he had not believed possible.”29 But the Roosevelt administration angered de Gaulle when they sought to negotiate with Darlan. This bitterness soon ended with news of Darlan’s assassination on Christmas Eve, 1942, disrupting the intricate allied plan with the French. With Stark back in Washington, it was left to Kirk and Kittredge to work with de Gaulle in arranging a trip to Washington to ostensibly be recognized French leader by the United States. They arranged for the day after Christmas, but Churchill asked for a meeting with de Gaulle and stopped the trip. The Americans favored General Henri Giraud as French leader in Africa and did

not want de Gaulle complicating the war effort there. During the delay, Kirk and Kittredge were told by Washington to postpone de Gaulle’s trip again. De Gaulle asked Kirk for a meeting. President Roosevelt’s blessing was not forthcoming. Kirk took the full brunt of de Gaulle’s displeasure.  

Kirk was soon relieved of his French burden as he was recalled to the U.S. to prepare for a second invasion operation in the Mediterranean. His trip home was an adventure, taking in a circuitous route through north Africa to learn about his next assignment in a meeting with Admirals Hewitt and King. Kirk remembered boarding “a little fighter plane at Land’s End, in a perfect gale wind, and was blown to Gibraltar, where the vice admiral of Gibraltar very kindly put me up for the night.” The next day the strong wind continued, and the DC-3 looked to Kirk “pretty shabby” with passengers smoking around the plane as it was being refueled. His powers of observation made for a nerve-racking start to a trip - “there was no discipline whatsoever.” The flight was grounded, and Kirk spent the day arranging for transport with his “Royal Air Force pals” who organized a special flight for him to Algiers. After landing he was lodged in a “pretty grim” looking hotel with all the windows blown out. Kirk remembered being “pretty forlorn,” but very gratifyingly, he recalled, his friend Admiral Cunningham “invited me to come and stay with him, and I stayed with him in his lovely quarters…”

The next leg of Kirk’s trip was to Morocco to see General Mark Clark, who was key to liaison with French officials. This time Kirk’s transportation was aboard General George

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32 Ibid.
Patton’s B-17, which was outfitted for the General’s use. 33 On the day of the flight the weather turned bad with poor visibility. The pilot grew anxious to depart, but Patton was late. Upon his arrival they took off down the coast. During flight the pilot said he was unsure of getting to their destination. Kirk seemed to agree with the pilot about extending the flight over the sea with better visibility. “Well Georgie,” said Kirk, “don’t you think we’d better go through the straits and come around?” Patton rejected this notion, concerned about being shot at. Kirk replied that “they never hit anything; you know that.” To which Patton shot back “This’d be just the time they would hit us…”. The weather improved for the turn south but as they approached for landing it became “thick and raining like the dickens, at which point,” recalled Kirk, “Georgie took up his two revolvers and he said, ‘I have these handy.’” Kirk did not respond – “I wouldn’t give him the benefit.” But one of his staffers asked, “Why do you want that?” Patton said (“in that high, squeaky voice of his” according to Kirk), “you know how it is. We might bump into one of these hills, and some of those damned Arabs might come around, and these would come in mighty handy!” Kirk was impressed not only with the smooth landing, “like a butterfly on a flower,” in such challenging conditions, but also with the presence of the fire department and rescue people at the ready along with General Clark’s chief of staff, Al Gruenther, anxiously awaiting in hip boots.34 Kirk brought a bottle of whiskey, which he contributed to a “gorgeous dinner” with Patton and Clark and staff. The next day Kirk again flew with Patton. Over Fez, Kirk remembered, “Georgie said, ‘Well, you better look out the window, you may see some of these women in harems on top of these houses.’” Kirk didn’t see any. Kirk and Patton split up after landing at the coast – Patton flew on to Casablanca and Kirk south to catch another flight.

34 Ibid., 192-193.
across the Atlantic to Trinidad, getting in late at night. His friend J.B. Oldendorf (who later was in the Battle of Leyte Gulf), was the Naval Station Commanding Officer there, and very kindly put him up for the night.\textsuperscript{35}

The next day he flew to New York, landing at La Guardia Marine Port. There he got his orders which were a bit “curt” – to proceed to Hampton Roads and relive Admiral Hewitt. The navy arranged a ride down to Hampton Roads in a small single seat (next to the pilot) plane. Kirk recalled that the conversation with the pilot about the war distracted him so intently that he forgot to switch fuel tanks and the engine quit. Kirk remembered thinking “I’ve gone through all this war this far, to come down in the woodlands on the banks of the Susquehanna River is too much.” The pilot quickly switched tanks, pumped fuel, restarted the engine, and the trip continued.\textsuperscript{36}

**Amphibious Commander**

Kirk’s formal orders came on February 3, 1943. He was to assume duties as Commander Amphibious Force Atlantic Fleet by May.\textsuperscript{37} Allied leaders settled on an invasion of Sicily at the Casablanca Conference in January. Up to this point Kirk’s background in amphibious assault was limited to Veracruz, almost three decades earlier. But it was new to most all. Why was Kirk picked for amphibious command? There are several reasons. He was expert at naval gunfire. Naval gunfire support was thought to be crucial. Ordinance was something the army understood. He had an intelligence background that connected him with an information network in Washington and London. He was also an anglophile, with solid British connections and relations.
Perhaps most important, he was one of the few senior officers “in on the planning from the start.”

Lastly, Kirk was responsible for preparations and training. Historian Samuel Eliot Morrison declared Kirk’s “appointment to command in action the force that he had trained in practice was logical and appropriate.”

Kirk was able to learn quickly from the successful landings in north Africa. Admiral Hewitt, who led the amphibious operations in TORCH, was now Kirk’s boss. Hewitt returned to Africa and began corresponding with Kirk, bringing him up to speed on developments from his headquarters in Algiers. Kirk also learned from Naval Academy classmate, Rear Admiral Monroe Kelly, who received the Navy Distinguished Service Medal for his contributions as Commander of the Northern Attack Group of the Western Task Force in the landings and activities around French Morocco. Kelly “conducted the ships of his group in complete darkness to their stations for assault on the town of Port Lyautey which, with certain airdromes in the vicinity, he had been assigned to occupy preparatory to further operations against Casablanca.”

Fighting was stiff as Kelly’s ships landed their troops and supplies from 8 to 11 November. During the ensuing action, shore batteries were destroyed by heavy naval gunfire from Kelly’s ships.

From late February through May, Kirk engaged in a flurry of activity - conferences, meetings, tours, and inspections all along the eastern seaboard. Kirk’s primary task was to oversee and ensure the training and exercising of the navy and army units that he would

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command in the landings. During this time Kirk ensured a heavy schedule of training as sailors and soldiers practiced in their boats and with sea ladders in mock landings at Patuxent River and Little Creek naval facilities. These landing craft were of new and innovative designs. New Orleans boat builder Andrew Higgins was well acquainted with shallow water boats meant for Louisiana swaps. The Higgins boat or landing craft, vehicle, personnel (LCVP), and had a draft of only two feet at the bow and held a platoon of thirty-six troopers or switch out 15 or so men for a jeep. Kirk’s troops used an updated design from the earlier model used in TORCH. The new version had a ramp. Over twenty-three thousand were built. Another new machine was the remarkable amphibious truck, or DUKW, dubbed “the Duck”. In the meantime, Kirk received his second star – Rear Admiral Upper Half.  

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28 Feb 43 conference in Wash DC
5 Mar 43 conference in Philadelphia
25 Mar 43 conference in Wash DC
31 Mar 43 conference in Wash DC
4 Apr 43 conference in Wash DC
10 Apr 43 conference in Wash DC
13 Apr 43 “entered the upper half of the list of Rear Admirals in the Navy on April 7, 1943.” Kirk was informed by Frank Knox. Kirk is Commander Amphibious Force, Atlantic fleet. In early April the news of Kirk’s arrival to inspect the Little Creek Virginia Amphibious Force Training Base spread. The staff at “Gator News”, the base newspaper, scrambled to get a bio and info on the upcoming inspection.

18 Apr 43 conference in Wash DC
27 Apr 43 to Jacksonville FL then to FT Pierce FL then St. Andrews Bay FL.
2 May conference in Wash DC
3 May back in Norfolk
15 May 43 he hoisted his flag aboard Ancon.

Task Force

On May 15, Kirk made his headquarters aboard his newly outfitted flagship, Ancon. Ancon (AGC-4), launched in 1938, was a converted luxury liner owned by the Panama Railroad Company. Early on, the ship was engaged in cargo and passenger service between New York and the Panama Canal. The Army took her as troop transport when WWII broke out and she ferried troops to Australia on two voyages. She was placed in naval service in August 1942, and she took troops to Africa in operation TORCH. Four other transports were sunk, and Ancon engaged in rescue operations. Ancon then anchored in Casablanca harbor and took on wounded and returned to Norfolk in convoy. She sailed for Algeria and Oran after repairs in January 1943 and then returned to New York in February where she was reassigned to Atlantic Fleet Amphibious Forces. On February 16 she was sent to Norfolk Navy Yard for conversion into a headquarters and communications command ship. It had a large state of the art radar and communications equipment installed for its new purpose.43

Kirk learned he, as Task Force 85 Commander, was to transport Major General Troy Middleton’s 45th Infantry Division to the beaches of Sicily in Operation HUSKY. His command was part of a larger force landing General George Patton’s Seventh Army. To Kirk’s right, the British would land General Bernard Montgomery’s Eighth Army - their naval force commanded by his friend Vice Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay.44

43 Later she went to Devonport England for repairs. On 25 May 1944, King George VI visited the ship. She was Hall’s Flagship for the Normandy invasion forces 5 June. On 27 June she returned to Portland, England. Then she returned to the US and was transferred to the Pacific where she was used in the defeat of Japan. She won five battle stars before she was decommissioned in 1946 and returned to the owner. Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, ed. Caleb Carr (New York: Random House, 1999), 121. See Naval History and Heritage Command, “USS Ancon (AGC-4),” accessed 3 May 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-navy-ships/alphabetical-listing/a/uss-ancon--agc-4-0.html and also “Ancon II (AP-66),” accessed 3 May 2023, https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/a/ancon-ii.html.
Kirk and Propagandists

War correspondents were integral parts of the war effort with many becoming well known and trusted by the American people. FDR recruited John Steinbeck, the great novelist who had just published *Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, to venture to England and the Mediterranean to tell the story of young Americans in exotic foreign lands. C. S. Forester, British novelist and propagandist, rode along aboard an American destroyer to Alaskan waters in 1943. He later put his experience to use in his novel *The Good Shepherd*, that become the basis for the 2020 Tom Hanks movie *Greyhound*.45 There were others – Ernest Hemingway, Andy Rooney, and Walter Cronkite (to name a few), who later became American cultural icons.

As a columnist for the *New York Harold Tribune*, Steinbeck brought the common-man perspective of the war in numerous 800 to 1000-word vignettes.46 He sized up his profession this way; “The correspondents were a curious, crazy, and yet responsible crew,” and “…many of them had enormous followings. They were syndicated from one end of the nation to the other.” Steinbeck thought Ernie Pyle a good example – so powerful with the “readers at home that in importance he much outranked most general officers.”47 Steinbeck describing the professional war correspondent corps further; “We carried simulated ranks, ranging from captain to lieutenant colonel, which allowed us to eat at officers’ mess, where enlisted men could not go, but we also had access to the enlisted men, where officers could not go.”48

Kirk had a boat full of these propagandist – but one was closest. Assigned to his staff for the Sicily campaign was the American drama critic and author John Mason Brown. He had worked as an aid for Kirk on Stark’s staff in London. Brown was a Harvard graduate 12 years

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47 Ibid., 5.
48 Ibid., 8.
Kirk’s junior. Before the war he worked from 1929 for the *New York Evening Post*. After the war he became a renowned critic writing for the *Saturday Theater Review* column “Seeing Things” and was posthumously inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame in 1981. Many journalists received a commission. Brown started as a navy lieutenant, and he took the role seriously. “The war correspondent or war photographer today,” wrote Brown, “is a hard-working fellow in uniform. He is a man of writing skill or camera mastery who is blessed (or cursed) with a love of adventure which lands him in the hottest spots at the hottest times. His courage can be infinite; his readers almost as numerous as the dollars in the national debt.”

Kirk’s force had correspondents and photographers representing a variety of news services and publications from the Associated Press (AP) and the United Press (UP), to *Time* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Aboard the command ship was Brown, Clark Lee of the *International News Service*, John Mecklin of UP, John Moroso of AP, George Sessions Perry representing the *Saturday Evening Post*, and finally, Reginald Ingraham of *Time*. Brown managed the information Kirk wanted and didn’t want them to see and hear and report.

Kirk came to consider Brown his “great friend.” It was a mutually beneficial relationship. Brown could contribute to the war effort and be inspired while up close to the action and decision making – the inside scoop. By telling the invasion force’s story, Brown enhanced Kirk’s reputation, and in such mass undertakings in the war, it mattered. Americans wanted to respect their military leaders. Public opinion was clearly part of the war effort. As was the case with perhaps most naval officers, Kirk was not a public self-promoter. He was not a

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“Bull” Halsey or George Patton. His character was more like that of Admiral Raymond Spruance – the “Quiet Warrior.” But Brown’s influence made Kirk a public figure by the end of the year.

Kirk had experience with shipboard life of course, and knew the problem with managing information. Steinbeck observed “a troopship is a nest of rumors, rumors that go whisking from stem to stern…” Kirk recalled that Brown’s poetic daily news summaries, which were always approved by the staff intelligence officer and the flagship office, where given most afternoons with men “listening to this yarn of our daily lives and the news of great events.”

**Invasion Force Atlantic Crossing**

*Ancon* and accompanying ships left port on Decoration Day, May 30, 1943, and sailed south toward Bermuda “and were diverted,” Kirk recalled, “by orders from Washington, to avoid submarines, well south of the direct route to Gibraltar…”. Kirk’s fleet then set out across the Atlantic, bound for Oran, Algeria. Kirk’s ships included 28 transports and cargo, all combat loaded, in two convoys – each protected by a cruiser and nine destroyers – 48 ships in all.

Brown recounts how Kirk wanted information to flow. “Our Task Force was two days out from America when the Admiral summoned me to the bridge.” Kirk said to him, “I want to talk with you about your Battle Station… I want you to be up here on the bridge during the action and report it play-by-play to the men below… I want you to do their seeing for them. After all, this is a democratic war, and I believe that men who are willing to give their lives for democracy have the right to be included in what’s going on.” Brown chose Kirk’s statement

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“This is a democratic war” for the introductory chapter for the book he planned. Brown recognized Kirk struck a quiescently American cord, and that it would make great press for the folks back home.

Two days out was the assigned convoy rendezvous. Ships gathered. Kirk told Brown to start that evening by telling the crew of the formation of the fleet.\textsuperscript{57} Once the ships gathered, they formed up and set off in zigzag course to avoid torpedo attack. Cruisers, destroyers, oilers, amphibious supply ships, a sea tug, and the troopships – all began the journey past Cape Verde and the Madeira Islands in reasonably good weather. The convoy had good air cover all the way. A missing search plane on anti-submarine patrol from an escorting cruiser caused Kirk the greatest concern during the crossing. To his relief, Kirk learned the floatplane’s pilot and crewman were picked up by a passing merchantman after three days.\textsuperscript{58}

One evening, after several days out, Kirk ordered the fleet to slow as a sailor with a bad appendix was transferred to the medical ship.\textsuperscript{59} Brown, was inspired by how many eyes fell on just one man and commented in his evening announcement “as Americans at war, we carry our decencies with us. Something tells me with shuddering certainly that, had the same thing happened in the German or the Japanese Navy, the operative case – the unknown man - whose only misdeed and distinction was to have been seriously ill, would not have received the same consideration.”\textsuperscript{60}

On one occasion the convoy destroyers engaged a possible submarine threat, dropping depth charges at 1000 yards from Kirk’s command ship. Kirk had just sat down to dinner with

\textsuperscript{57} John Mason Brown, \textit{To All Hands: An Amphibious Adventure} (New York: Whittlesey House, 1943), 4.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
General McLain and the Captain. Kirk, now on the uncovered bridge, Brown noticed, “bare-headed, calm, and decisive, continued to give his orders…” ⁶¹ During the calm transit into the Mediterranean, at the entrance to the Straits of Gibraltar, Kirk said to Brown “Aren’t you going to tell this ship’s company about what we’re doing? This is where Hannibal crossed, with his elephants, a very few miles north. Haven’t you got any interesting tales?” Stirred, Brown reported “We have sailed over those narrows, now known as the Straits of Gibraltar, which in prehistoric times were dry land. We have floated for a while in stately columns of twos where once the savage animals of Africa roamed into primeval Europe.” Brown’s prose became “quite famous” and inspired others to mimic and match him in shipboard address systems from the British navy to the U.S. Pacific Fleet in events on up to the Normandy invasion. ⁶²

Kirk’s fleet anchored near Mers-El-Kebir next to Oran and began preparations for the final leg of their journey – the coast of Sicily. The army disembarked and went to camp. Kirk was informed the army wanted to fit more troops and equipment on the ships than was planned. He accommodated until he finally had to say “You must remember, these ships have not got rubber sides. You can’t stretch them beyond a certain point.” ⁶³ To drive the point home, Kirk took army commanders on a tour. In Brown’s book, Kirk is pictured standing abord a small craft with Generals Patton, Alexander, and McLain on a water born inspection of the task force. ⁶⁴ In the end, Kirk accommodated 3,000 more men and their equipment, bringing the total to 25,000 men that he was responsible for in landing in the upcoming invasion.

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⁶¹ John Mason Brown, To All Hands: An Amphibious Adventure (New York: Whittlesey House, 1943), 42.
⁶³ Kirk, Reminiscences, 198.
The *Ancon* was berthed at a French naval base several miles to the west of Oran, which occupied a historic natural anchorage known for sheltering pirates in times past. Surrounding the ship were the pride of the British fleet, battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney* along with the aircraft carrier *Indomitable*.65 The 4th of July came, and Kirk was invited to lunch by Vice Admiral Sir A.U. Willis of the Royal Navy, probably aboard his flagship, H.M.S. Nelson along with other American leaders. They drank a toast, he remembered, “which you can have aboard a British man-o-war, to the tragic day on which the United States severed its connections from the British Empire. Then we put to sea.”66

General Omar Bradley, Patton’s lieutenant, remembered the 4th of July as a sunny afternoon when he left his lodging in Oran and came aboard *Ancon*. Bradley fondly remembers Kirk greeting him at the quarterdeck as he “was piped aboard and escorted to a comfortable cabin amidships.” After allowing him to settle in, Kirk said “Now General, is there anything we can get you? You’re our guest while you’re aboard.”

“Anything?” grinned Bradley.

“Anything,” Kirk replied.

Bradley ordered ice cream.67

The general was duly impressed. Navy life had its advantages. Kirk thought Bradley a “fine man,” and the two became fast friends. It was the beginning of a strong professional relationship that was built in the trials of close joint operations, making the two America’s amphibious dynamic duo.68

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67 Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 121.
Operation Husky: The Sicily Invasion

The Sicily invasion lasted from July 9th to August 17, 1943. Kirk’s responsibility as Commander, Task Force 85, ended July 22, because he was involved in leading the initial landings (the first in a series of smaller ones) on the south coast of Sicily near Scoglitti. D-Day was on July 10. 69

For the Sicily invasion, Kirk had the following chain of command: General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces in North Africa, was supreme commander. Under him, British Admiral Andrew B. Cunningham commanded allied naval forces, which was divided into two major task force divisions. The Eastern Task Force was British and led by Admiral Bertram Ramsey and General Bernard Montgomery. The Western Task Force was American and led by Vice Admiral Hewitt and General Patton. Hewitt and Patton’s force was divided into three. On the east side Kirk and General Middleton would deploy the 45th Division. Rear Admiral Hall and Major General Terry Allen were at the center of the American forces with 1st Division (Brigadier General “Teddy Jr” Roosevelt was second in command). To the west of Hall were Rear Admiral Connolly and Major General Lucian Truscott. 70 General Omar Bradley, Patton’s lieutenant, was assigned to Kirk’s flagship and would command Middleton and Allen once ashore. 71

Kirk’s flagship Ancon departed Africa at 3:55 P.M. on July 5th, leading a convoy made up of many of the same ships he led across the Atlantic. Kirk’s fleet sailed along the north coast of Africa east, toward a rendezvous point with British ships from Egypt. At Cape Bon, at the tip of

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69 Memorandum from Commander US Naval Forces Northwest African Waters to CINC US Atlantic Fleet 5 Jan 1944, P/R, Box 1. Commander Task Force 85 from 21 Jun 1943 to 22 Jul 1943 because he would be involved in leading the initial landings (the first in a series of smaller ones in Italy).

70 John Mason Brown, To All Hands: An Amphibious Adventure (New York: Whittlesey House, 1943), 100.

71 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, ed. Caleb Carr (New York: Random House, 1999), 123.
Tunisia, they turned south a bit to avoid enemy reconnaissance and to enter the previously mine swept channel, then they turned north to the Sicilian coast. There was some delay and congestion getting the ships together in order. “It was a bit of a snarl,” according to Kirk, “…because an awful lot of ships had to go different places.” Kirk’s force was pivotal. Designated CENT FORCE, his fleet occupied the middle of HUSKY, with Hall and Connolly’s fleet to his left, and Ramsay’s British forces to his right. Kirk commanded at the critical “hinge.”

War Speech

Kirk published a message “To All Hands” (which later became the inspiration for the title of Brown’s book) later that evening. Kirk informed everyone of the mission. It was the first time the Ancon’s crew were told of the invasion details. Over the public address system Kirk announced:

We are sailing to Sicily. We are going to land a division of Army troops on the southern coast of the island, on the beaches near a small town called Scoglitti. We and our division are only part of the forces involved in this attack, but we have a place of honor. To the west of us will be other American forces, and to our east will be the British. We are at the hinge. Overhead we shall have a very large force of Allied aircraft, although much of the time you will not see them. Ahead of us and to the west there will be parachute troops. Covering the operation at sea will be a strong British battle force. I have asked your officers to explain to you in detail where each of you fits into the coming battle. In its broad outline our plan is very much like the landing exercise we held recently. The transports under Commodore Phillips and Commodore Loomis will land their troops on the beaches west of Scoglitti. Commodore Bailey’s ships will use beaches east of the town. The landing will be assisted by control vessels; it will be supported by fire of destroyers, cruisers, and other craft; it will be screened by more destroyers. At daybreak we shall be joined by our LST’s, LCT’s, and LCI(L)’s; we shall proceed to unload the Army’s equipment as quickly as we can. You have been trained for this job. You have been equipped. To the best of their ability your officers have made plans that will work. We are ready. We shall be opposed. The Itallians are our enemies, and until we have the unconditional surrender of their misguided leaders our attack must be pressed with utmost spirit. They will be fighting on their home ground, and they will have German help. We can expect a hard fight. The Army troops have a tough assignment, and

72 Kirk, Reminiscences, 198.
a very important one in the overall plan. Our job is to make it less tough for them by doing our part well – we must put them where they want to go, on time, in full force. We must support them by gunfire, unload their supplies and equipment, care for any of their wounded. To do this we must also take care of ourselves. We shall be busy. As we proceed to Sicily we shall have several rendezvous, picking up many ships and dropping off others. Your officers will keep you informed of your progress, both on the way and during the landing battle. If you don’t get all the news don’t worry; the hunting may be too good for us to stop and talk about it. You will be doing your job to the limit; so will everyone else. We have bad news to deliver, but we are saving it, this trip, for Benito Mussolini. Good luck! A. G. Kirk.74

Brown reported to the crew that there were “approximately 2500 ships and landing boats with us on this huge Allied armada which is now converging on Sicily.”75 Kirk led 96 ships carrying a third of American forces.76 There were almost 26,000 troops relying on Kirk to land them. Hewitt and Patton believed Kirk’s to be the most critical landing because of its’ proximity to vital airfields.77 Bradley was impressed with Brown, and complemented Kirk on the speech and broadcasts. Beginning his memoir of the invasion (chapter 9 of A Soldier’s story) Bradley told of Brown’s voice and commentary. “A Manhattan drama critic, author, and lecturer, Brown had been called into the navy as an officer on Admiral Kirk’s staff. It was his task each day to brief the ship’s company with a battle report. For like all able commanders, Kirk knew that men respond more spiritedly to a task they understand.”78

As the ships approached the staging area on the 8th there was concern of enemy air and submarine attack, but the fleet passed unharmed, perhaps unnoticed. It was thought the enemy may be saving their strength for a decisive D-Day blow.79 There were planners on both General

74 John Mason Brown, To All Hands: An Amphibious Adventure (New York: Whittlesey House, 1943), 85, 86. It provides an excellent summary of happenings - so it is here in its’ entirety.
75 Ibid., 88.
77 Samuel Eliot Morison, Sicily – Salerno – Anzio, 126.
78 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 122.
79 Ibid., 125.
Eisenhower’s and Admiral Cunningham’s staffs who, according to Kirk, “thought that (HUSKY) was going to be a pretty bloody affair.”

Kirk and Bradley were confronted with a late-hour concern regarding the height of sand bars. A submarine reconnaissance indicated the threat to the landing craft. Alarmed, Bradley told Kirk “If we get hung up on (the sand bars) now, we’ll not only have a hundred yards to go to the beach, but the water there’ll be five feet deep. We’d have one devil of a time getting in.” Kirk considered the situation and told Bradley “Well, it may not be much to offer, but there’s at least one thing that we can do. We’ll pick up every rubber raft in the force and load them with the assault waves. Then maybe if they get hung up on those runnels they can paddle in the rest of the way.” Although Bradley thought rafts would help, he remained concerned about critical delays. Kirk arranged for rafts to be towed in on the first landing “so if the boats did ground, the soldier boys could get into these little rubber boats and go ashore.”

Overnight another worry intensified. “Well,” Kirk recalled, “it began to blow. It began to blow, and it blew – and the Mediterranean can get awful rough…”. It was double concerning to non-sailors. “I awakened to the 10,000-ton Ancon bucking a heavy sea,” recalled Bradley. “I climbed up to the deck and found Kirk was pacing the bridge in his black foul-weather gear.” That afternoon the sea remained rough. Bradley recalled barrage balloons “bobbed wildly as one by one their cables snapped and they were dashed away.” Everyone knew the invasion could not be stopped. “The Plan was in command, and nothing could have stopped it,” Bradley

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admitted. Kirk sent a message to Rear Admiral Davidson, his Support Force Commander:

“Jolly boating weather.” He received no reply.

Brown chronicled the hours starting at 11:30 p.m. on July 9th. “When we passed Malta – unconquerable Malta – toward the middle of the afternoon, and later came to Gozo, we knew our next island was Sicily. We are near Sicily now, still moving towards it in darkness.” Brown told the crew of the large flights of Spitfires late that afternoon and the unconfirmed reports of enemy aircraft in the area and the sight of fires and flares ahead and the sounds of distant guns. “It is towards these guns and fires that we are steering. The enemy is there. Even the extra slab of ice cream on the pie after tonight’s steak dinner was a pleasant way of our being told that something extra was soon to be expected of us.”

Earlier that day as the weather turned bad, Brown told the crew there was a 30-knot wind. By midnight the wind slowed dramatically and although still a bit choppy, “…compared to what it was only a short time back, as quiet as if God had put his hand on it. This ought to be the best of good omens.” Bradley recalled shortly after midnight “as though in answer to our prayers, the wind dropped and the seas leveled into a broad swell. While the gale had frightened us badly, it had also helped to keep the secret of our invasion.” What’s more, “the heavier swells lifted our craft over those sand bars and Kirk’s rubber rafts remained unused.”

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82 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, ed. Caleb Carr (New York: Random House, 1999), 125.
85 Ibid., 116.
86 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 126.
Invasion Force in Action

Kirk’s ship dropped anchor at 12:45 a.m. July 10. Forty-five minutes later many allied planes passed overhead signaling the beginning of the 82nd Airborne Division paratrooper landings. Brown reported the ship had become so dark that it was hard to make out the person next to you on the Admiral’s Bridge “unless in passing he just happens to be silhouetted against one of those fires still burning on the beaches.”87 Bradley recalled by the time he awoke and made his way to the bridge around midnight, “Kirk had shepherded his vast force with magnificent seamanship into the saucer-like bay off Gela where we now lay undetected.”88

The 2:00 a.m. “H” hour was delayed an hour due to choppy sea. Kirk received reports of difficulties with hoisting trucks and tanks and other heavy cargo from ship’s holds in the rolling sea. Kirk notified the chain up to Eisenhower, who became very concerned that Kirk would postpone loading the small boats for several hours. During the 3 a.m. hour the night sky lit up with search lights and gunfire. “The Fourth of July was never like this!” reported Brown “These are the biggest fireworks I’ve ever seen.”89 The show intensified.

At 3:30 a.m. Kirk ordered naval gunfire support to commence. Kirk was pleased with the new radar technology and the accuracy of his gunners. He later learned they had “rather surprised the Italians in their beds.” The first wave of the landing occurred on time at 3:45 a.m. With the mass of men now in the process of boarding or transiting to landing sites in small boats, the action intensified. At about 4:30 a.m., the ships of the landing force came under attack from the air by a squadron of Italian torpedo-bombers and a separate group of high-level bombers. The 45-minute attack scored zero hits on Kirk’s force.90

Brown noted that by 5:15 a.m. the initial landings were complete with “slight opposition.” An enemy plane attacked the Ancon to no effect. Still more enemy planes attacked ships around them. The destroyer Maddox (not under Kirk’s command) was sunk by dive bombers, but damage by enemy air action overall was light. 91 As dawn broke Spitfires from Malta arrived and pursued the enemy aircraft. Kirk ordered a cease fire at 5:29 a.m. to avoid friendly fire. Kirk and Middleton were growing impatient with the lack of information coming from the landings, so Kirk ordered transports to move in closer to within 5000 yards of the beaches. By 8 a.m. Ancon had weighed anchor and had moved closer to shore and Brown could report a period of quiet as Kirk shook hands with Middleton of the 45th Division as he departed for shore.92 Admiral Cunningham, who had dashed off in a destroyer from his Malta headquarters, had his concerns immediately asswaged observing firsthand Kirk’s progress in the face of choppy sea and heavy surf. “The landing conducted by my old friend Rear Admiral Alan Kirk,” recalled Cunningham, “had been particularly difficult. He had had a dead lee shore, and I made him a congratulatory signal…” while passing by. Eisenhower remembers Cunningham happily reporting that Kirk’s landings “constituted one of the finest exhibitions of seamanship it had been his pleasure to witness in forty-five years of sailoring.”93

Italian coastal batteries opened up on the transports as they drew near but were soon silenced by naval gunfire support. Kirk decided to switch beach landing sites because of some heavy equipment getting stuck in soft sand. Landing craft began piling up. The surf drove the boats far up into the sand. It was a lesson Kirk learned for the next landing in Normandy. Kirk remembered “we didn’t have the equipment at that time that we had later on to pull landing craft

out through the shallow water back again where they could use their engines.” One boat
overturned causing about 10-15 soldiers to drown - the most loss of life of soldiers in Kirk’s
landing zone. Kirk responded quickly, sending a senior officer to investigate and take charge.
New landing sites were chosen and more than 700 DUKW amphibious trucks went hard at work
transporting men and supplies from ship to shore. Steinbeck was enthralled with the “ducks”
which “are perhaps America’s real secret weapon” being able to drive on land and at sea.

Bradley departed on a DUKW later in the morning. When he arrived ashore, he learned
that naval gunfire had been critical to success. “Without it the 1st Division might have been
thrown back into the sea,” he said. Kirk, as a gunner himself, was confident “naval gunpower
could be used very effectively against shore targets, provided you knew exactly where you were,
in terms of a chart, and you had a good map of the shore, what you call a military map with good
coordinates to start.” Kirk ensured a spotter was embedded with the troops to maintain radio
contact with the ship gunnery crews to explain what corrections they needed to make to hit the
target. In Kirk’s judgment, the result was “that shooting was awfully good. It was so good that
the Germans and Italians said: ‘Americans can see in the dark.’” Kirk’s six-inch gunners did
shoot in the dark before sunrise, and the dawn made visible to Kirk the double vision of Mount
Etna’s fire and smoke above, and the fire and smoke on the beaches below. Kirk was pleased.
In the late afternoon, he sent a message informing Hewitt that seven of his transports would be
finished unloading by midnight. But there was delay again because of reports of overcrowded
and blocked beaches.

95 John Steinbeck, Once There Was a War (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), 124.
96 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, ed. Caleb Carr (New York: Random House, 1999), 129.
97 Ibid., 128.
98 Kirk, Reminiscences, 203.
On the 12th enemy planes harassed *Ancon* and the fleet offshore. The ship would mysteriously shake – with speculation amongst the crew as to what it was. Then they were under heavy attack from aircraft. At one point, shrapnel hit the ship and injured eleven – two seriously. One plane crashed 1500 feet to port.99 The moon was full that night, causing angst. The ship fired its 5-inch fore gun several times.100 Kirk ordered ships not to fire toward the beaches because friendly aircraft with paratroopers were approaching. However, friendly fire, much of it coming from U.S. army batteries ashore, took down friendly aircraft. Kirk blamed command and control. The fight in the air was run separately from the sea and ground operation, and that was the simple and unacceptable situation that was a clear weakness to Hewitt and Kirk for weeks prior to the landings.

**Invasion Complete**

When Kirk went ashore at 8 a.m. on the 12th to conference with Bradley and Middleton, a large German bomb hit close by covering them “with the dry white dust of southern Sicily.”101 Kirk observed the blockages in the landing zones but fortunately the naval gunfire had caused the enemy to move their guns far inland allowing for time to ease congestion. With the job nearly complete, Kirk transferred his flag temporarily to the destroyer *Earle* at 4:30 p.m. That evening, Kirk released ten of his unloaded transports, along with destroyers and support ships, and *Ancon*, to return to Oran. Brown reported to the crew that German radio said *Ancon* and three other transports were sunk two days previously. “Hence,” Brown told the crew, “I trust you are doubly

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100 Ibid., 162.
surprised to be sailing again tonight.”

Kirk continued to oversee the last of the unloading of the seven remaining transports and then sailed for Oran the following day via Malta where he briefly visited Admiral’s Cunningham and Mountbatten. It was a chance to reinforce his professional network of British friends. Cunningham praised Kirk’s landing operation in a report to Eisenhower. Kirk celebrated the occasion marking the end of unloading by receiving from Patton the quart of whiskey he’d won in a bet that the unloading would be in under eight days. However, one of his transport ships later informed him that they neglected to unload some ammunition still in the hold. He considered sending the ship back but declined. “I wasn’t going to have Georgie thumbing his nose at me,” said Kirk. “But he won the bet.”

Back at the dock in Oran, Kirk found his flagship was highly coveted. He learned that “Jimmy (Rear Admiral Hall) wanted the Ancon.” Soon however, his boss, Vice Admiral Hewitt could not resist making the “Hotel Ancon” with all its updated communications, his personal flagship in the Mediterranean. Kirk was initially annoyed with having to give up his flagship, but, after suppressing pride and disappointment and turning to reason, he realized “it turned out to be dandy.” Hewitt and Hall were remaining in the Mediterranean and he knew that the equipment on board would be needed for command-and-control operations as the battles progressed on the Italian mainland. Kirk said his goodbyes:

For two months my flag has flown on your ship. During this time, I and my staff have lived with you and worked with you. Together we have sailed many thousands of miles; together we have had a considerable share in the largest amphibious operation in history, and one of the most successful. Tomorrow we part. I know that the burden of an Admiral’s Flag and an Admiral’s staff often bears hard upon the company of the ship that carries them. It is heavy duty. You have borne it well, and for myself and men, I thank you. The Ancon is a fine ship, with a fine crew and skipper. As we go to our separate

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104 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 204.
duties, I think we may justly take pride, together, in a task well done. Good luck to you all.\textsuperscript{105}

Kirk transferred his flag to a former merchantman and began preparations for the now largely empty ships to return home across the Atlantic. They would take on some cargo – prisoners of war. Kirk observed the line of six hundred German officers from Rommel’s army lined up on the dock. They made an impression on him. “Boy,” he said, “they were lean, tanned, hard in the face. They were tough babies!”\textsuperscript{106}

While underway on the return trip to the states, the seas became a bit rough. Kirk sent a message to the captain of the ship with the German POWs on board: “How are the herrenvolk doing?” There was no answer. Kirk later reminisced saying “You know, the American navy doesn’t have much of a sense of humor when busy. They’re always so damned serious.”\textsuperscript{107}

Later, Kirk sent another message to the transport inquiring as to the treatment and the care of German prisoners. After giving assurances that the prisoners were well treated, that they were rotated above decks, and that morale and discipline was good, the captain said that the German officers were in fact so pleased with the treatment that they said they would ensure that when Hitler had soon won, that American officers and men in German prison camps would receive the same excellent treatment. The captain also told Kirk that the German prisoners were concerned about their submarines until they saw, and were surprised by, the great number of destroyers protecting the fleet. They had been told the allies had few destroyers. When they were told of the fall of Mussolini, the word reaching them underway on July 25\textsuperscript{th}, they rejected the news as


\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
propaganda. This episode spoke to Kirk about the power of propaganda, and it remained an important and particular interest of his for the remainder of his public life.

Brown continued his daily talks, telling the crew of their new flag officer status. Kirk’s 250 member staff crowded the ship. “If you are denied your Lebensraum, Brown apologetically piped, “blame us.” On the way home Brown would announce congratulations from Churchill on down, but this praise and congratulatory atmosphere was pierced by a mark of true success. “Il Duce is out,” announced Brown to the crew, “He has fallen as leader of his Fascist state.” It had to have lifted morale like nothing else, and Brown took up the entire evening broadcast in top poetic form. “In bringing all this about; in shortening the war; in changing the course of history; in cutting the tightrope from under Mussolini, all of us who took part in this amphibious invasion of Sicily can feel a happy sense of ownership, no matter how small or how remote.”

In his final public service announcement, Brown said “this is where, as a Task Force, we have stepped into history and where world history has become a part of all our individual histories.” They were gone just under two months, departing the Mediterranean three days after the Sicily landings.

Kirk’s part in the invasion was over. It was up to that point in the war the largest and most significant amphibious event. It was a significant challenge regarding organization, joint operations, manpower and equipment. His landings were not opposed as was feared. The deception and surprise worked. Perhaps rising more than any other officers in HUSKY, were the professional statures of Kirk and Bradley. Historian Samuel Elliot Morison blamed the heavy

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110 Ibid., 220.
111 Ibid., 236.
112 Ibid., 5.
surf, absence of landmarks, and last-minute influx of inexperienced crews (beyond Kirks control) for the few casualties in Kirk’s landings.\textsuperscript{113} Kirk was pleased and relived it “went very well” and had not become “a pretty bloody affair” as some believed.\textsuperscript{114}

Aftermath

Kirk knew British crowds routinely cheered their returning ships. But his hope of a similar welcome was soon dashed. They pulled in about 4 in the afternoon. He could not help but be disappointed with the lack of interest in the triumphant return of the successful invasion fleet. “There wasn’t anybody down there to meet any of us,” recalled Kirk. “There were some men to handle the lines, but the Commandant sent no one down to welcome the returning heroes.” This instilled in Kirk a resolve to inspire “vim and joyousness” in the Norfolk naval bases and activities. He was determined to have a dress review – a “big parade,” and a dinner with dancing on the tennis courts including everyone – especially the women of the WAVES, WACS, and Nurses from the Red Cross and area hospitals.\textsuperscript{115}

On August 4, 1943, Kirk was back in Washington to see his family and conference with navy leadership. “We were damned lucky,” Kirk told the news correspondents in Washington. They all went to war and suffered relatively few casualties for the size of force.\textsuperscript{116} Hewitt said Kirk performed his duties in “a highly satisfactory manner” and recommended him for the

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\textsuperscript{115} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 208.

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Distinguished Service Medal. The award was upgraded. He was awarded the Legion of Merit.

He took 10 days leave – and rest. John Steinbeck arrived in Oran just as Kirk was leaving. He traveled with the second wave of troops and supplies for the invasion of Italy, observing from offshore. “Above the pier the troopship rears high and thick as an office building,” he wrote to the folks back home. “She is a nameless ship and will be while the war lasts. Her destination is known to very few men and her route to even fewer, and the burden of the men who command her must be almost unendurable, for the master who loses her and her cargo will never sleep comfortably again.” Kirk could rest.

Kirk had a public relations boost after the Sicilian operations in the late fall of 1943. Brown’s book was published by Whittlesey House of the venerable McGraw-Hill Book Company in New York and London. Quality bound, it featured on the front leaf cover Kirk’s iconic “master of the sea” image, complete with distant commanding look - binoculars dangling at his chest. Entitled To All Hands: An Amphibious Adventure, Brown’s compilation was a rich and poetic taste of invasion happenings aboard ship. The chapters of the book “were intended to be air-borne” Brown explained, read to sailors over a ship’s public address system while at sea.

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117 Memorandum from Commander US Naval Forces Northwest African Waters to CINC US Atlantic Fleet 5 Jan 1944, P/R, Box 1. On 16 Aug 1943, General Eisenhower recommended Kirk receive the Distinguished Service Medal for his service in the invasion of Sicily. See Memo form CINC US Fleet and CNO to Chief of Staff US Army 3 Sep 1943, P/R, Box 1. The Navy responded to Army 27 Aug 1943 Rear Admiral Kirk had been awarded the Legion of Merit by the Navy and was considered for Army Distinguished Service Medal but is lesser and an “undesirable duplication.” Memo from CNP to CINC US Fleet 27 Aug 1943, P/R, Box 1.


120 John Mason Brown, To All Hands: An Amphibious Adventure (New York: Whittlesey House, 1943), 3. The copy of the book consulted was evidently a Christmas gift. In the upper right front page, it reads “William W. Fitzhugh Jr., Christmas 1943.”
Philosophy of Leadership and Management

With his connections as an entertainment columnist for the *New York Post*, Brown was uniquely positioned to write and publish quickly – in enough time to sell as a beautifully bound volume his daily entries, illustrated with photos, for Christmas gifting that year.\(^{121}\) Kirk, in the forward to the book, tells the reader that it was a “frequent practice on a men-of-war to have the progress of the battle described over a PA system” and that “it is practicable to give summaries of events from time to time and thus keep all hands informed…”\(^{122}\) Kirk explained his belief in management and leadership; “success in combat comes often from brilliant individual initiative. But before a person can act independently without throwing out of gear a carefully drawn plan, he must have some idea of what it is all about.”\(^{123}\) Kirk’s philosophy was to keep his subordinates informed and expected them to act independently when necessary. In his view, senior commanders gave general orders and plans – leaving specifics to be carried out by subordinates. Kirk believed this strongly. This trait brought friction to his relationship with British Admiral Ramsey in the later part of the war – for his philosophy relied on detailed plans that carried the force of orders.

Kirk’s philosophy was bolstered by what he learned at the Naval War College. “Once the rank and file learn how the power-play is intended to be run and have seen by drill and practice that it can be so run, then the cares of the leaders are lifted appreciably. Our soldiers and sailors are the better for knowing the score. This reliance upon the individual is nowhere greater

\(^{122}\) Ibid., ix.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., x.
than in amphibious warfare. During our attacks we are poised precariously – one foot on land and the other in the water. “124

Samuel Eliot Morison noted that both Admiral Hewitt and General Patton recognized Kirk’s was the most important of the three landings in Sicily and that responsibility for the 26,000 troops was well placed in what Morison characterized as a “reliable, experienced, and versatile flag officer.”125 Kirk’s versatility as a naval officer was clear by the fall of 1943. His meticulous knowledge and experience with guns and explosives, his experience as a seaman, his refined practice with briefing technical information and lessons learned, his ability to build and maintain professional relationships with senior officers both in and outside the navy – especially British naval and American army officers – made him ideal for new and complex joint-warfare operations. Kirk’s knowledge, skills and abilities were needed for the long-awaited invasion of northern France, a major undertaking that everyone knew was coming.

Chapter 7

The Usual Élan: The Invasion of Normandy and the Continent

By the end of 1943, Rear Admiral (upper half) Alan Goodrich Kirk was established as one of a handful of amphibious experts in the navy, so it was no surprise when he was assigned to the long-awaited invasion of France for the reestablishment of a western front. The great naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison called Kirk “the key American Naval figure in NEPTUNE-OVERLORD, from the time he reported in mid-November 1943.”1 But in the story of the Normandy invasion, Kirk’s contributions remain less known. There are three reasons for this. The invasion story is highly concentrated in time and space. It was the beach, and the morning hours of D-Day that was the endless narrative of conflict and heroism. What happened before and after, on the sea and inland, gets lost. Second, many more people experience, and can better relate to, land warfare. D-Day is a story largely retold as an army endeavor. Popular and well-respected historian Max Hastings identifies Kirk as the Western Task Force Commander, but he provides one quote and two passing mentions – no more than a paragraph’s worth – in a 320-page history of the landings. Lastly, although he exuded confidence, Kirk was not flamboyant, flashy, or charismatic. His style did not demand attention unnecessarily. Kirk did look the part. Age 55, Kirk was “of middle height, with twinkling blue eyes set in a sailor’s weathered face,” wrote Lieutenant Brown. He was “dapper and grimly determined” and walked with energy in a “cross between a stride and a strut, which even on dry land had an uncanny way of converting a

carpet into a bridge. Executed by legs which refused to forsake the sea, it was Admiral Kirk’s only unamphibious aspect.”

He was an experienced amphibious commander, administrator, and diplomat. Morison says Kirk was “thoroughly conversant with English ways, problems and personalities” and he was recognized “master” of amphibious warfare. His natural diplomatic skills were manifest in his wide range of friends – friends who would not get along with each other – from Ernest King to Andrew Cunningham. As was the case in the landings in North Africa and Sicily, Kirk was in on the planning for the invasion of France from the beginning. In fact, he had “a large voice” in the larger scheme. Even before leaving Washington, Kirk was aware the target was the Bay of the Seine – a decision of, as he called them, “the politicos” in the spring and summer of 1943.

In mid-September Kirk conferred with Admiral Royal Ingersoll, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, and his staff in Washington. Admiral Ernest King, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet decided his old academy pupil’s knowledge and experience needed to be shared with commanders readying for amphibious operations in the Pacific, so Kirk went to Hawaii to consult with Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Pacific Fleet, and his staff. He set out for Honolulu September 28th. As was the case with the novelty of long trips by air during the war, Kirk saw these flights as vivid personal adventures. The flight to San Francisco in a Lockheed Lodestar Electra and on to Honolulu in a Pan-American flying boat, thrilled him. He arrived for a two week stay and enjoyed meals and rounds of horseshoes with Nimitz. Nimitz asked Kirk to brief his planning staff – headed by Admiral Turner, his former competitor in

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4 Craig L. Symonds, Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xiv. This is a reference to the Quebec Conference.
5 Memorandum Temporary Additional Duty from Commander Sixth Amphib Force to Kirk 16 Sep 43, P/R, Box 3.
6 Memorandum Temporary Additional Duty from Commander Sixth Amphib Force to Kirk 28 Sep 43, P/R, Box 3.
naval intelligence. Now the two men were counterparts of amphibious warfare in the two-theatre war and past quarrels were long buried. Kirk helped in preparations for landings in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. He and several members of his staff who went with him, reviewed air cover, anti-mine and camouflage operations and of course his specialty – naval bombardment. By October 15, Kirk was finished and returned to Washington. His trip home was marked by other adventures including staying at the lovely Hotel Del-Coronado in San Diego and being squeezed by crates of oranges that his navy pilots wanted to take with them to Pensacola. He also had a joyful stopover in Corpus Christi, Texas to see his daughter, who was a WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and took her to a dinner party.  

**Orders to England**

Back in Washington on October 23, Kirk met with King. He was to take charge of the Sixth Amphibious Force in London, reporting to Commander Twelfth Fleet by November 1. Kirk next met with General George Marshall, who was rumored to be preparing to become Allied Supreme Commander for the coming invasion. During the meeting Kirk thought Marshall was not fully engaged in their discussion, which made him think Marshall was just going through the motions knowing he would not be leaving President Roosevelt’s side as senior military advisor.

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As soon as he arrived back at Hampton Roads Air Base, Kirk immediately organized his staff. He made several important changes. He pried loose from the navy department the well-liked Rear Admiral Arthur D. Struble to be his chief of staff. “A finer man one couldn’t have chosen,” according to Kirk. Struble was a highly prized officer, and it took Kirk extra effort to convince leadership of the necessity of the move. Described as “an irascible little guy, a nice fellow in many ways,” Struble was a great asset to Kirk. Kirk made McGeorge Bundy, Harvard graduate and an army first lieutenant, his military aid. Many on Kirk’s staff were veterans of Sicily and were even on Kirk’s staff in London before Sicily, including John Mason Brown, Kirk’s journalist, and public relations man. “Notwithstanding the palace atmosphere of all Commands, we admired – and liked - Admiral Kirk genuinely,” declared Brown. Kirk cared for each, and the loyalty flowed both ways. Kirk knew the strengths of individual staffers and tried to match them to tasks for which they were best suited.

Kirk was designated Commander Task Force 122, soon to also be known as the Western Task Force, made up of American forces, from November 10, 1943. He was to report operationally to Admiral Ramsay. Kirk traveled to Appledore on November 18, then went on to London and set up his headquarters next to Admiral Stark’s offices at 19 Grosvenor Square. It was his old stomping ground from the year before as Stark’s Chief of Staff. Stark, as Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe, immediately initiated Task Force 122 as Kirk’s

13 John Mason Brown, Many a Watchful Night, 50.
14 Ibid., 51.
command dedicated to invasion, and the two organizations worked side by side until April 24, 1944, when Kirk transferred his flag to *Augusta*.

Kirk was soon given a pleasant surprise. The secretary to the British Admiralty wrote Kirk: “I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to inform you that the King has been graciously pleased to give orders for your Honorary Appointment as Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath for great skill and devotion to duty as Commander, Naval Task Force N. 85, in the assault on Sicily.”

Stark delivered the appointment with congratulations. Moved by this gesture, Kirk responded to the secretary of the Admiralty: “I am deeply appreciative of the Honor which has been bestowed upon me by His Majesty the King.”

Admirals Cunningham and Hewitt sent a “hearty congratulations” and “lively pleasure.”

It was a great welcome, but once settled, Kirk soon found a spirit of confusion and general lack of direction. There were three reasons for this. There was yet no supreme commander. There also was rumor of a German surrender of France that could come within weeks – making invasion unnecessary. Then there was office politics. Kirk was very disappointed with the atmosphere of back-biting and mistrust on Stark’s staff. The jockeying for power and his unrecognized place in the pecking order displeased him greatly.

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16 Memorandum to Kirk from H.V. Markham, 4 Dec 43, P/R, Box 1.
18 Memorandum from Kirk to H.V. Markham 16 Dec 1943, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was writing from 15 Grosvenor Square London W.1.
uncertainties were largely soon solved, however. Eisenhower was chosen in early December, and the project coalesced around allied united determination to get over to France.

Knowing the value of strong staff officers and having been one himself, Kirk was always on the look-out for talent. But he was soon accused of trying to poach officers from Stark’s staff. This was at first, when Kirk was commander in NEPTUNE, a minor irritant. But it later got Kirk into trouble in his follow-on assignment in France when Stark’s chief of staff, protective of his boss, had had enough and harshly criticized Kirk for this behavior. But friction with Stark was not as severe as with his British senior.

Ramsay

The Supreme Allied Commander for the invasion was U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower. British Admiral Bertram Ramsay was Eisenhower’s naval commander. Both Kirk and British Rear Admiral Sir Philip Vian were Ramsay’s lieutenants.

Kirk’s reacquaintance with Ramsay did not start well. He admitted fault. “Here is where I was really a little less than diplomatic,” remembered Kirk, “because recalling our very friendly relationship in terms of golf games the year before, I suggested, couldn’t we have lunch – which he declined.” Kirk thought his mistake was the informality – that he needed to check-in as any subordinate to his new boss. He performed a formal check-in with Ramsay immediately. Admiral Ramsay was as brilliant as he was meticulous, heavily involved in work from the extraordinary to the mundane. Orchestrator of the dazzling success of the Dunkirk evacuation, he

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also wrote, previously while a ship’s captain, a long treatise on how to clean a ship and precisely how to mix paint. Eisenhower judged Ramsey capable but “ritualistic”.

Kirk’s relationship with Ramsay is the subject of some controversy. The difficulty in the relationship was emphatically not Kirk’s doing. Kirk was not known for personal criticism and not getting along. Quite the opposite. Criticism of his old boss was rare and strictly professional. Ramsay, however, criticized Kirk personally and harshly on occasion. But he dished out harsh criticism liberally – to many, especially Americans. He considered American military leaders astute politically but second rate in military operations. He even criticized Eisenhower for not being involved enough in directing the North African invasion.

Ramsay’s treatment of Kirk striking mirrored the negative experience Ramsay had with his old boss in the mid-1930s, while he was chief of staff to then-Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet. Backhouse complained that Ramsay did everything to the point of annoyance – even hiding papers from him. In return Ramsay complained to others about Backhouse, who was well-known as a kind-hearted gentleman, describing him as unbalanced - comparing him to Mussolini. It is clear Ramsay was controlling. He wanted nothing to surprise him or be beyond his purview. The 61-year-old Ramsay wanted to be the most knowledgeable person in any room he walked into, which meant he left little to his subordinates. As a result, Ramsay had trouble even in his relationship with his British subordinate and Kirk’s counterpart, Admiral Philip Vian, as well. Vian was a close personal

25 Brian Izzard, Mastermind of Dunkirk and D-Day, 183. Brian Izzard, biographer of Ramsay, gives clues to explain the rift from out of Ramsay’s many letters and diary entries.
26 Ibid., 181.
27 Ibid., 31-33.
28 Ibid., 206.
friend of Ramsay, and he was hand-picked to be Ramsay’s deputy. But even in this close relationship, Ramsay was very critical of Vian at times – in his case, ironically, for begin helpless and making him do his subordinate’s work. It is likely Ramsay criticized Vian’s work so he could micromanage him with built-in excuse that he did not delegate and use his staff. At the same time, Ramsay felt that another one of his subordinates, Rear Admiral William Tennant, of Dunkirk fame, who was in charge of the Mulberry harbors, was too independent.

There was another reason for friction. On the golf course in 1941, they knew each other as “Alan” and “Bertie.” But three years later, things were different. As noted before, when Kirk first tried to greet his friend and new boss in NEPTUNE, Ramsey gave him the cold shoulder. Kirk at first blamed himself for some faux pas in being overly familiar. But this friction was just exactly why Kirk was chosen. He knew how to navigate in this regard. He was a suave diplomat and was ever capable of charm. It was Kirk’s disposition that allowed the relationship to work. Kirk knew of British efforts and sacrifices at Dunkirk, the Blitz, and in the Mediterranean invasions that fed pride and stoicism in the British people – Ramsay included. Ramsay’s England had stood alone, was battle scared and was threatened to a much greater extent than the United States. But Americans were an ever increasingly powerful force – quickly displacing Britain as world power. Kirk perceived Ramsay’s pride in his country and service, which he considered forever the dominant and senior, was undoubtedly the culprit – at least in part. Knowing this, Kirk was patient and forgiving.

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 John Mason Brown, Many a Watchful Night (New York: Whittlesey House, 1944), 51.
But Ramsay considered that Americans were upstart and lagged Britain. He felt the emergency of being recalled to active duty after a short retirement to experience Dunkirk shame and close disaster. It was a “Gallipoli moment” that Churchill shared regarding amphibious events, for the British were most experienced with a sort of reverse amphibious operation – retreat! It is reasonable to believe Churchill and his admirals where correct in wanting to avoid the second front landing before allies had scored several smaller successes. It built morale to have two successful landings in North Africa and Sicily. The whole idea of an invasion of France was American – come in with guns blazing. Max Hastings noted “the invasion was pre-eminently an American design, reflecting an American willingness to confront the enemy head-on in a collision which Britain’s leaders had sought for so long to defer.”

There was a third part to the tension between Kirk and Ramsay. Ramsay wanted to supervise the drafting of a detailed plan. This was a problem for two reasons. The first was a translation problem. The British and American navies had separate languages and procedures to a significant degree. Although the two county’s naval services had the same cultural root, the British and American navies, by 1944, spoke a different enough language that communication often required interpretation. It was Kirk’s job (and that of his staff) to correctly interpret. Second, the British, unlike the Americans, were used to developing detailed instructions and plans at senior levels of leadership. American naval leaders promulgated broad instructions at top levels of command and expected the details to be worked out by lower ranks. Ramsay’s insistence on developing a detailed plan from his headquarters was, Kirk thought, inadvisable and contrary to sound naval leadership practice. A top-down plan was too brittle. One

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miscalculation or failure could jeopardize the entire enterprise. In Kirk’s view, learned from experience and education at the Naval War College, it was best to set goals and objectives and leave details to subordinates and delegate down the chain of command. As it turned out, Ramsay’s order, issued from the top in mid-April, was 1,100 pages long.  

Ramsay was clearly a micromanager – a character trait that was anathema to Kirk. He and his staff planned NEPTUNE “in the minutest detail,” recalled Kirk. Kirk got testy notes from Ramsay scolding both he and his staff for speaking out against him when they offered ideas for improvements. “It got to be a little bit touchy, a little bit awkward,” noted Kirk. But Kirk smoothed the gears of administration. In the end, Kirk admitted the “set piece” plan was well thought out and well done. The plan did allow for some flexibility. Getting ashore and staying there was an individual commander’s job - working out fire support, boat waves, and specific beaches that the waves would hit.

**Organization, Planning and Resources**

In his initial meetings with Ramsay, Kirk discovered that he was expected to be his American advisor on staff and not in a command role. In addition, the Americans were assigned only one beach. Kirk pushed back diplomatically but hard. “That wasn’t to my taste and I was certain that we would have to do more than land on one beach,” remembered Kirk. Much hinged on how much the American forces would contribute to the invasion – and Kirk knew much more American force was coming. He went to see his old friend Admiral Cunningham who was just

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39 Ibid., 360-361.
back from Washington. Kirk insisted to Cunningham that he would not be in a bunker on D-Day with Ramsay, but off the coast in his flagship. Kirk continued to insist on this arrangement with the British. As it turned out, Kirk was already getting support from British General Bernard Montgomery, who wanted a much larger invasion force than was initially planned for based on his insistence that Cherbourg be captured early. When asked about this expansion of adding an American landing beach to the west, given the obstacles of tides and sandbanks, Kirk had already agreed it could be done with additional naval forces from America. So, it was decided the Americans would open a second beach landing. Ramsay and his staff grudgingly acquiesced. It was now up to Kirk to collect the men and ships.40

Kirk and his staff quickly settled into their heavy workload. “No day was long enough” for Kirk and Struble. Brown remembers their “overcrowded schedule became more and more overcrowded.” Conferences with Eisenhower and Ramsay, Montgomery and Bradley and subordinate commanders were never ending. “Yeomen pounded typewriters like woodpeckers holding a convention.” Desks were piled high with memos and letters, many marked Top Secret, along with volumes of instructions and manuals and all the office paraphernalia.41

The effective instruments as any shopper knows, were lists. Lists of ships of all types, supplies and personnel. Urgently, Kirk sent a list of required gunfire support ships to Washington, insisting they were required for the coming invasion. Then on Christmas Eve, Kirk signed a letter to Washington containing the bulk of the requests. Kirk wrote personal notes to key members of King’s staff explaining the political need to act soon to show the British how much American support would be forthcoming. However, collecting a fleet was maddeningly slow

that winter. For these letters and notes, Kirk received no formal response for almost three months. Assurances came finally in March and ships began arriving in April – just two months before the invasion. Ships trickled in even then – some arriving just two days before the invasion.42

Numerous other types of craft were procured. In addition to the Higgins LCVPs for personnel, and the LSTs (Landing Ship Tank) for heavy equipment, there were other innovative concepts like the DD Tank which was a tank fixed with a canvas shroud and a propeller – able to “swim” to shore independently. So too the DUKW, or amphibious truck known as the “Duck.” There were many other vehicles for specialized purposes - even a synthetic harbor known as a Mulberry that formed the armada. The British provided the Mulberry and DD Tank. Kirk’s staff focused on the LCVPs, LSTs and DUKWs. 43

On the last day of the year Kirk set off on a tour of the port cities and transportation hubs of England’s southern coast – including Exeter, Dartmouth, Plymouth, Falmouth and Appledore.44 In mid-February, Kirk met other American and British naval commanders at Norfolk House in what was termed the “Landing Craft Conference.” At the conference, hosted by Admiral King’s planning officer, Rear Admiral Charles Cooke, they agreed to request 7 more LSTs (Landing Ship Tank – up from 110 LSTs) from the U.S. and a slew of British ships from the Mediterranean. They also agreed to use American loading doctrine which increased the load of each vessel – something that was causing confusion in procuring vessels. The American estimates were for 176,000 men and 20,000 vehicles and British estimates were significantly

44 Memorandum Temporary Additional Duty orders 29 Dec 43, P/R, Box 3.
lower. Overall, the British contributed more ships than the Americans, but the landing craft were mainly of US origin.  

The code name “NEPTUNE” was what British leaders initially gave all papers associated with the time and place of the seaborne invasion, corresponding to the Initial Joint Plan, but it came to represent the entire amphibious stage of OVERLORD. By late February the plan began to coalesce. The British and Canadian forces under Vian would land on “Gold,” Juno,” and “Sword” beaches. Kirk named the two American beaches “Omaha” and “Oregon.” They were very American names, and phonetically dissimilar to avoid confusion. It was the army planners who insisted on a change to “Utah” from “Oregon,” a sub-optimal revision since both beaches now ended with an “ah” sound.  

Timing was critical – this due primarily to meteorological factors in which Kirk made himself expert. Weather was important for multiple reasons. Kirk explained that the night before the landing had to be light enough for sailors to see nearby ships and to keep position in the convoy. The airborne troops needed light as well. Also, there needed to be an hour of daylight before troops landed for the naval gunfire to be most effective. What’s more, the beaches needed to be secured before high-water so that demolition teams could clear the beaches of obstacles. Kirk noted for the leadership that only certain days met these requirements including 21-23 May, 5-7 and 19-21 June, and 3-5 July.  

Kirk urgently drove himself and his staff to collect more resources early in the spring. Mostly, he needed more ships. One major deficiency in capability was naval gunfire support.

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46 Ibid., 29.
Kirk knew the bombardment fleet was inadequate. But needed ships were hard to come by. King was pressed to send ships to the Pacific. During dinner in February at the Landing Craft Conference, Kirk and Hall confronted Rear Admiral Cooke with the dire need for gunfire support ships. Cooke was perturbed but the message got through. Still, Kirk had to dissuade Cooke and King of the idea the British where to provide all naval gunfire support. Kirk got help from an important army friend – General Omar Bradley. Their relationship was tested, strong and frictionless – they called each other by their first names. They expected their staffs to have the same cooperative nature.48 This made Kirk an early leader and practitioner of “joint operations.”

Enlisting Bradley’s help – knowing he had first-hand knowledge and respect for naval guns and could pull army strings, the two “battled side by side,” noted Bradley, “in a strenuous effort to coax additional naval gunfire support from naval operations in Washington.” Kirk’s concern grew to a peak in April when there were still only two battleships, four cruisers, and 12 destroyers assigned to him.49 Bradley said the bombardment fleet “looked woefully inadequate for its task.” He “begged the navy” for increased firepower. Then late hour success. After his detailed request letter to Washington at the end of the previous year, the dinner confrontation with Cooke in February, and the personal involvement of top army brass, Kirk received two more battleships and 14 more destroyers and, although their hopes were not fully realized, Bradley noted “our pinchpenny days were ended.”50 The Battleships Nevada, Texas, and

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50 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 253-254. Alan G. Kirk, “Command from the Flagship Augusta” in John T. Mason Jr., The Atlantic War Remembered, 359. The German navy was not a large threat – it was the coastal guns that caused the most concern.
Arkansas arrived in late April. Many of the requested destroyers did not arrive until just days before the invasion.\(^5^1\) The grand total of ships of one type or another from all allied navies assigned to the NEPTUNE armada, was enormous - almost 7,000.\(^5^2\)

Also, by April the command arrangements became clear and solidified. The army and navy were paired, just as during the Sicily invasion. The Western Task Force, commanded by Kirk before and during landings was to be turned over to Bradley after landing operations were complete and an army shore headquarters established. But all the while they reported to Ramsay and Montgomery respectively. Kirk’s force was divided into three – Omaha, commanded by Rear Admiral John L. Hall Jr aboard Ancon, Utah, commanded by Rear Admiral Don P. Moon aboard Bayfield, and a follow-up force that would set out behind them from the Bristol Channel, carrying combat-loaded reinforcements for both beach landings.\(^5^3\)

Beginning the last week of April, Kirk stepped up his meetings with Ramsay at Southwick House, which was increasingly active with final preparations. Southwick House, a mansion with extensive grounds only 7 miles from Portsmouth was just a mile away from Eisenhower’s headquarters housed in temporary trailers.\(^5^4\) The chosen landing area limited maneuver at sea. The area was thought to be heavily mined. So, an extensive minesweeping operation would be necessary, along with bombardment and naval gunfire support along with protection against enemy vessels – both surface and submarine. Logistical planning for the transportation and care of the troops of the landing force was extensive.\(^5^5\) Ramsay and Kirk were

\(^{52}\) Peter Caddick-Adams, *Sand and Steel*, 231.
\(^{55}\) Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 244.
very concerned about mines in the landing zone. Kirk assigned the sweeping task to groups of Higgins PT boats.\textsuperscript{56} Then Kirk became alarmed at reports of new obstacles near Omaha beach.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Training and Tragedy}

In March, Kirk and Bradley observed a successful demonstration of DUKWs, amphibious trucks that are hybrid boat and truck, and planned for 90 to be fully loaded to be used early on to supply the first wave ashore.\textsuperscript{58} Kirk made trips to Portland and Dartmouth to oversee training and exercises. Then, on April 24, Kirk transferred his flag headquarters to \textit{Augusta}, birthed at Plymouth. Kirk visited his gathering ships and traveled along coastal areas, to Ramsay’s Southampton headquarters, and to London, in an airplane placed at his disposal. Even with all the culminating activity, Kirk carved out personal time for exercise and unwinding. For the next several weeks Kirk got daily exercise at the officer’s tennis court near the dockyards from about 4 pm to 6:30 pm.\textsuperscript{59}

On April 27, there was a delay in a landing exercise that went horribly wrong. When troops finally landed, they were hit by live “friendly” fire. Exact casualty figures were hidden for purposes of operational security and morale. The next day, there was a worse catastrophe when 9 German E-boats attacked the convoy of Rear Admiral Moon’s ships preparing for the full-scale landing exercise. The German E-boat or “Schnellboote” was a fast torpedo boat that was housed in hardened pens across the English Channel. During the 25-minute battle, several LST’s (Landing Ship Tank) were lost and others damaged with more than 749 Americans killed. Again,

\textsuperscript{56} Peter Caddick-Adams, \textit{Sand and Steel}, 364.  
\textsuperscript{58} Peter Caddick-Adams, \textit{Sand and Steel}, 200.  
this was kept secret. Kirk was thus alerted to a significant threat and sought action. The British commander in Plymouth was responsible for protecting the exercising fleet. So, Kirk’s involvement was bound to raise tension. He recommended sending the Nevada to destroy the E-boat base at Cherbourg. But Ramsay opposed the move so as not to inform the Germans of their success or reveal any inkling of allied invasion plans and capabilities.60

However, Kirk ensured his proposal reached Eisenhower directly, knowing Ramsay had misgivings. Eisenhower called a meeting with Ramsay and Kirk, and Kirk pressed his case directly and hard – too hard for Ramsay’s liking. The E-boats were a direct threat that had to be dealt with, Kirk insisted. Ramsay pointed out that action against the E-Boats in their Cherbourg pens was disruptive of the secrecy regimen and would give the enemy warning the allies were up to something. Eisenhower turned to Kirk and asked him if he agreed. This made Ramsay greatly annoyed – having the two Americans – superior and subordinate, skip him right in front of him was just too much. In a memorandum exchange soon after, however, Eisenhower sided with Ramsay.61 One reason that the meeting was so uncomfortable for Ramsay was that the British were responsible for force protection during the exercises, and Eisenhower and Kirk brought the heat down on the closest and most senior British officer they could find.

But there was yet another reason for the angst that naval historian Craig Symonds points out. Weeks before, Kirk knew of a weakness in the command structure and had asked Ramsay specifically for zone authority that extended to Cherbourg. This change would have placed responsibility for protecting against the E-Boats under Kirk. Ramsay flatly refused and

maintained responsibility for the Cherbourg area under British purview. Symonds judges that the refusal to approve Kirk’s request was a catastrophic mistake!62

Final Preparation

On May 15, there was a final, grand, and secret conference sponsored by Supreme Allied Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) with all principal commanders briefing each other. Held in a Victorian gothic room at St. Paul’s School in London, the meeting was attended by King George and Prime Minister Churchill, and every link in the chain of command down to Bradley and Kirk spoke. All the top brass were there – gathered in a type of circular arena. “During the whole war I attended no other conference so packed with rank as this one,” remembered Eisenhower. The purpose was to ensure any remaining concerns were addressed and give the participants a view of everyone else’s part – clarifying how each supported the other.63 For Eisenhower, it was a meeting “packed with dramatic significance.” It marked an end to planning and preparations, wrote Eisenhower, and instilled “confidence as each of the scores of commanders and staff officers present learned in detail the extent of the assistance he would receive for his own particular part of the vast undertaking.”64 Kirk spoke later in the afternoon, presenting the plan that his Western Naval Task Force would carry out. But even here Kirk spoke his mind and “caused a little bit of flutter which annoyed” Churchill and Ramsay. Again, it was about the E-Boats – he wanted confirmation Ramsay was responsible for dealing with them.

63 Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, 245. Samuel Eliot Morison, The Invasion of France and Germany, 69. Memorandum Temporary Additional Duty 29 Apr 44, P/R, Box 3. On 29 April 44 Kirk travel to Portsmouth then to London and on 5 May 44. On 7 May Kirk travel to Portsmouth and London. He traveled by air. During the last week of April and first couple of weeks of May, Kirk shuttled back and forth between southern English ports and London. He was back on the 14th - in time for a major conference.
64 Dwight D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, 245.
in the event they sortied. It was confirmed. When the meeting ended, Kirk accompanied Eisenhower to Belfast on an inspection tour of his naval gunfire support ships. It was the first of many high-level inspection visits. King George and Admiral Ramsay soon lunched with Kirk aboard Augusta at Portland, then he gave them a harbor tour in PT-507.65

By the last day of May, more than 250,000 troops were ready for the invasion. On June 1, Kirk reported to Ramsay, to his great relief, that, through the efforts of Rear Admiral John Wilkes and his staff, the beaching and landing craft were ready.66 At mid-day on June 3, General Bradley came aboard the cramped Augusta in Plymouth harbor. Space was limited and Bradley had to trim staff.67 Kirk was ashore, so his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Struble, welcomed him aboard and showed him to Kirk’s cabin, the same space, he noted, that President Roosevelt occupied when meeting Churchill and drafting the Atlantic charter three years earlier. Once again, Bradley’s coming aboard Kirk’s flagship signaled the beginning of action. There had been discussion amongst senior officials that favored keeping top army commanders in Portsmouth for the first day of the landings. Bradley disagreed, telling Eisenhower “If we run into trouble on the landing, the decisions are going to have to be made aboard Kirk’s flagship. Our communications are all tied in there and that’s where I belong. If something were to happen on the beach, I could more easily influence the battle from there than I could all the way back here in England.”68 Eisenhower agreed. With all the army staff reporting aboard Augusta, Kirk’s “bright young army aid,” Bradley later recalled, Lieutenant McGeorge Bundy, jokingly told the General that his

67 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 252.
presence aboard “had usurped his position” as senior army officer.\(^{69}\) Kirk asked Bradley to brief the correspondents aboard on the army assault plan.\(^{70}\) They asked about the speed for taking Cherbourg which the map indicated was in 8 days. Bradley admitted it could be more on the order of 20 days.\(^{71}\) As in the Sicily invasion, Lieutenant John Mason Brown was on-hand to keep the men below decks informed over the ship’s public address system.\(^{72}\)

The Delay

On Sunday, June 4, Lady Nancy Astor invited Kirk and Bradley to lunch at the Astor’s Plymouth home and she asked them to attend a parade the following week. They agreed, knowing they would leave for France the next day. Secrecy was paramount.\(^{73}\) When they got back to the ship the weather began deteriorating. Winds increased uncomfortably. To Bradley, the Cherbourg port was now more critical because weather threatened to make beach resupply prohibitive.\(^{74}\) “It looked a little bit dubious,” recalled Kirk, knowing that units in his command from ports in the north, including Belfast were already getting underway. Later that day Kirk received an urgent telegram prompting him to go ashore and call in to Ramsay on “the Green Line” or secure telephone. Ramsay asked Kirk if he could delay one day. “Yes, Admiral,” said Kirk, “we have an annex to the main plan – what to do in the event that we are delayed. Yes, we can.” Ramsay was surprised and unsettled at Kirk’s simple affirmation. The British were incredulous. Kirk had

\(^{69}\) Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 282. Bundy would later become a consummate Washington insider with a foreign policy network of friends, including Kirk, and two other Harvard connections – John F. Kennedy and Henry Kissinger. Kennedy was a young naval officer and PT boat commander and Kissinger a young army counterintelligence and psychological warfare specialist during the war.

\(^{70}\) Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 255.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 256.

\(^{72}\) John Mason Brown, *Many a Watchful Night*, 14. As in the previous invasion, Brown’s musings were published in a book, *Many a Watchful Night*, soon after the invasion and before the year was out.


\(^{74}\) Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 257, 260.
contingent plans for delay – showing American adaptability knowing the fog of war and proving that detailed, intricate and lengthy plans favored by the British were vulnerable to the friction of war.\textsuperscript{75} Regarding this incident, Kirk fondly remembered after the war one critic stating something like - “Admiral Kirk, with his usual élan accepted this delay, the postponement, without any searching questions.”\textsuperscript{76}

The invasion’s brief false start was emblematic of Kirk’s coolness and organizational ability. Eisenhower had decided on postponement early on June 4. Both he and Ramsay were very concerned over the complicating factor that ships stationed in the north of Britain were on the move. Kirk reassured them, Eisenhower recalled, “with characteristic verve,” that the ships would be stopped and ready again the next day to proceed. That the ships managed to get to port and refuel and be ready the next day “represented the utmost in seamanship and brilliant command and staff work,” according to Eisenhower.\textsuperscript{77}

The question then was: should the operation proceed June 6\textsuperscript{th} with weather deteriorating, wait until the 8\textsuperscript{th} or 9\textsuperscript{th} with better weather but more unfavorable tides and significant daylight, or postpone two weeks? Ramsey asked Kirk’s opinion. Kirk immediately held a staff meeting that afternoon, inviting Bradley and his staff as well as General Ralph Royce, deputy commander for the Ninth Air Force (also berthed aboard Augusta).\textsuperscript{78} Bradley found the two-week delay option unacceptable. “As far as the army is concerned,” Bradley said to Kirk, “we’ll take either the eighth or ninth in lieu of a two-week lay-up. For if we put our troops ashore, we take an awful chance on having this thing leak out. And we can’t keep the troops penned up on their craft for

\textsuperscript{75} Alan G. Kirk, “Command from the Flagship Augusta” in John T. Mason Jr., \textit{The Atlantic War Remembered}, 364.
\textsuperscript{78} Omar N. Bradley, \textit{A Soldier’s Story}, 261-262.
two more weeks. But if we’re going in on either the eighth or the ninth, I’d rather ride in with the
tide as we planned it and take my chances on daylight.” Kirk responded, “Well, speaking for the
navy, I know I’d much prefer more daylight to see what I was shooting at. And air would
probably like it for bombing. How do you feel, Royce?” They studied the charts, noting obstacles
and tide calculations, and considered the likely need for more air support for airborne troops.
Royce assured the others of plenty of support. They all agreed that a two-week delay was least
preferred. Kirk recommend to Ramsay they go on the 8th or 9th if there was another delay from
the 6th. Ramsay informed Eisenhower that Kirk had to know of the decision to go or postpone a
second time by late that evening. At about 11 p.m., Kirk was told to have his ships proceed. But
the tension and concern continued to mount until the early morning. At 4:15 a.m., June 5,
Eisenhower decided the attack would commence for landing on the 6th, and operation NEPTUNE
OVERLORD was underway. 79

D-Day

*Augusta* and her fleet sailed on the afternoon of the 5th heading out from Plymouth
toward the formation area east of the Isle of Wight known as “Piccadilly Circus.” Six battleships,
twenty-three cruisers and eighty destroyers were setting out escorting the troop ships, supply
ships, and support vessels. 80 Secrecy for the captive audience on ships was no longer necessary,
so Kirk’s addressed went out “To All Hands” in the Western Task Force:

We of the Western Task Force are going to land the American Army in France.
From Battleships to landing craft ours is, in the main, an American Force. Beside
us will be a mainly British Force, landing the British and Canadian troops.
Overhead will fly the Allied Expeditionary Air Force. We all have the same

81,82. Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 265. Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of
mission – to smash our way onto the beaches and through the coastal defenses, into the heart of the enemy’s fortress. In two ways the coming battle differs from any that we have undertaken before: it demands more seamanship and more fighting. We must operate in the waters of the English Channel and the French coast, in strong currents and twenty-foot tides. We must destroy an enemy defensive system which has been four years in the making, and our mission is one against which the enemy will throw his whole remaining strength. These are not beaches held by an apathetic foe or defended by hasty fortifications. These are prepared positions, held by Germans who have learned from their past failures. They have coastal batteries and mine fields; they have bombers and E-boats. They will try to use them all. We are getting into a fight. But it is not we who have to fear the outcome. As the Germans have learned from failure, we have learned from success. To this battle we bring our tested methods, with many new weapons, and overwhelming strength. Tides and currents present a challenge which, forewarned, we know how to meet. And it will take more than the last convulsive effort of the beaten ‘master race’ to match the fighting spirit of the American Navy. It is the enemy who is afraid. In this force there are battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. There are hundreds of landing ships and craft, scores of patrol and escort vessels, dozens of special assault craft. Every man in his every ship has his job. And these tens of thousands of men and jobs add up to one task only – to land and support and supply and reinforce the finest Army ever sent into battle by the United States. In that task we shall not fail. I await with confidence the further proof, in this the greatest battle of them all, that American sailors are seamen and fighting men second to none. A. G. Kirk

Late that evening Kirk’s ships turned south toward the landing zones. Kirk was impressed with the mass of forces on display at the rallying area – “a kind of juggernaut. When you started it you just couldn’t stop it.”

The fleet proceeded without enemy resistance. Bradley said to Kirk, “Seems hard to believe, maybe we’re going to have a Sicily all over again.” Kirk, clad in foul-weather gear, stayed on the bridge through the night. As early as 1 a.m. Kirk began to see German antiaircraft fire begin to light up the French sky in opposition to the airborne assault. In the early hours the intensity grew to a spectacular light show that included allied flares. Kirk saw two parachutists entangled and blown off course by the wind. “I don’t know where they finally came to earth,”

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81 John Mason Brown, Many a Watchful Night (New York: Whittlesey House, 1944), 127, 128.
recalled Kirk. “I’m sure they were lost, either in the sea or on the German side. So it was not all duck soup for those fellows.” Battle stations sounded at 3:35 a.m. with increasing attacks spotted in the distance. At 5:30 a.m. dusk was evident along with a group of Spitfire fighter aircraft racing by.83

Just ahead, Kirk’s PT boat sailors performed their task magnificently – removing seventy-eight mines by early morning.84 At 5:40, Kirk watched Texas open bombardment of shore targets. At 5:47 Kirk received a message that fifteen E-boats had departed Cherbourg harbor looking to fight. At 5:50, Augusta’s shore bombardment began on pre-determined targets – her guns resounding in the ears of those in nearby ships.85 Reports confirmed that Kirk’s concern about the weather impacting the launch of DD tanks was well founded as 27 of the 32 DD Tanks sank. H-hour arrived at 6:25 a.m. and, 15 -20 minutes later, Kirk learned of the first troops arriving on shore. By then Kirk’s ten destroyers had sprung into action screening the battleships and chasing off threats of E-boats and submarines. The retreating E-boats no longer posed immediate threat. The destroyers then began engaging targets ashore – at times at very close range. So close, Kirk proudly recalled, that they “had their bows against the bottom.”86

Kirk received pleas for naval gunfire support especially for enemy positions near Omaha Beach. Kirk was proud to later learn one of the destroyers scored a bullseye shot right through the slit in an enemy concrete bunker, destroying the gun instantly. He was amazed at the lack of enemy air attacks and rounds from shore batteries on the fleet.87

83 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 267.
84 Peter Caddick-Adams, Sand and Steel, 364.
85 Ibid., 390.
Reports indicated the Utah Beach landing was going smoothly. Omaha Beach was another matter. Kirk grew very concerned about the delay in securing the beach for follow up landings of reinforcements and supplies. The second wave was readying. By 8:30 a.m., Kirk was becoming aware of a developing problem of a traffic-jam of vessels near Omaha Beach. Admiral Hall on *Ancon* collected transmissions of contact on the beach and shared the information with Kirk. A mix of fear and panic colored early reports. Kirk ordered his gunnery officer to investigate the shoreline up close by PT boat. Bradley had his personal aid go with him. They returned an hour later—“soaked and grim.” They reported a discouraging scene. The underwater obstructions were still a problem because the demolition teams suffered overwhelming casualties and the rising tide limited any further efforts in removal. As historian Max Hastings writes “a monstrous traffic jam had developed off the beach (Omaha).” Vessels piled up and became vulnerable because each was scheduled and timed for delivery of men and equipment on the limited strip of beach. Kirk and Bradley considered redirecting landings toward Utah.**88** Bradley wanted the navy to beach its LSTs for quicker unloading, but Kirk refused until the beaches were cleared of enemy artillery.**89** Bradley had difficulty containing frustration—confined to the *Augusta* and watching the initial stages of battle take place as Kirk called the shots, directing the landings while he stood with him on the bridge.**90**

The first day of landings went better than expected in all beaches but one—Omaha. At Omaha, German resistance was strong, but the brave Americans with the help of naval gunfire support, broke the enemy by mid-day.**91** By late morning, German artillery went silent. Hall sent

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89 Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 305.
Kirk a burst of favorable reports at 11:37 a.m., indicating German capitulation. Casualties were staggering - mounting to 2,400 Americans. Historian Adrian Lewis argued that the high casualties on Omaha resulted from a strategic error – making the assault during daylight hours. Lewis notes both Kirk and Hall were skeptical of making the landings in daylight from planning inception, but their misgivings were overruled by Montgomery and Bradley. At 1:30 p.m. Kirk received the message that the army units were moving inland from Omaha Beach. At the time, Augusta lay 4,000 yards off the beach. The backlog of ships began to unload. Bradley reaffirmed that the naval gunfire support was critical to the landings. The first message Bradley received on the morning of June 6th from V Corps was “Thank God for the U.S. Navy!” At about 5 p.m. Kirk set up a defensive screen of his ships to transition from naval gunfire support to protecting the landing zones and resupply effort.

D-Day Plus

D-Day was marked by confusion and panic. The situation was greatly improved early the following morning when Kirk and Bradley meet Admiral Moon on Bayfield to initiate the heavy unloading of supply ships. Eisenhower and Ramsay arrived alongside aboard a British minelayer at 11 a.m. and Kirk and Bradley climbed aboard to confer. Kirk found Ramsay “perturbed” about the ships piling up. Kirk assured him “We’ll straighten it out, don’t worry!” Ramsay handed Kirk a drink of whiskey. True to his word, Kirk ensured that the waiting ships in

93 Adrian R. Lewis, Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory, 4, 207.
94 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 272.
95 Ibid., 254. Samuel Eliot Morison, The Invasion of France and Germany, 152. See also Adrian R. Lewis, Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory, 84, 85.
96 Samuel Eliot Morison, The Invasion of France and Germany, 155.
97 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 278. Samuel Eliot Morison, The Invasion of France and Germany, 162.
line were unloaded by the end of the day. After the meeting Bradley asked Kirk to take him in close to Utah Beach where he transferred to a DUKW for his deposit ashore.99

Over the next two days Kirk and Bradley made several trips to shore. On one trip, a reporter from the ship came along and witnessed Kirk, Bradley, and Hall in “a heated debate.” Bradley “insisted they had to get more army supplies,” recalled the reporter, “Hall was sort of angry, and Kirk, you know how decisive he was and almost feisty in insisting that Hall get to it.” The problem was threefold – all interrelated and centered on getting supplies quickly ashore. There were obstacles and wreckage blocking the landing zone. Also, inland army units urgently requested specific ammunition that was on vessels not in the scheduled unloading order, which made overall unloading slower because of a confused redirected order of landings. Thirdly, Ramsay insisted the LST’s would only land once enemy artillery was out of range, which made for some makeshift unloading to smaller craft while still offshore. These were the urgent concerns of Kirk, Bradley, and Hall.100 The reporter noticed they were all standing next to a row of bodies covered with ponchos. “I always felt this was most dramatic. Here they were, arguing, and here the dead are.”101

For the next week Augusta moved back and forth between the two American beaches “much as a visiting supervisor” where Kirk and his staff monitored operations.102 Bradley made return trips to the beach until the morning of Saturday, June 10th, when he established his headquarters ashore - the army having set up its’ communications equipment in an orchard behind Pointe du Hoe the day before.103 Command of the invasion passed from Kirk to

102 John Mason Brown, Many a Watchful Night, 151.
103 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 282.
Bradley. Kirk, now in a supporting role, sent his aid to Bradley on the evening of the 11th to inform him that top officials would be visiting, including General Marshall, General Arnold and Admiral King. Kirk had his aid also bring his friend a gallon of ice cream.

Meanwhile Kirk witnessed several German air raids on the ships offshore – especially toward the British areas to the east, calling their anti-aircraft fire “a perfect Fourth of July celebration and it couldn’t have been more picturesque.” The German air attack was largely ineffective except for the loss of US destroyer *Meredith*, which was put out of commission and then sunk as she was towed back to England with the loss of 35 sailors.

**Cherbourg**

The Americans drove toward securing the Cherbourg peninsula beginning June 10, and isolated German forces there by the 18th. New rounds of naval gunfire support were needed. Kirk put Admiral Deyo in charge of gunfire support ships and operated for three days until a storm necessitated a pause on the 20th. In the meantime, on the 19th, the storm heavily damaged the two artificial Mulberry harbors – one all but destroyed. The American Mulberry fared worst in the destructive gale, and Kirk made the decision, some say rash in hindsight, to abandon it.

British historian Peter Caddick-Adams’s criticism of Kirk as “extremely rash” is faulty not only because it is based on hindsight – from more complete knowledge of the future, but also from a bias in British pride. The Mulberries were British. Kirk’s decision, with the concurrence of Ramsay and Hall, was based in part on his belief Cherbourg harbor would soon be in American

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105 Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 289.
hands - reasonable thinking at the time. It also sped up repairs to the less-damaged Mulberry by making parts available.\textsuperscript{109} Also, Kirk was pleased that old ferries were at the ready, previously brought over from America. They were pre-positioned and loaded with ammunition and supplies for just such an emergency. Kirk gave Bradley credit for the idea, and they were used to drive supplies up the beach with their shallow draft and remain as the tide receded.\textsuperscript{110}

As the storm subsided, Kirk went ashore to see Bradley and select new targets. Bradley asked Kirk to attack the main fortress coastal guns. Knowing the German shore guns there more numerous with longer range than the battleship guns, Kirk hesitated. “Is it worth that much to you?” asked Kirk. “It is,” confirmed Bradley, “We must take Cherbourg just as soon as we can.” Kirk immediately ordered three battleships to engage the harbor defenses. Bradley recalled that Kirk “accepted without question my measure of the gains to be gambled against the risks to be run…” But the uneven fight was soon obvious, and the battleships retreated to safer distance. Bradley was impressed by Kirk’s “valorous gesture” of willingness to take such a risk, and he then regretted “the earlier petulance with which we had criticized the navy’s handling of our supply on the beaches.”\textsuperscript{111} Kirk also wanted to prove once again the value of naval gunfire, remembering what happened in his meeting with Ramsey and Eisenhower before the invasion. Kirk wanted to use naval gunfire more extensively than Ramsey, and this was a chance to showcase this approach. Kirk later remarked “I suppose there was the old tradition of the American navy where Admiral Farragut rammed the forts of New Orleans and Mobile Bay…that


\textsuperscript{111} Omar N. Bradley, \textit{A Soldier’s Story}, 312. Alan G. Kirk, “Command from the Flagship Augusta” in John T. Mason Jr., \textit{The Atlantic War Remembered}, 372. They meet on June 22 or 23.
means that you accept that as something that might be done.” In the end, naval gunfire support, although effective for the beach landing, was less so against the much larger and hardened enemy guns at Cherbourg, with much longer and accurate ranges. The big guns soon fell silent, and the final action Kirk had to deal with was smaller caliber harassing German gunfire near Cherbourg. He sent a destroyer and a group of PT boats who, along with air support, successfully forced a surrender.

General Schlieben, the German commander, surrendered Cherbourg on June 26. But the Germans ruined the port facilities so much that it remained unusable for three vital weeks. So, without the harbor, the Allies had to move significant amounts of supplies onto the landing beaches for much longer than planned. For the remainder of the month, Kirk focused on the supply effort – ensuring an organized offloading of vessels. After the first week since D-Day, Kirk’s vessels where an estimated 35,000 tones of supply behind schedule. Shipment timing and distribution slowly became less chaotic as Kirk, Hall and Moon organized and focused efforts. The situation was much improved when in late June Kirk sent Rear Admiral John Wilkes to take charge of naval installations on the French coast.

Mission Complete

On July 1, NEPTUNE was essentially at an end. Admirals Hall and Moon were reassigned. After Cherbourg fell, Kirk transferred his flag to a destroyer and conducted turnover of responsibilities for the beaches with Wilkes. Arriving back in Portsmouth on the 4th of July,

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112 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 312.
115 Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier’s Story, 304, 305.
Kirk immediately went to see Ramsay. “Pretty chilly interview it was – grim! It was rather too bad because he was a decent guy and we had been rather good friends up until the Normandy operation,” Kirk later remarked.\textsuperscript{116} The meeting was very short – Kirk informing his boss the job was complete and that he was going to London to complete reports before heading back to the United States. Ramsay was cold, but Kirk did not take it personally. He summed up the poor attitude as a general disappointment that the British navy no longer ruled the sea and now American upstarts were calling shots. Kirk then proceeded to London and reported to Stark. Kirk’s task force was dissolved on July 10, and \textit{Augusta} was sent to the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{117}

During the third week of July, Kirk finished up with duties in England. He learned the navy staff proposed that “the first available unnamed destroyer, DD-631” under construction in Bath, Maine, be named for his uncle and cousin “Goodrich”. Mrs. Casper F. Goodrich, the widow, “expressed desire” that a ship be named after her late husband and son “who died as the result of burns received in a gun turret abord the USS GEORGIA.”\textsuperscript{118}

Kirk submitted his final report of the landings. He noted how proud he was of the performance of the over 125,000 U.S. naval personnel under his command and it was a great privilege to command such a fine force.\textsuperscript{119} From the start, Kirk knew he was involved in a project of profound historical consequence. He well understood the geopolitical implications for the future. During urgent preparations for the invasion, on March 10, Kirk wrote to a friend, “I don’t have to tell you what a big show this is, or how important. If this is successful the war is

\textsuperscript{116} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 355.
\textsuperscript{117} Samuel Eliot Morison, \textit{The Invasion of France and Germany}, 214 -215.
\textsuperscript{118} Memorandum form LED to Admiral King 25 Jul 1944, P/R, Box 3. The explosion was in 1907.
won, if this fails it may go on for years. Perhaps too it will settle whether we or Russia dominate the world for a while.”

If popular historians like Max Hastings and James Holland mention Kirk only in brief passing, how is Kirk’s contributions assessed? At the very least, if Kirk had made any gross error, Hastings and Holland and others would have more to say about him. Ramsay gave lackluster evaluation of Kirk’s performance during NEPTUNE. Kirk was “average” according to the British officer. This was not the American reaction. Stark recommended Kirk for the Distinguished Service Medal saying he “skillfully and efficiently organized his forces and brought them to the highest state of readiness for D-Day. Throughout the planning, training, and operational periods he maintained such control and supervision of the varied units of his command that his force was able to acquit itself with distinction in battle.” Back in Washington, King agreed. And so did the army, because once approved, Kirk was presented the Distinguished Service Medal on August 24 by the secretary of war in person in his office at the War Department. The citation noted Kirk directed the Normandy landings including coordinating gunfire support and establishment of a port and the capture of Cherbourg on June 27, 1944 with “skill, energy and determination.” British recognition, although delayed, came on January 7, 1945, when Kirk was awarded a certificate of a Grant of Dignity in the Order of the Bath by Great Britain or British Order of Commander of the Bath. H.V. Markham wrote

123 Memo award citation from Stark to Secretary of the Navy 1 Jul 44, P/R, Box 1.
124 Memo from CNO to Secretary of the Navy 11 Jul 44, P/R, Box 1.
125 Memo from Kirk to Chief of Naval Personnel 24 Aug 44, P/R, Box 1.
126 Memo from Navy Department Board of Decorations and Medals to Secretary of the Navy 15 Feb 46, P/R, Box 1.
127 Memo to Kirk from CNP 10 Dec 45, P/R, Box 1.
Kirk saying “on the advice of the First Lord, the King has been graciously pleased to approve your Honorary Appointment as Knight Commander of the Military Division of the Order of the Bath for gallant and distinguished services as Naval Commander Western Task Force in planning and carrying out the operations of the invasion of Normandy.”  

Kirk spent the month of August working in Washington with a few days away at the family summer retreat in Niantic, Connecticut where his wife Lydia was summering. With the influence of his old academy mentor, Admiral King, President Roosevelt appointed Kirk Commander, U.S. Naval Forces France and, at the same time, gave him temporary promotion to Vice Admiral with date of rank of September 10, 1944.

**Commander, U.S. Naval Forces France**

Paris was liberated on August 25, and Eisenhower set up SHAEF headquarters at nearby Versailles. Ramsay remained Allied Naval Commander under Eisenhower and Kirk was designated again as Task Force 122, under Ramsay in the operational chain of command. King determined that Stark would continue to be Kirk’s administrative commander. Kirk’s immediate focus was ensuring needed ports were secured and made useful. He was also to prepare for anticipated amphibious operations in the crossing of the Rhine River. Pockets of German

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128 Memo from H. V. Markham Royal Navy to Kirk 28 Nov 44, P/R, Box 1.
129 Memo Temporary Additional Duty from Commander Task Force One Two Two to Kirk, 7 Jul 44, P/R, Box 3. Orders memo from Commander Task Force One Two Two to Kirk 25 Jul 44, P/R, Box 3. Kirk went to London 3 Jul 44 for temp duty then back to Plymouth. Kirk went to London 8 Jul 44 then on to Perthshire Scotland while assigned to/as Commander Task Force ONE TWO TWO. Memo orders modification 26 Jul 44, P/R, Box 3. On 26 Jul 44 Kirk goes to London. Then he and his staff go back to US 1 Aug. See staff list of names.
resistance in waterways and coasts remained to be delt with.\textsuperscript{131} Kirk continued in this assignment – his final one in the navy – for almost a full year.

But soon there was organizational confusion and misunderstanding. Kirk’s title was for U.S. Naval Forces France. Did this mean he was limited to operations in France? Why then was he responsible for the crossing of major rivers in Germany? It seemed to Kirk he was acting with naval oversight and operational control of all continental Europe. What’s more, Stark apparently did not fully recognize or accept this vision of organizational arrangement worked out by King and Kirk. Almost immediately Kirk ran into trouble. Flying to London in early September, Kirk checked in with Stark and tried to piece together his staff. He asked for volunteers - but his pleas and recruiting were largely ignored. The year before, Kirk had invited Captain Howard Flanigan, then Stark’s deputy chief of staff for logistics, to be his chief of staff. He refused. Flanigan subsequently became Stark’s chief of staff and now was very protective of his benefactor’s resources in manning. Kirk finally got Captain George Rood for his chief of staff. Kirk judged Rood, who was first to get his ship underway and out to sea during the Pearl Harbor attack, as “a most competent and efficient fellow.”\textsuperscript{132} But it was a slow and incomplete start. Undeterred, Kirk flew across the channel to see Eisenhower at Mount St. Michelle. Then Kirk went on to Paris, landing at Orly Airport late in the afternoon, followed by a drive through the bomb-blasted and potholed road into the city.\textsuperscript{133} Kirk’s Paris headquarters was at 9 Rue de Presbourg. It was the Hotel Royal Marceau on the Avenue Marceau, adjacent to, and just to the southwest of, the Arc de Triomphe.\textsuperscript{134} With a fresh shipment of coal, Kirk’s small initial staff quickly turned the cold

\textsuperscript{132} Kirk, \textit{Reminiscences}, 365
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. St. Michelle is the beautiful castle on the Normandy coast – which inspired Kirk to ask his pilot to circle around.
\textsuperscript{134} Memo from US Naval Forces France to Kirk 28 Apr 45, P/R, Box 3.
but otherwise nice accommodations into something quite comfortable.\textsuperscript{135} Then Kirk returned to London to see Stark. The meeting was disappointing. Kirk recalled Stark “resisted any large staff to be formed in Paris. He wanted to keep control in his own hands.” Kirk felt strongly otherwise. He was the operational naval commander, and he insisted on resources to get the job complete. It is likely that Stark was encouraged in a power struggle by the capable, protective, and aggressive Captain Flanigan. Instead of flattering Flanigan the year before, Kirk’s invitation to join his invasion staff evidently incited him in office politics.\textsuperscript{136}

When Kirk arrived back in Paris, he found that his headquarters was reassigned to a different building. Kirk found that Flanigan, perhaps motivated by a mixture of humor and desire to humiliate, arranged for Kirk and his staff to be moved to the Hotel Pennsylvania, a known brothel for German officers. Kirk did not press the issue with Stark but went directly to General Beedle Smith, telling him in a kidding manor “Beedle, of course the service can do anything, but I don’t quite see why you move me out of a nice hotel into a whorehouse! Everybody knows that the Hotel Pennsylvania was a brothel for the German officers all during the time of the occupation of Paris!” Smith replied “Well, I’ve heard of sailors going to whorehouses before.” Smith assured Kirk he could remain at the Royal Marceau.\textsuperscript{137} Kirk felt restricted in his authority to reorganize personnel at will. Stark’s biographer, Mitchell Simpson, characterized Kirk as an arrogant self-promoter and praised Flanigan for defending Stark’s command integrity. This character attack shows Kirk made a lasting impression, but it was his forceful focus on his mission that drove him. In a personal letter to King, Kirk recommended that Stark and his command be phased out in favor of a new Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Continent. Phasing

\textsuperscript{135} Kirk, Reminiscences, 366.
\textsuperscript{137} Kirk, Reminiscences, 367.
out Stark and transferring continental responsibility to Kirk would imply a fourth star – full Admiral. Kirk had to know by sending such a letter he was putting his career on the line, but he was focused on completing King’s vision and bringing clarity to a murky organizational arrangement. King did not keep the letter a personal matter but showed it to Stark, who obviously felt undercut and surprised King by informing him that Kirk hadn’t discussed the matter with him. King told Kirk he was out of line. Simpson says Kirk made a miscalculation in his rampant ambition in sending the letter. But this incident must be interpreted differently for two reasons. Simpson implies the letter was a request to change the current arrangement solely because of Kirk’s ambition. But the letter was sent in April when German resistance was collapsing, and it was Kirk’s foresight and desire for smooth transition to post war occupation that instigated the letter. Kirk proposed a unified command for the navy to strengthen representation on the European Allied Council. The letter incident clearly shows that Kirk took risks to support the navy - the same risk he took in going around Ramsay with the E-boat request. Kirk risked his career and being sent home in disgrace - all to accomplish his mission and support the naval service. Therefore, Kirk wasn’t fired, nor was he censured for insubordination. As Simpson admits, “Stark knew what Kirk could do, whatever his shortcomings and ambitions.”

Stark picked Kirk to go with him to Europe in 1942. They developed a trusting and positive relationship that continued even through the Normandy invasion. However, when Kirk again worked under Stark after Sicily and Normandy, the relationship came under strain. This is reflected in Stark’s fitness report appraisals of his administrative subordinate. It is as if there

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139 Ibid.
were two Kirks – one his loyal and flawless chief of staff, the other a power-hungry officer over his head and borderline insubordinate ingrate. From 4.0 and having a “particular desire” to have him work for him, to 3.5 and a terse “performing satisfactory” – marks and remarks designed to end a younger officer’s career, Stark’s view of Kirk changed dramatically after Kirk’s operational commands in the amphibious landings.140 But it was Stark’s own ambition and insecurity about his lasting reputation that made the relationship tense at times. It was Kirk’s character and focus on the mission that ensured that although tense, the relationship was not dysfunctional, and they continued to meet to solve problems often.141

Kirk knew Stark well. They worked together for four years – he was his DNI, chief of staff and junior operational commander. Kirk characterized Stark as “ingenuous” and “gullible.” But when it came to maintaining image, Kirk knew Stark to be crafty. Kirk had a pet name for Stark – “Foxy Grandpa.” Stark nurtured his reputation carefully to such a degree that at one point he bought up the entire issue of Life Magazine (July 8, 1940) for Britain. It had his photo on the cover.142 To unstop the administrative blockage, Kirk rightly complained to General Beadle Smith, Eisenhower’s chief of staff.143 Flanigan and Stark were simply out of line - SHAEF was trying to fight a war. Smith confronted Flanigan, chief of staff to chief of staff, and there was smoother sailing from then on. Kirk then built a strong and capable staff by the end of October.144

142 Kirk, Reminiscences, 377.
144 Ibid.
**Ports, the Rhine, and Holdouts**

For the fall and winter, supplying the army was the major challenge. Kirk relied heavily on George Rood and his brilliant young officers – his aid McGeorge Bundy (who spoke fluent French), James “Gordon” Grayson, flag lieutenant, and his intelligence officer Donald MacDonald. Kirk knew Bundy and Grayson from their boyhoods and were family friends who knew the Kirk daughters.\(^{145}\) The August allied advances were strong but took the armies further from functioning ports. The Germans were adept in holding port facilities and, if a loss of control was imminent, at disabling the ports for allied use.\(^{146}\) Marseilles was left in terrible shape. Antwerp could not be used because it was not accessible through German lines. General Montgomery’s controversial order to rest his army, combined with the failure of the “Market Garden” operation, delayed for months the clearing of the Scheldt estuary and securing the Antwerp port.\(^{147}\) Kirk had to navigate the opening of the ports of Cherbourg, Le Havre and eventually Antwerp. Rear Admiral Wilkes was again his assistant, now on scene in the northern French and Belgian ports.\(^{148}\)

None of this surprised Kirk. Even before Cherbourg fell, he assisted in planning for moving bases, men, and equipment from England to France to be closer to the action.\(^{149}\) Soon after Kirk got his headquarters up and running, he met with Stark at Cherbourg to discuss and coordinate action on French port facilities.\(^{150}\) Kirk and Stark greatly beefed-up channel patrols in the wake of the Christmas Eve sinking of the *Leopoldville* by a U-boat. The ship was

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\(^{147}\) Ibid., 700, 761.


\(^{150}\) Ibid., 227. Memo from Commander US Naval Forces France to Kirk 3 Oct 44, P/R Box 3. On 4 Oct 44 Kirk travels from Paris HQ 9 Rue de Presbourg to Cherbourg and Le Havre.
transporting troops to Cherbourg from Southampton. Eight hundred soldiers were lost.\textsuperscript{151} Kirk was very concerned and considered moving all transport to the shortest route across the Channel - to Calais and Dover.\textsuperscript{152}

On January 2, 1945, Ramsay was killed in plane crash at an airfield near Versailles, France. He was on his way to Brussels for a meeting with Montgomery.\textsuperscript{153} Kirk temporarily assumed Ramsay’s duties for the rest of the month, turning over to British Admiral Harold M. Burrough.\textsuperscript{154} Kirk kept in close contact with Bradley as the army approached the Rhine at the end of February. The army required the services of the navy because of the 8-knot current and inadequate boat fleet. Kirk assumed operational control over the boats, placing naval officers in charge of the crossings in operation “Delaware.”\textsuperscript{155} Stark ensured the boats, each close to 70 feet long and weighing 70 tons, men, and equipment, were available on time.\textsuperscript{156} Kirk and his staff prepared and implemented plans to transport the craft overland to execute the river crossing. To maintain secrecy, Navy personnel dressed in army green and only transported at night. Kirk made multiple trips to the Rhine during the crossing in March.\textsuperscript{157} The Rhine River crossing was the final U.S. Navy operation in the war against Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{151} Samuel Eliot Morison, \textit{The Invasion of France and Germany: 1944-1945}, 304. There is a personal note of interest in the sinking of \textit{Leopoldville}. My grandmother’s first husband, Private Jeter, was one of the lives that was lost. The man my grandmother later married was a U.S. Coast Guard radioman at the time.


\textsuperscript{154} Samuel Eliot Morison, \textit{The Invasion of France and Germany}, 326.


\textsuperscript{157} Memo form Commander US Naval Forces France to Kirk 28 Mar 45, P/R, Box 3. On 28 Mar 45 Kirk traveled to Brussels. Memo from Commander US Naval Forces France to Kirk 3 Apr 45, P/R Box 3. On 3 Apr 45 Kirk travelled to see TWELFTH ARMY GROUP.

\textsuperscript{158} Samuel Eliot Morison, \textit{The Invasion of France and Germany}, 325.
By April, French Rear Admiral Andre Lemonnier was placed in command of newly organized French naval forces, and he oversaw several German mop-up operations in tight cooperation with Kirk. He and Kirk became great friends, often getting together with their aids for tennis. Kirk worked with Lemonnier primarily to address the pockets of German holdouts in the Channel Islands and near Bordeaux. The actions in southwest France intensified in mid-February when Kirk traveled to Bordeaux and Cognac to organize with French naval officers. The last naval action against the Germans on the French west coast took place at Ile d’Oleron near La Rochelle. Kirk organized an almost entirely French force, and the successful pacification of the forts came on May 2 – a week before the surrender of Germany itself.

Kirk and his staff worked closely with Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley and his staff in London on plans to disarm and divide up the German navy among allied countries as soon as the war was over. On April 12, Stark arrived at Kirk’s Paris headquarters for a briefing on the status of naval forces. The next day they learned of the death of President Roosevelt. Kirk’s experience in France did not include working directly with Charles de Gaulle, who was a source of growing angst since he solidified the support of all French forces outside of France in the summer of 1943 and moved his headquarters to Algiers. At that point, Kirk was commanding amphibious forces and Stark and his staff in London were no longer tasked with de Gaulle’s

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160 Samuel Eliot Morison, The Invasion of France and Germany, 308, 309.
diplomatic care and upkeep. In July 1944, with allied forces securely back in France, de Gaulle finally travelled to Washington for his long-awaited meeting with the president. In the fall of 1944, de Gaulle was the key leader in re-establishing French government and military power - but he now interacted with Eisenhower.

One visitor to Kirk’s headquarters in Paris was the Chairman of the House Committee on Naval Affairs (and newly promoted Commander in the Naval Reserve) Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson led a fact-finding trip of other congressmen on the Surplus Property sub-committee. Johnson praised Kirk, among others for making their stay in Paris “a memorable one.” Kirk’s staff assisted them with traveling in Europe and north Africa with “many courtesies” and “in an extremely intelligent fashion.” Kirk loaned the delegation his plane and crew for numerous trips on the European continent. Johnson singled out Kirk’s pilot, Lieutenant Johnson, as doing everything possible to make the trips “interesting.” “All of the Committee,” said Johnson, “regarded him as an admirable officer and highly competent flier.”

End of War

On May 7, 1945, German forces surrendered. Kirk spent the next several weeks in much traveling. He met with Stark in London and inspected newly opened port facilities in St. Nazaire and Bremen, Germany. Then, after receiving orders, he shut down his headquarters operations beginning in mid-June. On June 25, Kirk traveled home to Washington on 15 days leave.

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165 Ibid., 798.
166 Memo from Congressman LBJ to Secretary of the Navy Forrestal (not dated but probably 11 Jul 45), P/R, Box 1.
orders. Kirk’s formal orders ending his assignment as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces France, and Deputy for Navy, SHAEF Mission to France, came on July 1. Kirk immediately requested sea duty in the Pacific and Stark recognized and endorsed this request. Kirk also received a permanent promotion to Vice Admiral on July 26. Kirk did not know it at the time, but he later learned the War Department requested to have him placed in command of the amphibious force for the invasion of the Japanese home islands. But with the atomic bombings on August 6 and 9, the war in the Pacific drew down. At the time, Kirk was engaged in traveling and speaking “in connection with public information matters” when he learned of Japan’s surrender on September 2. For the remainder of the year Kirk engaged full-time in victory speeches and parades and events in multiple cities including New York, Washington, Cincinnati, and Chicago.

On January 22, 1946, Admiral Stark, former Commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe, recommended to the Secretary of the Navy via the Chief of Naval Operations that Kirk be awarded a Gold Star in lieu of the second Legion of Merit “in recognition of his meritorious service as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces France.” Stark stated that Kirk was “responsible for the discharge of the duties assigned the U.S. Navy in the operations of captured Northern European ports…and effectively coordinated the units and activities under his command to maintain, in cooperation with the Army, an uninterrupted flow of vital equipment and material to

169 Memo from Bureau of Naval Personnel to Secretary of the Navy 26 Jul 45, P/R, Box 1.
170 CNP to Kirk temporary duty orders 13 Aug 45, P/R, Box 3. About 14 Aug 45 Kirk travelled to Erie PA.
our armies fighting across France toward the German homeland.” Kirk, continued Stark, “was charged with the support of the U.S. Naval Forces assigned to assist the Army in the Rhine crossing. The success of this unique inland amphibious operation reflected great credit on him and the U. S. Naval Service.” Kirk also “supervised the French Naval Forces in the capture of important German-held seaports in Western France, thereby depriving the enemy of these ports and making them available to the Allies.” Stark concluded that “by his ability, initiative, and devotion to duty, he contributed to the ultimate capitulation of Germany.”

The Secretary of the Navy approved the citation the following week with modifications including noting “brilliant leadership.”

Kirk emerged from the war a proven success. He was unquestionably a top-quality administrator and diplomat. His early foresight recognized amphibious warfare and joint operations as critical elements in allied victory - and he became an expert in both. He was given a massive challenge to help prepare for and execute the largest amphibious invasions in history in coordination with multiple nations, organizations, and personalities. Kirk’s abilities were well recognized – and rightly backed up with honors and awards. He had a professional network of powerful friends, including the Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Based on his strong record, his professional network, and the significance of a prominent admiral of Normandy fame, with instant prestige, representing the U.S. in Europe, the Truman administration selected Kirk to be Ambassador to Belgium. A new adventure that capitalized on his strengths was about to begin.

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172 Memo from Admiral Stark to Secretary of the Navy 22 Jan 46, P/R, Box 1.
173 Award citation signed by James Forrestal 11 Apr 46, P/R, Box 1.
Chapter 8

Steady Nerves: Cold War Ambassador

Alan Goodrich Kirk held posts and had influence important to the developing Cold War. The word “retirement” does not fit with Kirk’s life. When V-E (Victory in Europe) Day came on May 8, 1945, he began to press for assignment to the Pacific war. When V-J (Victory over Japan) Day came three months later, on August 14, he prepared immediately for transition to the state department to become an ambassador. Ambassador was his major role for the rest of his life. He was closely involved with the reconstruction of Europe and the start of a conflict with a war ally - the Soviet Union. He was successful as ambassador to Belgium and then the Soviet Union not because of something dramatic, but by reason of smoothness. Most of Europe remained American allies under the new threat of international communism, and Kirk encouraged support with his steady calm demeanor. He also held leadership positions with anti-communist and corporate organizations. In the sense that Kirk ever ceased to work, he never “retired.” Along the way, he lived up to his ability to be reliable and versatile, becoming an early adaptor to the policy of containment and promoting peace in Europe and Asia.

Tombstone Admiral

On February 11, 1946, Vice Admiral Kirk sent a memorandum to Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, requesting retirement after over 40 years of naval service. But the purpose for the request was so that he could accept an appointment to become U.S. ambassador to Belgium. Kirk stated: “It is requested that this retirement be made effective immediately in order to permit
me to accept the appointment as Ambassador to Belgium.”¹ His friend, General Walter “Beedle” Smith, was soon assigned as ambassador to the Soviet Union.² It was unusual for a military officer to be assigned as ambassador, but Admiral William Leahy had recently served as ambassador to France (and Vichy France). Now at war’s end, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes wanted senior military officers in key ambassador positions – most notably Kirk and Smith. Later, in 1952, Admiral Raymond Spruance was made ambassador to The Philippines and Admiral Jerauld Wright succeeded Kirk as ambassador to Taiwan in 1963. Byrnes and President Truman believed officers of Kirk and Smith’s reputation helped open and honest discussion. This was especially true of the Russians. Stalin had, recalled Smith, “on a number of occasions, indicated a certain distrust of career diplomats, and had shown some preference for military men.”³ Byrnes and Truman also believed Soviet military leaders had significant influence over post-war policy – so an American military counterpart helped to establish trust more quickly.

Administrative wheels turned on the question of whether Kirk received a special commendation for performance of duty in combat by the head of an executive department, which would make him eligible for promotion upon retirement. It appeared that this commendation was based on an army one and was technically not signed by the Secretary of War. The legal opinion was that Kirk in fact was given this commendation, although not by the navy, but by the Secretary of War in person, who was authorized to give the award qualifying him for promotion.

¹ Memo from Kirk to Secretary of the Navy 11 Feb 46, P/R, Box 1. Report of Physical Examination NMS FORM Y, 27 Feb 46, P/R, Box 2. Kirk was given a final navy medical examination on February 27, 1946. He had just had a bout of vertigo that was recorded as Meniere’s Syndrome resulting in hearing loss and tinnitus.
² Walter Bedell Smith, My Three Years in Moscow (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1950), 36.
³ Ibid., 14, 15.
and that the seal constituted signature. A promotion board recommended that Kirk be eligible for promotion to full Admiral two weeks before his March 1, 1946, retirement date. This promotion was a retirement reward appointing him “an Admiral in the Navy on the Retired List to rank from the 1st day of March 1946.” This type of honor is known as a “tombstone promotion” because Kirk’s retirement pay remained at the three-star level and he would wear the fourth star only on his grave marker. In acknowledging, on March 8, 1946, his promotion and retirement, he was already using State Department letterhead. Kirk had a total of 40 years and 7 months and 24 days of active service. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal’s memorandum to Kirk said “Having been specially commended by the Secretary of the Navy for performance of duty in actual combat with the enemy, you were, then transferred to the retired list, advanced to the rank of Admiral, but your retired pay is based on the rank held by you at the time of retirement…” and ending with “the Secretary of the Navy regrets your retirement from active service and takes this occasion to extend to you his heartiest congratulations and appreciation for your long and distinguished service to our Nation.”

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4 Memo from Navy Department Board of Decorations and Medals to Secretary of the Navy via JAG 15 Jan 46, P/R, Box 1. Memo from BUPERS to Commander Eastern Sea Frontier 13 Apr 46, P/R, Box 1. On 13 April 1946 Kirk was also awarded a retirement medal, a Gold Star in lieu of the Second Legion of Merit while on leave in Black Point, Niantic, Connecticut. Memo from Commander Easter Sea Frontier to BUPERS 22 Apr 46, P/R, Box 1. By the time the award memo reached Kirk he was already in Belgium, and it had to be forwarded to Europe.

5 Memo for JAG from Secretary of the Navy 15 Feb 46, P/R Box 1. Promotion citation from Truman singed Forrestal 6 Mar 46, P/R, Box 1. James Forrestal signed for Truman the Admiral promotion documents 6 March 1946. Memo CNO to Secretary of the Navy 6 Jul 48, P/R, Box 1. CNO was Admiral Louis Denfeld. The navy was slow in giving out awards. On 6 July 1948, the CNO recommended Kirk for the Legion of Merit “in recognition of outstanding services in a position of great responsibility as Naval Attaché, London, from February 1939 to January 1841.” The CNO’s recommendation concluded that “Kirk displayed marked organizational skill and ability” that made “transition to full wartime cooperation” with the British “smooth and effective.” Memo from Navy Dept of Decorations and Medals to Secretary of the Navy 16 Aug 48, P/R, Box 1. In July 1948, another proposed Legion of Merit, for services as Attaché in London before the war, was denied by the Navy Department Board of Decorations and Medals due to the meritorious service being performed during peacetime. Retired research sheet prepared 11 Jun 58, P/R, Box 1. Kirk was given the honorary promotion to Admiral by June 1958, although for pay purposes he remained Vice Admiral.

6 Memo from Kirk to Secretary of the Navy 8 Mar 46, P/R, Box 1.

7 Retired research sheet prepared 11 Jun 58, P/R, Box 1.

8 Memo from Secretary of the Navy to Kirk 7 Mar 46, P/R, Box 1.
Diplomatic Experience

Kirk accepted the appointment as Ambassador to Belgium on March 4, 1946. Kirk was not new to the state department. His diplomatic involvement came in tandem with his intelligence work while attaché in London. State department records showed they relied on Kirk and his staff from early in the war in Europe. Ambassador Kennedy sent coded diplomatic telegrams through Kirk’s office. In September 1939, it was Kirk who prepared Kennedy’s report to the state department on the investigation into the *Athenia* sinking. The following year Kirk was heavily involved with the “Swedish situation” and Crown Prince Olav of Norway’s request to ensure the safety of his wife, the Crown Princess Märtha, and their children. Kirk had met the President of China, Sun Yat-sen, played cards with Norwegian royalty, placated Charles de Gaulle, given many “dog and pony” tours and talks to dignitaries including King George VI. He was a proven charmer, but his skills included nuts and bolts policy, primarily in naval matters, with foreigners - most notably with senior British leaders. But the post-war diplomatic role was official and no longer an individual – but family affair.

Ambassador to Belgium

The Kirks were excited to be off on a new adventure together, shipping out on a passenger liner, the *Queen Mary*, for a stopover in England before the flight to Belgium. Kirk’s

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9 Memo from Kirk to CNP 4 Mar 46, P/R, Box 3.
11 FRUS Diplomatic Papers, 1940, General, Vol 1 857.0011/39: Telegram. FRUS Diplomatic Papers, 1940, General, Vol I, Document 101. One message, dated June 22, 1940, was from Kennedy to the secretary of state regarding Olav’s request and asking him to refer to Kirk’s cable to the navy department that afternoon. Kennedy said the Crown Prince “begs to know if there is anything you can do in a hurry to get the Crown Princes out.”
wife Lydia was fluent in French. Kirk knew some of the language and could get by. He studied French at the academy and had worked to be more conversant more recently at his posting in Paris. Kirk’s secretary was “a nice woman whom he had inherited” from Selden Chapin, Lydia’s brother in the diplomatic service who soon became U.S. ambassador to The Netherlands. While Ambassador to Belgium, Kirk was also Minister to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.12

Kirk’s interests and involvement were wide. The most pressing controversy in Belgium was whether to invite the King, Leopold III, to return. The Socialist Party was against it, and the Catholic Party was in favor. Leopold III had surrendered the country to the Germans and so was unpopular. An interim solution of establishing the King’s brother, Prince Charles as regent, calmed rancor. Kirk was careful not to take sides. Alarmed by the show of communist party support in Italian and French elections, at 19 and 28.6 percent respectively, his priority was anti-communism, which involved trying to limit and mute the Belgian Communist Party, which had won 13 percent in elections a month before Kirk arrived. Also, Kirk worked to ensure Belgium made raw ores – especially copper and uranium - available to the West, and the West only, from its’ colony – the Belgian Congo.13 The secret agreement between Belgium and the U.S. to sell all Congo uranium exclusively to the U.S. and Britain was soon discovered, resulting in loud outcry from the Belgian Communist Party and some in the press. Kirk had “many difficult conversations” with the Belgian foreign minister.14 For Lydia, anti-communism continued in social circles with the new Soviet ambassador’s wife, “reputed to be an expert pistol shot” who

13 Ibid., 132. Tony Judt, *Post War: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 79. Leopold III did return in 1950, after Kirk had become Ambassador to the Soviet Union, but he soon found that he had to abdicate to his son Baudouin.
was “a grim creature of forbidding aspect.” Kirk was also interested in spies in Belgium, and valued their contributions to the past war efforts, but he was already thinking how they might be used against communists. He reasoned that capable spies were just as effective against communists as Nazis and the German war machine. His own experience as attaché and Director of Naval Intelligence affirmed the value of spies. He told Lydia he was torn between wanting to honor allied spies and giving their awards too soon. “I wish I did not have to give their names. Who knows? We might need them again.”

Kirk was mindful of the need to secure industrial and nuclear capabilities. Kirk was mindful of companies involved in arms manufacturing when he informed the state department that the Fabrique Nationale company was still waiting for open letter of credit by the Chinese government. He also wrote to Secretary of State Dean Acheson in February, 1947, saying the Russians were trying to obtain information from “friendly scientists” like Professor Frederic Joliot-Curie, who was High Commissioner for Atomic Energy in neighboring France. Later, in 1950, upon learning from an article in Pravda that the French expelled Joliot-Curie from his post in atomic research, Kirk sent a note to Acheson saying “I am immensely gratified,” since Kirk considered the professor a “serious menace.” Although it is unclear if Kirk was directly involved in their ouster, he followed the careers of both Joliot-Curie and his wife Irene, who were each Nobel-Prize recipients (just like Irene’s mother Marie Curie) sympathetic to the communist cause.

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15 Lydia Chapin Kirk, Distinguished Service, 134.
16 Ibid., 138.
18 FRUS 25 Feb 1947, Kirk to Acheson.
19 FRUS 5 May 1950, Kirk to Sec of State. See also FRUS, 1950, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, Volume I, Document 177.
In November 1947, Kirk was appointed Chairman, United Nations Special Commission on the Balkans, headquartered in Salonika. The commission’s mission, which lasted beyond Kirk’s tenure, lasted until 1951. The Greek communists were getting assistance from Bulgarian and Yugoslav allies. The Greek government needed support and the Truman administration, in what became known as the Tuman Doctrine, purposed to aid anti-communist fighters and was being implemented by Secretary of State George Marshall. The communists were conducting raids near the borderlands of northern Greece, displacing people in small towns. Kirk’s assignment was to be temporary – two or three months – to get the committee efforts started, and report on any atrocities. The work was dangerous at times and was hindered with the added difficulty of other commissioner’s lack of enthusiasm. Lydia went home to Washington and watched news reports – several of which made her very concerned for Kirk’s safety. “It was one thing to face the Germans from the deck of his flagship off Normandy and quite another to encounter screaming mustachioed Bulgarian outlaws,” she later wrote. Kirk did journey to the frontier area and saw “fairly active goings-on.” By March 1948, Kirk’s work there was quickly ended, and he traveled home to Washington for a brief Belgian prince regent visit – then he and Lydia returned to Belgium.

In March 1949, Kirk returned to Washington for consultations and the signing of the Atlantic Treaty creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Kirk knew his time was up in Belgium and was hoping for a new assignment, but none came all during his consultations visit. NATO was founded on April 4, with 12 original signatories including Belgium. As he was about to leave to return to Belgium, he was asked to report to the state

21 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 162, 163.
department where he learned of his selection as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. The following day this was confirmed in a meeting with Secretary of State Dean Acheson and President Truman – who told Kirk directly he wanted him in Moscow. Stalin and influential Soviet military officers had the greatest trust and respect for military men, and Kirk symbolized goodwill and promises kept. As a Normandy commander he spearheaded the opening of the much anticipated second front that Stalin desired during the war. Lydia was stunned - proud of her husband yet “fearful of what the assignment to the capital of our archenemy would entail.” When the official news came the papers were full of stories, “and the telephone rang constantly.” Two weeks later, on April 20, President Truman publicly nominated Kirk, then 60 years old, to become ambassador to the Soviet Union.

The Kirks had dinner with the current ambassador, General Walter Bedell (“Beedle”) Smith, and his wife, who showed them pictures of the ambassador’s residence, Spaso House, and informed them of the relatively sparse conditions. Lydia made a shopping trip to stock up on winter gear. The salesperson exclaimed “You are going to Moscow? May the Lord be with you!” Lydia remembered, “We met this reaction everywhere we went.” With this second senior military officer to lead the American diplomatic mission to Moscow, it is evident U.S. officials were sending a solid message to Moscow – the U.S. was a responsible ally both in supplying the Russian war effort but also opening the second front to relieve pressure on Moscow and ensure victory over the Nazis. The choice of Kirk was a signal of friendship, but that signal was not received.

22 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 164, 165.
23 Ibid. Walter Bedell Smith, *My Three Years in Moscow*, 14, 15.
24 State Department Office of the Historian, “Search,” accessed 5 May 23, https://history.state.gov/search?q=%22alan+g.+kirk%22&within=entire-site&sort-by=relevance. NATO was first headquartered in London but was eventually moved to Brussels in 1967.
Lydia’s Writing

Kirk’s wife Lydia played a key role in his ambassadorships. A daughter of Frederic Chapin, a naval attaché in Paris in 1908, she was well attuned to diplomatic life. Lydia was deeply involved as hostess and, as she puts it, “ambassadress.”26 Most important – she was an observant and prolific writer who was engaging with her experiences. More can undoubtedly be learned in studying her writings in these years. In the Cold War, she took the role Brown had as the Kirk propagandist.

Lydia wrote a novel reflective of the Kirk Belgian experience. Her “detective story” reflects the Kirks involvement and is indicative of the place and time. The novel, The Embassy Madonna, published in 1971, is historically instructive. It is a story about a stolen work of art from a Belgian country church during World War II. It turns up in the United States and is eventually returned. The American ambassador is preparing to present it to the Belgians when it is switched with a fake. The thief, and villain in the story is a young arrogant and selfish German man. The heroine is a mature Belgian lady who is employed as secretary by the American embassy. She is a character closely based on a Belgian employee of the embassy, who became a friend of Lydia, Ida Nerinckx, whom she simply referred to as “Mademoiselle.” She is the heroine in the story, who was active in the Belgian Resistance, courageously smuggling downed allied aviators to safety during World War II.27 NATO merits great respect in her novel. A former German general, uncle to the villain, supports NATO and thus has good standing in the story.28 An Interpol records check helps nab the thief.29 In the end, the “generous” American ambassador

26 Lydia Chapin Kirk, Distinguished Service, 13.
28 Lydia Chapin Kirk, The Embassy Madonna, 112.
29 Ibid., 130.
would not press charges and so there would be no arrest if the young German villain returned immediately to Germany. Interpol would keep a watchful eye on him now.\textsuperscript{30}

Although, in her book, the American ambassador and “ambassadress” have background roles, Lydia says they “were deservedly popular, a patriotic and hard-working couple.” \textsuperscript{31} The ambassadress is “a charitable woman, secure in her own husband’s affection.”\textsuperscript{32} Much of her story reflects the realities of the Kirks experience and perceptions in Brussels? Mrs. Kirk shows she is observant and well acquainted with the Belgian country. Her novel follows canal life, and she is familiar with, and appreciates, the complex Flemish and French divisions. Lydia’s curiosity, respect for, and knowledge of Belgian history showed through.\textsuperscript{33} She was not averse to self-stereotyping criticism. “Impatient people, the Americans, even the time for coffee to filter down seemed wasted to them.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textbf{Foreign Honors}

Before his departure, Kirk was presented with personal awards for his war service from the Belgian government. Although congress had not yet acted to allow for legal acceptance, the gesture was remarkable. On April 29, 1949, Kirk made a farewell visit to Luxembourg, where HRH the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg presented him the Grand-Croix de l’Ordre Grand-Ducal de la Couronne de Chene and the Croix de Guerre 1940-45, for his service to Luxembourg during the war. “The circumstances were such that the decorations had to be received,” wrote the interim Charge’ d’Affaires, George Lybrook West Jr, to the secretary of state. The awards were

\textsuperscript{30} Lydia Chapin Kirk, \textit{The Embassy Madonna}, 158.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
to be held in custody by the state department pending the passage of legislation allowing the
awards to be received.\footnote{Memo form Charge d’Affairs to Secretary of State 13 Jun 49, P/R, Box 1.}
A month later, Kirk wrote the secretary of state explaining that “I have
the honor to report that upon my farewell visit to the Foreign Minister of Belgium, Mr. Paul
Henri Spaak, upon relinquishing my post as American ambassador, the Foreign Minister gave
me a decoration of the Order of Leopold, in recognition of military service performed by Naval
Forces under my command in Belgium during the late war.” Kirk continued, “the circumstances
were such that the decoration had to be received. It is forwarded herewith for the Department’s
custody until such time as legislation may be passed permitting this decoration to be received for
military services in the late war.”\footnote{Memo from Kirk to Secretary of State 25 May 49, P/R, Box 1. Memo for Secretary of the Navy from Secretary of State 16 Aug 49, P/R, Box 1. On August 16, 1949, George W. Perkins, Assistant Secretary of State sent a memo to Secretary of the Navy informing him of Luxembourg’s bestowing the decorations of the Grand-Croix de l’Order Grand Ducal de la Couronne de Chene and the Croix de Guerre 1940-1945 on Ambassador Kirk “in recognition of his services as a naval officer during the last war.” These would be “held in the custody of the Department until such time as Ambassador Kirk may be in a position legally to accept them.” Letter from CNP to Kirk 12 Dec 58, P/R, Box 1. On December 12, 1958, Kirk was finally able to receive foreign awards of Order of Grand Ducal of the Corona de Chene (Grand Cross), Luxembourg and Croix de Guerre, Luxembourg and Order of Leopold, Belgium. These were held by the State Department pending legislation by Congress granting retired U.S. military personnel to receive these. The CNP forwarded these with congratulatory note.}

**Ambassador to the USSR**

The Kirks flew to the U.S. Air Force Base in Wiesbaden Germany on June 26, 1949. The
next day they flew a carefully scheduled route to Berlin due to the extensive air resupply effort to
the western zone of occupation which had been cut off from ground transport by Stalin for over a
year. It was only a month earlier that Stalin reopened the roadway, but the Berlin Airlift
continued until September to ensure stability in case of further policy disruptions. In Berlin, the
Kirks saw the devastation of a fallen capital, and the steady buzz of airlift planes provided the
tense tone of a Cold War superpower standoff. Arriving at the Moscow airport, the Kirks met the
embassy staff along with their four Russian guards who would be with them wherever they went. Spaso House, the American ambassador’s residence since 1933, was, recalled Lydia, “an immense neoclassic palace built in 1913 by a rich businessman” with “gigantic” ceilings and main hall.37

On July 4, 1949, Kirk presented his credentials to Nikolai Shvernik, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Soviet Union. After the formalities, the Russians asked Kirk if it were his first time in the Soviet Union. “No, I’ve been here before.” Intrigued, they asked for specifics “Where were you?” Kirk replied “St. Petersburg.” The Russians “froze, cold as slate,” he remembered. After an awkward moment, one of them asked, “When was that?” Kirk replied, “That was in 1911.” The smiles immediately returned.38 Fifty Russians were invited to the evening reception at Spaso House, hosted by the Kirks for Independence Day, but only twelve showed, led by Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet deputy foreign minister – staying for less than an hour. “It was farcical pretending to entertain those people,” recalled Lydia, “but we had to continue to play the game …”. The Kirks tried tuning in Voice of America and BBC radio but heard only “the whirring noise” from jamming. Interactions with people were very limited. Isolation was oppressive. The restrictions in movement and speech – especially for Russians, disturbed the Kirks deeply. “A horrid business,” in Lydia’s view.39

Kirk met Stalin only once, and soon into his ambassadorship in 1949.40 It was late August when Kirk was invited for a short “courtesy call.” The meeting lasted thirty-seven minutes. Kirk remembered the seventy-year-old Stalin looking strong, dressed in his unadorned but carefully

37 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 175.
38 Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 29. The city was renamed Leningrad in honor of the Soviet founder. Those present evidently wondered if Kirk were about to make a political statement with the name of this city. Kirk and Shvernik were the same age. See also FRUS, 1949, Eastern Europe, The Soviet Union, Volume V, Document 364.
fitted military uniform, and smoking a pipe. Foreign Minister Andrey Vishinsky was there, nervously attending to his boss. Kirk brought up two issues – loan repayment for World War II aid and the jamming of radio signal. When Kirk uttered “Voice of America,” Stalin turned smiling to Vishinsky and said, “Do they say wicked things about us?” Stalin told Kirk to come meet with him whenever he had something to discuss. But Washington refrained from ever instructing Kirk to meet with Stalin again. The limited contact may have been precipitated by his immediate predecessor, “Beedle” Smith, who had a contentious meeting on April 5, 1946 and, although it ended on a high note, marked a downward trend in direct communication with the Soviet leader. In mid-February 1947, Smith had officially asked the Soviet government and press to publish the date, time and wave-length of the new Voice of America broadcast. The request was, of course, ignored. Initial programs, including speeches by President Truman, did reach many in the Soviet Union. “Gradually,” remembered Smith, “the evidence multiplied that the effect of these broadcasts on Russian thought was very great.” The Soviets began jamming the signal in the spring of 1949 – just before Kirk arrived and took up the cause.

The Kirks knew what they were getting into in the Moscow assignment even before briefings by the Smiths, their predecessors. John Steinbeck, and photographer Robert Capa, traveled around the Soviet Union in 1947 and recorded their impressions in a journal and photo essay they called A Russian Journal, a book that presented “the Soviet Union as a framed portrait.” Published in April 1948, their account provided what many Americans came to know

41 Lydia Chapin Kirk, Distinguished Service, 183-184.
43 Walter Bedell Smith, My Three Years in Moscow, 180-183.
about the mysterious place the Kirks were about to venture into for two years. The embassy “is different from any I have ever seen,” wrote Steinbeck. It is not crowded at all because few Americans venture to Russia. “There is no question, in this period of tension, that Russians do not like to be seen with members of the American Embassy, and this is fairly understandable.” Steinbeck continued, “General Smith, the American Ambassador, asked us to dinner, and we found him an intelligent and carful man, who desperately tried to the best he could for the relations of the two countries. And it must be admitted that he is working under great difficulties. For the diplomatic services of foreign countries are under the same restrictions as the correspondents. They are not permitted to leave Moscow, they cannot travel about the country, and their access to the homes of Russians is highly limited.”

Steinbeck and Capa toured the Kremlin. His verdict? “Just two hours in this royal place so depressed us that we couldn’t shake it all day,” wrote Steinbeck. “It is the most gloomy place in the world.”

The first fall in Moscow was filled with new experiences for the Kirks. In September 1949, they made their first visit to the Kremlin for a carefully guided tour of museums and historic sights. On November 7, the Kirks attended the Russian National Day parade in Red Square with a great assortment of military personnel and hardware. Kirk invited Vishinky to lunch and he accepted – it was the first meal for a Russian at Spaso House in almost two years. The Kirks also enjoyed some excellent ballet and drama at the famed Bolshoi theater. In late December the Gromykos came to lunch at Spaso House. Conversation “was a bit strained but very correct in tone and subject,” remembered Lydia.

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46 Ibid., 205.
47 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 188, 191-192
48 Ibid., 193.
While ambassador to the Soviet Union, Kirk continued to support anti-communist efforts developing in Europe. Between March 22 and 24, 1950, there was a “Meeting of Ambassadors” from major European countries in Rome to discuss European foreign policy challenges. Also in attendance were directors of the European aid program known as the Marshall Plan. But economic aid was only partly to provide relief from communist gains. The six ambassadors agreed for the need for a “rapid development of anti-Communist activities on an expanded scale,” and the “launching of a vigorous propaganda offensive” to wrestle back control of the world peace movement for the West.49 On April 20, President Truman announced the need and effort for a “campaign of truth” at a luncheon for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and days later a new organization called Crusade for Freedom was birthed out of the National Committee for a Free Europe. This led to the establishment of Radio Free Europe with involvement from leaders like Allen Dulles of the new Central Intelligence Agency and actor Ronald Reagan.50

Kennan and Containment

Averell Harriman, wealthy heir to a giant of Wall Street, and friend of President Franklin Roosevelt, preceded Kirk and Smith as ambassador. He was appointed in October 1943, and by the end of his ambassadorship in 1946, he had met with Stalin more than any diplomat. George Kennan, who later became a key foreign policy influencer known for his “Long Telegram” and support of “containment” in 1946, was his lieutenant at the Moscow Embassy, and later became ambassador immediately following Kirk. Smith remembered Kennan as “my mentor and

49 FRUS, 1950, Central and Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV. Document 137. See also Lydia Chapin Kirk, Distinguished Service, 199.
principal advisor during my first months in Moscow.” But Smith says little more about Kennan and does not identify him with long-term policy impact. Kennan’s policy contributions soon came – spearheading the notion of “containment” or combining peace and co-existence while restricting the expansion of Soviet power. Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis wrote a thick (almost 700 pages) biography of Kirk’s successor, George Kennan, but largely overlooks Kirk. Two questions stand out. Why does Kirk remain little known for his years in Moscow? Did he support containment? These questions are linked to one answer. Kirk was transitional.

Kirk’s ambassadorship came at a transitional period, where U.S. officials hashed out policy perspectives regarding the former Soviet ally. For example, Smith does not mention “containment” in his memoir. During Smith’s tenure, the idea of “roll back” – to the point of war - was plausible. Not so by the end of Kirk’s time as ambassador. At the start, Kirk favored “roll back” over “containment.” In a Top-Secret cable dated April 25, 1950, Kirk forwarded a report to the state department that his staff prepared, under his direction, on Soviet intentions. It leaves no room for doubt that the Soviets were an enemy to be defeated in a war that is already underway. It states that “Moscow is waging a total war against the Free World, a ruthless and unrelenting struggle within which ‘Cold War’ and ‘Shooting War’ are merely tactical phases.” The word “containment” is used only once – and in a derogatory way. “The free peoples” the report reads, “will rise to the occasion only if they realize its vivid and lasting urgency…” and “This can be done if the war is both fought and publicly presented as an enterprise of grandiose scope and strategic and tactical action. ‘Containment’ is too defensive and static concept for winning either the public or the war itself.” But Kirk changed his mind. Did Kennan influence Kirk? Undoubtedly, but his influence was indirect. Kirk, like Smith as a military man, was

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51 Walter Bedell Smith, *My Three Years in Moscow*, 86.
52 FRUS, 1950, Central and Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV, Document 651.
sensitive and understanding to the perspective of his superiors – in this case the secretary of state and the president. Soon, events changed Kirk’s view, and gave those that favored containment, the upper hand.

Korean War

North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. It was one day before Kirk arrived back at Spaso House from a two-week trip deep into Siberia and to Lake Baikal. Embassy staff began destroying classified documents. The idea of all-out war seemed eminently plausible. “I hated the thought that my family and our colleagues were living in the center of what would be the American bombers’ target number one in case of war,” thought Lydia. “I only hoped that,” recalled Lydia, “if it (war) did come, it would be general and not leave a few of us to drag about a ruined earth.” 53 The Soviet press ran with harsh, accusatory, and frightening stories about American treachery – some stories insinuating that America was engaging in a secret biological war campaign exposing Russia to dangerous germs and insects. Tension was high but Kirk wanted the appearance of calm, so he insisted they keep to the normal schedule – attending typical functions like receptions. Lydia remembered angry propaganda in newspapers and magazines – “it was a wonder we were not stoned in the streets, for we must all have appeared to the Russians as devils with horns.” Kirk ensured the embassy held a strong showing for the Fourth of July celebration that included many invitations to Russians – although only a “scruffy lot” of seven or eight low-ranking Russians came. 54

Kirk navigated the roles and influence of power brokers other than Stalin – especially during the Korean crisis. Kirk’s interactions were mostly limited to Vishinsky and Gromyko.

53 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 203, 204.
54 Ibid.
Without Stalin, nailing down decisions and gauging intent was difficult. At one point he thought Gromyko, a young and key player in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, was worth pursuing to gain some sort of feedback in reaching understanding. But it was all for naught. Kirk sent a message to Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk June 30, 1950, saying “my efforts to draw Gromyko out…were unsuccessful” and that it appeared he had little or no authority to discuss the situation (regarding the Korean conflict). In 1951 it appears caution won out as the state department sent an advisory to Kirk to not attempt to see and interact with Stalin directly, but to stick with his foreign minister Vishinsky. Here Kirk seemed to have at least mild success. Kirk commented on the state of Soviet relations “I think following my call (on Vishinsky) a little more reasonable attitude has developed in Korea.” At one meeting Vishinsky handed Kirk a note that accused the U.S. of shooting down a Russian plane in Korea. Kirk refused to take the note - telling the Russian minister that it needed to be addressed to the United Nations. Kirk insisted in this even though Vishinsky spent almost an hour trying to convince him to take the note. In retaliation, the Soviets revoked the right for the American ambassador to turn left on Moscow streets - only the British ambassador retained this right. Also, for one day, the Soviet guards would not salute Kirk. The Soviets sent a “scruffy” group of minor officials to the Kirk’s Fourth of July party.

In February of 1951, just a month before Dwight Eisenhower became the first Supreme Allied Commander of Europe under the new NATO organization, he re-evaluated Kirk’s contribution in World War II to the positive. Eisenhower wrote to the Chief of Naval Operations: “I am writing this letter because of a conviction that I may have inadvertently been guilty of an

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59 Lydia Chapin Kirk, Distinguished Service, 203-204.
injustice towards a distinguished naval officer, Admiral Alan G. Kirk, now retired and serving as the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union.” The General noted Kirk performed “gallantly and brilliantly” in “two critical battle operations in World War II” but “he never received the Distinguished Service Medal of the Navy.” Eisenhower remembered that during the invasion of Sicily, his Naval Commander in Chief, Admiral Cunningham, said Kirk’s amphibious landing under challenging weather conditions was “the finest act of seamanship he had seen in his long Navy service.” Eisenhower wrote that Kirk “measured up, in every respect,” to service in the Normandy invasion and then as U.S. Naval Commander in Europe. “At the end of hostilities, I apparently made the false assumption that Admiral Kirk would be recommended by U.S. Navy officers for the Distinguished Service Medal of his service. Consequently, I have obviously been guilty of a neglect that has worked to the disadvantage of Admiral Kirk…” Eisenhower concluded that “In any event, I sincerely hope that such an award can now be made; approval of this recommendation would lift a real load from my mind.” This is a humorous episode that not only provides evidence the navy was stingier with awards than the army, but it also indicates Kirk was content with the recognition he received. In March of 1951, a navy medal was forwarded to him in Moscow - a Navy Distinguished Service Medal and Citation.

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60 Letter to Admiral Sherman from Dwight D. Eisenhower 4 Feb 51, P/R, Box 1.
61 Memo from CNP to Kirk 14 Mar 51, P/R, Box 1. Third endorsement on letter from CNO dated 6 Feb 51, 21 Feb 51, P/R, Box 1. This set off several record reviews and recommendations and revised recommendations so as to not duplicate awards. The Navy Board of Decorations and Medals was concerned that that no overlap in awards was allowed by law. Since Kirk had been awarded a Legion of Merit and an Army Distinguished Service Medal, it was decided to recognize Kirk’s contribution to the training and preparation for Sicily and Normandy with a Navy Distinguished Service Medal. Citation for NDSM from Secretary of the Navy 14 Mar 51, P/R, Box 1. The timing was specified as from 26 February to 23 June 1943 when he was Commander Sixth Amphibious Force, from 27 October 1943 to 6 June 1944 as Commander Task Force 122. But the citation itself reads differently. The final award of the NDSM by the Secretary of the Navy includes the dates between 28 February 1943 to 27 June 1944 but directly addressed not the actual operations but the vital role and achievements of preparation for the two landings. Citation for NDSM from Secretary of the Navy 14 Mar 51, P/R, Box 1. Kirk is characterized as “an inspiring and forceful leader”, the citation notes that he, “assumed a vital role in preparing for major offensives against the enemy in the European Theater. Under his expert supervision, large-scale amphibious and combat forces were organized, systematically trained, and brought to the highest level of combat readiness to carry out assigned missions in direct support of invasion operations.”
On October 6, 1951, the Kirks departed Moscow. They did leave but, as Lydia states, “Russia one never forgets.” In his 40 minute out-brief with President Truman on October 26, Kirk highlighted the Soviet propaganda machine characterizing America a “warmongers, imperialists, encirclers of the Soviet Union, and preparing to launch an aggressive war.” Kirk also told the president of his concern that Stalin was not getting “a frank and clear-cut statement of what was going on” from this advisors and information sources. Finally, as if to put his stamp of approval on the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, and the firing of General Douglas MacArthur, Kirk told Truman that he believed “our foreign policies were good, were sound, and were bearing fruit.” Importantly, Kirk gave no hint of pushing for “roll back.”

Kirk was asked to extend his time as ambassador from October 1951 into March 1952, for Kennan, his successor, to wrap-up work on several policy projects. Kennan represents the professionalization of the diplomatic corps (like Donovan and the intelligence profession). “I firmly believe that we could make much more effective use of the principle of professionalism in the conduct of foreign policy,” wrote Kennan. At his selection as ambassador, Kennan, and his state department professional supporters, could claim containment had won. Kirk told the president that he “heartily” supported the choice of Kennan for ambassador. Kirk was persuaded there would be no “roll back.”

Kirk was a success as ambassador. He knew his job was to keep communication open while presenting a strong and dignified demeanor. He and Lydia maintained the dignity of his office with poise in difficult and transitional times – grappling with an ever-present police state,

difficult personalities all while never knowing when a hot war could replace the cold one. As Lydia later stated—“Moscow was no place for scratchy nerves or hidden complexes.” Gaddis wrote “Harriman, Smith, and most recently Kirk had all served with self-effacement in Moscow under difficult circumstances.” Kennan respected their challenge in saying before he became ambassador that if “I can meet the requirements of the job with as much dignity as they did, and make no more mistakes, I will be pleased enough.”

Gaddis explained that Kennan, determined not to fall victim to private writing being made public as under Kirk, did not keep a diary at the time of the transition probably for fear of the Soviets obtaining it. Major General Robert W. Grow, the Army attaché in Moscow while Kirk was Ambassador, had his diary entries reveled by Soviet authorities and was then court-martialed. Lydia got into some trouble committing an “indiscretion” by publishing her “gossipy account of Spaso House life” while Kirk was still technically U.S. Ambassador. Lydia’s Postmarked Moscow, became a best seller the Washington Post described as “lively and informal” and “throws a little light into a fringe of a dark and hostile world.”

Kennan told his wife to be prepared for a cool reception when they got to Moscow.

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68 John Lewis Gaddis, George Kennan: An American Life, 450.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid. Gaddis probably refers also to a Washington Post interview in 1952 where Lydia made disparaging comments about Soviet life and products like: “They have terrible, terrible bras. They button and they are usually bright yellow, heavy cotton, and they bring the bosom up practically to your chin.” Lydia’s letters to the Kirk children were published in a book Postmarked Moscow: An American Ambassador’s Wife Looks at Life in Russia Today. (New York: Scribner’s, 1952). See the Washington Post article by Richard Pearson, “Lydia Kirk, 88, Wrote Best-Seller On Moscow Life,” December 4, 1984. This article gives the publishing date in error – saying Postmarked Moscow was published in 1954.
71 Ibid.
Psychological Warrior

The Kirks settled in New York City in early 1952. Here Kirk was involved with various anti-communist initiatives and organizations involved with psychological warfare. He became chairman of the board of directors of the CIA backed Radio Liberation and Radio Free Europe. By June 1952, Kirk was also a leader in the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia, Inc., an anti-communist group founded in 1950 and headquartered in New York. Kirk recognized that psychological warfare was an important and well recognized aspect of war in and beyond World War II. Initially, psychological warfare had the popular effect of conjuring up a sci-fi genre with space-age technology that could warp minds to alien wishes. In fact, it was a popular sci-fi author of the 1950’s, publishing under the pseudonym Cordwainer Smith, that also wrote the first comprehensive guide to the subject. His real name was Paul M. A. Linebarger, and his definitive work *Psychological Warfare*, first published in 1948, went on to numerous editions over the next 60 years. Radio, said Linebarger, “is the chief burden-bearer of long-distance psychological warfare.”

In the 1950s, psychological warfare was “waged on a very broad front.” CIA funds went to academic organizations and trade unions, women’s groups, artists, cultural tours, libraries, and animated films, movies and radio. In 1951, William Yandell Elliott, Harvard professor and consultant to America’s burgeoning intelligence and security bureaucracy and mentor to his student Henry Kissinger and the young Senator Richard Nixon, became a founding trustee of the American Committee for Liberation. From this organization came, with CIA funding and

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72 Paul M.A. Linebarger, *Psychological Warfare* (Landisville PA: Coachwhip Publications, 2010), 7-10. The book was first published in 1948. The American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia, Inc. was headquartered at Room 702, 6 East, 45th Street, New York, NY.
73 Ibid., 267.
74 Ferguson, Kissinger, 281, 410.
direction, the beginning of Radio Liberty, which was assigned to broadcast into the Soviet Union, for the purpose of winning hearts and minds.76 Quickly, psychological warfare had proponents throughout government, sparking competition for enlargement of various fiefdoms. Agency rivalry was rife.77

In 1951, the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) was “set up to try to restore harmony.” Palmer Putnam was executive secretary and Gordon Gray, director of the PSB. As it turned out, they were not successful in fostering a unified effort. Putnam sought to liberate peoples under communist rule – favoring a “roll back” as opposed to containment.78 The purpose of the PSB was to help in coordinating agency efforts. But leadership was divided. Some, like Putnam, favored aggressively seeking to destroy communism, while others, led by factions with CIA backing, preferred a more patient approach - accepting the existence of communist power and influence, and favored just stopping its expansion.79

In mid-August 1952, Truman determined to replace Palmer with Kirk. As former Ambassador to the Soviet Union and current chairman of the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia, the president found a reliable, experienced, and versatile supporter in Kirk to be the new director of the PSB.80 Kirk was chosen because U.S. policy was

78 Ibid., 264.
79 Ibid.
shifting to containment and Putnam had to go. It is evident Kirk truly grasped and supported containment – a reversal of his attitude from two years earlier. The quarterly report of the PSB, now headed by Kirk, reflected containment efforts around the globe, noting progress in Europe in “increasing awareness of the communist danger in some countries, notably France and Sweden” and concern in Egypt and Iran. Importantly, the report highlighted the need for military psychological warfare assets to be made available to “national peacetime programs.” The language of war no longer fit.

**McCarthyism**

Washington was undergoing a type of witch hunt in the early 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy was loudly accusing government officials – especially those in the state department – of being communist or selling out to the communists. How did McCarthyism affect Kirk? Not much. The reason is that Kirk had an excellent service reputation, along with anti-communist bona fides. Kirk was not a vulnerable and much targeted career state department official. By the time McCarthy held hearings in 1954, Kirk’s wife Lydia had published *Postmarked Moscow*, which caused a stir and angering Soviet leaders. It justified strong anti-communist sentiment. Her book was a collection of letters written primarily to the Kirk daughters during their time in Moscow. Lydia’s book is a candid and very observant look at Soviet society. She is not complementary about most things. She liked and was impressed with the airshow (just as Steinbeck had been) and the puppet shows – but not much else. She couldn’t wait to get away for shopping trips to Paris and London. Lydia’s portrayal of Soviet life in a coercive state gives first-hand account of what historian David Hoffmann described in *Stalinist Values: The Cultural*

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81 FRUS, 1950-1955, Intelligence Community, Document 133.
McCarthy damaged the Truman administration in withering attacks on the state department which tarnished its’ image. The loss of China and of nuclear secrets was devastating. But the Kirks emerged unscathed. However, because his were political appointments, Kirk found himself out of government work for the first time as a new president, and the Republicans, swept into office.

The Corporate Years in the Mid to Late 1950s

At the beginning of 1953, when Eisenhower became president, Kirk left federal service and associated organizations and became CEO of a small corporation. It was not a busy or challenging position and it left Kirk with time to read classics and attend social events and enjoy family and friends. Kennan did not believe that in 1947-49 the Soviets posed a military threat (just a political one). He thought the over accentuated threat was due to the growing military-industrial complex and suggested that it boosted support for keeping military assets in Japan and starting the Korean War. Eisenhower made warning of the growth of the military-industrial complex a feature of his final speech as president. But Kennan was not a military or industrial expert. Kirk had more experience and was comfortable with corporate involvement in military partnerships since his Indian Head days in munitions development and testing. How did Kirk view the military threat, and did he support the military-industrial complex? Kirk supported the growing partnership between business and the military. His picture, in a business suit, is

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83 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 220.


85 Ibid., 172.
prominently featured in an advertisement for the American Petroleum Institute in *National Geographic*. The advertisement includes a long quote that includes the following:

> As U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, I saw a State-controlled oil industry at work. Five-year plan followed five-year plan. Yet only recently – 18 years late – did Russia reach her 1937 production goal… How sharp the picture of how much we owe to the American freedom of competitive action! How clear the lesson that we must keep this freedom strong and unfettered! Alan G. Kirk”

From 1958 to 1960, Kirk was in senior roles as President and Chairman of the Board of Mercast Corporation, headquartered on Madison Avenue in New York City. Mercast specialized in broadcasting and communications to hard-to-reach places - like ships at sea. This likely complemented his work in broadcasting anti-communist transmissions deep into Soviet territory that needed capital investment.  

On March 11, 1958, from his 1 West Seventy-Second Street home in New York, Kirk wrote out a memorandum for the Chief of Naval Personnel that included the summer itinerary. It was to be a six-month tour of the Middle East and Europe. Sailing on the *S.S. Queen Frederica* on March 19, he and Lydia would travel to Naples and Rome and then on to Teheran on April 3. The stay at the American Embassy would last two weeks. Then on to Greece via Istanbul and the Istanbul Hilton, arriving in Athens on April 17. The next week and a half-included cruising the Greek Islands. On May 3, the trip plan was to go to the Hotel de la Ville in Rome for a two week stay before touring in the north of Italy including stops in Florence and Venice. By June 2, they check in to Hotel France et Choiseul in Paris for five days and then travel to stay with a friend, Mr. Jen Wittouck, in Brussels from June 9 – 14. On the 14th they stop in on the American Embassy in London. The itinerary here has the mysterious entry of “Belgian Congo” between 10

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86 *National Geographic*, 1956.
87 Letter from CNP to Kirk 12 Dec 58, P/R, Box 1. Mercast Corporation, HQ on 295 Madison Ave. NY 17, New York. As of December 12, 1958, Kirk was President of Mercast Corporation. He was Chairman of the Board in 1960. See also Congressional Record, House of Representatives, January 11, 1960, 267.
July and 10 August, with no vessel or hotel mentioned. By August 11, they are back in Brussels. Then a visit to the Italian lake district on the 16th for the remainder of the month. The first half of September would be spent back in Rome at the Hotel de la Ville before shipping out to New York from Naples on the 12th. This is an intriguing trip. There is no other record of the Kirks making this trip and it would seem unlike Lydia not to mention it in letters. Was the trip classified? What else was this trip about other than vacation? What was the primary reason for the embassy visit in Iran, the Congo? Did Kirk have corporate ties to the petroleum companies with interests in Iran and elsewhere on the trip? More information is needed to answer these questions.

**Ambassador to China (Taiwan)**

In the fall of 1961, through the connection of his father, John Mason Brown Jr sat with Kirk in New York for extensive interviews to provide an oral history of his life. John F. Kennedy was months into his term as President. In the spring of 1962, Kirk, a lifelong Democrat, and through his professional network that now included the president himself, was summoned back to diplomatic service. At seventy-four years old, and although still a smoker with bouts of emphysema, Kirk had a quick mind. Kirk first heard rumors from the press when they called him over the phone to confirm that he was to be the next ambassador to the Republic of China. At first Kirk suspected it was a mistake and went to bed that evening thinking this was the case. But Lydia called their friend, the new assistant secretary of state, Ambassador Averell Harriman. Harriman “came on the line at once,” recalled Lydia. He confirmed it was true – they needed her

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88 Itinerary of Admiral and Mrs. Kirk for BUPERS 11 Mar 58, P/R, Box 1. See also Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 220. Lydia Kirk’s cousin was administrator of the Dakota Apartment House that had tall windows overlooking Central Park at 1 West 72nd Street.

husband there soon and he was just about to call him. Kirk met with Kennedy, and the president made the case that he was exactly the man for the job. Kennedy valued Kirk’s combined diplomatic and military experience, and though it helped that he was the same age as Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China based in Taiwan. War in China was a threat to national security and Kirk was to dissuade Chiang from fighting. Amphibious war expertise made Kirk credible. Paul Fay, a close friend of Kennedy who was a fellow PT-boat skipper that he met in the hospital after their boats were hit, later became acting secretary of the navy at the time of Kirk’s death. Fay observed that “undoubtedly recalling the excellent contributions of Admiral Kirk as Naval Attaché in London while President Kennedy’s father was the American Ambassador,” Kennedy appointed Kirk Ambassador to Taiwan.

Kirk was called back to duty for one major purpose. In the wake of Mao’s Great Leap Forward, China faced disaster on an epic scale. Chiang saw an opportunity to press for an invasion of the de-stabilized mainland. The U.S. State Department was given the assignment in restraining the nationalist leader from reigniting fighting with the communists. So, with peace as his mission, Kirk replaced the Eisenhower appointed ambassador and held the post from July 1962 to April 1963.

James Leonard, a Chinese Language Training and Political Officer at the Embassy in Taipei from 1957 to 1963, knew of the mass deaths on the mainland by 1960, but would later remark “we had no idea how bad it was.” Leonard said Chiang was inspired by the mainland chaos “to think that maybe, maybe he had a chance to overthrow the regime and return to the

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90 Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 221-223.
92 Letter from Paul Fay Acting Secretary of the Navy to Lydia 18 Nov 63, P/R, Box 1.
94 Ibid., 176.
95 Ibid., 175.
mainland.” So, he began to do things “behind our back.”

President Kennedy was involved in the Warsaw Talks at the time of the Taiwan crisis and the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Taipei Embassy, Ralph Clough, said the two were linked in June 1962. Kennedy promised not to support an attack on the mainland. The administration’s concern was that US intentions might be misunderstood, so “Kirk was sent out to really talk very frankly to the GIMO and make sure that this was understood.” Leonard believed “Kennedy personally” was concerned. Kirk’s role was to talk Chiang down. Who better than a well-respected diplomat and an amphibious war expert.

After the Kirks settling in, Chiang sent for Kirk even before the official presentation of credentials the following day. During the meetings those two days, Chiang promised not to begin an attack without allied approval, but he wanted Kirk to understand that he needed to encourage his population and military to stay motivated and be ready for a fight. Kirk reaffirmed U.S. support for the defense of Taiwan and made clear that the defense agreement specified that any attack on the mainland must have joint approval. Just over a month later, in preparation for a visit by General Maxwell Taylor, who was to be the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kirk asked to meet with Chiang. The conversation was strained. Chiang wanted to land troops on the mainland, telling Kirk he was under enormous pressure from his top generals. Kirk replied firmly – the 1954 treaty explicitly specified agreement with the U.S. in this matter, and the U.S. was opposed to a mainland invasion. How successful was Kirk’s mission? In the end – there was no invasion. Soon, attention was consumed with the Cuban Missile Crisis in late October, and

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97 Ibid., 176.
then Kirk’s seventy-fourth birthday celebration on October 30, which was the same day as Chiang, who turned seventy-five.\(^\text{100}\)

It was not the Kirks’ first trip to Taiwan. He was a celebrity in Taipei in late-1960 when presenting the formal invitation to participate in the coming 1964 New York World’s Fair. Fifty years earlier, that Kirk had shaken the hand of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the revered President of China, when he came to meet his captain in Canton, made him “an object of marked distinction” with President Chiang Kai-shek and his family and staff.\(^\text{101}\)

After his naval career and the defeat of Nazi Germany, Kirk helped bring about peace and a new security arrangement in a new Cold War. He was, and remained, an unabashed anti-communist. Initially favoring a roll-back policy with conflict on a war-footing, Kirk changed his view while ambassador to the Soviet Union by supporting containment under Truman. His work for peace continued in his final assignment in Taiwan in 1962. His career as naval officer and diplomat brought him full circle – ending where it began fifty years earlier.

\(^{100}\) Lydia Chapin Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 244.

\(^{101}\) Ibid., 221. Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 34.
Kirk became ill just after Christmas celebrations in Taiwan in 1962. He and Lydia traveled home to New York where doctors found an aneurysm. Kirk underwent an operation in Houston. Afterward, the Kirks moved to Long Island to be near family and he occupied himself mainly with reading – much of it works of Rudyard Kipling. It is fitting that Kirk ended his days reading works by a respected author known for defining the progressive times he lived. In September Kirk’s health quickly deteriorated and family were called to his side at the hospital. Son Roger came all the way from Moscow where he had a foreign service assignment. Kirk was moved to his Manhattan apartment where he died two weeks shy of his 75th birthday.¹

**Arlington**

The navy form Report of Casualty (CASREP) was used in the case of serious injury or death. A CASREP reports Kirk’s death on October 15, 1963 “from arteriosclerotic heart disease at New York, N.Y.”² The death certificate noted the time of death was 7:35 am. He was buried three days later at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors and a memorial service was held at 2 p.m. at St. John’s Church, Lafayette Square, Washington D.C.³ Navy Dr. R. G. Hughes asked for a second opinion on the cause of death. Dr. George Carden Jr. of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York reported on January 10, 1964, that Kirk “died of

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¹ Lydia Kirk, *Distinguished Service*, 245-247.
² p/r report of casualty 21 October 1963.11/14
mesenteric thrombosis and cardiac insufficiency secondary to arteriosclerotic heart disease.” It is a rare condition where blood is blocked by clot closing vein drainage from the intestine. It can be treated if addressed soon. There was no accusation of malpractice, but this shows the limits of the science of modern medicine and the isolation and strain of Kirk’s work overseas.

Immediately upon learning of Kirk’s death, the Mayor of Sainte-Mere Eglise sent a letter of gratitude to Lydia Kirk via the State Department reaffirming the naming of him “honorary citizen” by the City Council on March 7, 1949. It was given “in considering the immense services rendered to our country by Admiral Kirk.” The Acting Secretary of the Navy, Paul B. Fay, Jr., forwarded the letter from the mayor to Lydia saying, “our country and our navy shall always be indebted to him for his significant and lasting contributions to the welfare and security of our nations.” Fay stated in a condolence letter that “the way of life which we now enjoy, the peace and security which we hold so dear, have endured only because men such as Admiral Kirk so courageously met the challenge of their time.”

**Vietnam Legacy**

Just as his revered uncle and cousin Goodrich, Kirk was memorialized with a ship name. Launched on September 25, 1971, the Kirk was a Knox Class destroyer escort, DE-1087, later reclassified as fast frigate FF-1087 in 1975. In the last days of South Vietnam, in April 1975, the Kirk played a significant role in leading the evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese refugees.

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4 Letter from George Carden to R.G. Hughes 10 Jan 1964, P/R, Box 2.
5 Letter from Mayor of Sainte-Mere Eglise to Secretary of the Navy in care of State Department 19 Oct 63, P/R, Box 1.
6 Letter to Lydia Kirk from Acting Secretary of the Navy 13 Nov 63, P/R, Box 1.
7 Letter to Lydia Kirk from Acting Secretary of the Navy 18 Nov 63, P/R, Box 1. Letter to Lydia Kirk from Acting Secretary of the Navy 13 Nov 63, P/R, Box 1. As of 13 Nov 63, Lydia Kirk resided at One West 72nd Street NY 23, New York. Casualty Report death of Kirk 21 Oct 63, P/R, Box 1. Roger was overseas. Marian Appel was in Villanova, PA. Deborah Solbert was in Washington DC.
was America’s largest humanitarian rescue. It was Dunkirk-like. The *Kirk* was ordered to lead whatever was left of the South Vietnamese navy to safety in the Philippines. One of the refugees gave birth to a girl in Guam on the way to the United States. Her parents gave her the middle name of “Kirk.” At the *Kirk* reunion in July 2010, among the Vietnamese refugees, it was found that several were named as children after the rescue ship.

**Character**

Biographers can gravitate toward viewing their subjects in what Thomas Carlyle suggested is a “Universal History” that “is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones…” This is not the case in a Kirk biography. He was not charismatic. Kirk was not, nor did he pretend to be, a “sailor’s admiral.” His oral history largely lacks reference to enlisted sailors. His lowest marks in fitness reports relate to his uninspiring leadership and management of enlisted sailors. Lower marks in categories such as “manor of giving commands” and leading enlisted sailors were more than offset by marks in technical proficiency and comments about his “fine” or “pleasing personality.” Kirk’s weakness never became a critical problem because Kirk accentuated his strengths as technical expert in guns and capable staff officer, maintaining a winsome and diplomatic personality. Kirk always preferred the company of senior officers, and he cultivated the respect of his peers and especially his seniors. Kirk was ambitious - but ambition did not rule him. Desiring promotion, he was motivated to support the navy first – risking his career on

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9 Ibid., 2.
10 Ibid., 119.
12 Fitness Reports 9 Apr 32-30 Sep 32, 23 Feb 37-30 Sep 37, P/R, Box 4.
several occasions, including his embarrassing but true report of gun deficiencies while on staff in the Bureau of Ordnance, his row with Ramsay over the E-boats, and the letter to King over the head of Stark recommending reorganization. If Kirk’s life suggests he bares any resemblance to a naval hero, it is because heroes perform their duty capitalizing on innate strengths that overshadow their weaknesses.

The title of Thomas Buell’s excellent biography of Admiral Raymond Spruance could be used for a Kirk biography as well - *The Quiet Warrior.*\(^1\) As soon as 1953, Samuel Eliot Morison rightly assessed Kirk’s character as “reliable, experienced and versatile” during the Sicily Invasion.\(^2\) A British writer with derogatory intent noted that Kirk confronted the Normandy delay with the “usual elán” – something Kirk accepted as complementary, and indicative of American superior flexibility over British rigidity in planning.\(^3\) He is mischaracterized by some as showy and self-servingly ambitious. The truth was that even though he had a subtle dramatic flair periodically – like when he carved the meat in the wardroom after winning a ships efficiency award, he was never showy – even expressing slight disdain for it when interacting with General George Patton. Granted, he was ambitious, but his ambition was subservient to sound reason and greater good.

Kirk did not see personal conflict as personal. Kirk never responded to Ramsay’s personal attacks. Kirk maintained that Ramsay’s frustrations with him were not rooted in the personal, but the cultural – in the differences in the British and American philosophies of planning and signaling. Also, Kirk believed Ramsay reflected a general frustration that

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\(^3\) Kirk, *Reminiscences*, 311.
Americans were so powerful and overtaking the British for primacy on the world stage. Stark and Kirk worked well together professionally though the Normandy invasion. Stark’s biographer Mitchell Simpson, sought unfairly to discredit Kirk to shield and bolster Stark – possibly out of concerns for supporting Stark’s tarnished reputation. Simpson offered a shoddy story about Kirk’s rudeness to a junior officer who interrupted a meeting he was having with Stark. Simpson recounts that it was only when Stark explained to Kirk that the man was connected to powerful people, that Kirk thought to be courteous and smooth things over by taking him to play golf. Simpson clearly wanted to portray Kirk as arrogant and obsequious. It is a cheap and low blow in an otherwise rich and powerful biographical work on Stark.\textsuperscript{16} Christopher Young, in his \textit{Gators of Neptune} account of the planning for Normandy, came much closer to explaining Kirk’s record and character. However flawed Kirk may have been with perceived rudeness at times, he was “unquestionably technically proficient” and “a skilled bureaucrat and politician.” Take “bureaucrat” to mean staff officer and administrator, and “politician” to mean diplomat – and Young’s assessment is fair.\textsuperscript{17} Craig Symonds, in \textit{Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings}, shows that Kirk was prescient and correct to ask Ramsay for zone authority to Cherbourg and noted the British Admiral’s petty reply – “You Yanks want everything. No, I won’t do it.”\textsuperscript{18} This proved a catastrophe when E-boats attacked the landing craft during an exercise. Kirk’s professional and diplomatic character was vital in maintaining a positive working relationship with men like Ramsay.

\textsuperscript{17} Christopher Young, \textit{Gators of Neptune: Naval Amphibious Planning for the Normandy Invasion} (Annapolis: MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 222, 223.
Kirk was uniquely suited for his roles and contributions. To drive this point, consider applied history. What if Kirk was not as reliable, experienced, and versatile? What if he was not as good at networking with his seniors and he spent more time as a mentor to juniors. In emergencies, picking the right people for roles is critical. Counterfactuals can be dangerous to use, but for the historian who carefully reconstructs points of decision, they can also be very instructive if used in plausible ways. For example, Ramsay was brilliant but had personal proclivities that made him hard to work with for those immediate to him. What alternative could have been better at managing this relationship than Kirk? Imagine the cooperation if Kirk was switched with “Terrible Turner” in the Pacific. This is plausible and highlights what Kirk contributed. A Turner, Bradley and Ramsay team effort is discordant for Normandy, perhaps just as jarring as a Kirk and “Howlin Mad” Smith match is for Saipan. Imagine Kirk’s gifts eaten up by the competing forces in a theater where foreign allies and interservice cooperation meant less, along with Turner’s knack for decisive bull-dog action irritating Bradley and breaking Ramsay.

Lessons

Kirk’s life helps explain United States, European, and Global history. His was America’s first global generation - deeply involved in world affairs. Kirk lived during a dramatic period of history – from the end of the Victorian through the Progressive Eras, “Roaring Twenties,” and deep into the turbulent, disruptive, innovative, and deadly twentieth century. His life fits neatly with the beginning and coming of age of America as world power and the U.S. Navy as the dominant force on global seas. His uncle Goodrich’s generation laid the groundwork, and inspired Kirk and his generation with the exploits of the Spanish American War and strategic theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Kirk and his generation were further schooled by World War I,
and became masters of World War II and the Cold War, and realized the Mahanian and Progressive dream of America as dominant global superpower.

Kirk’s life teaches that the successful naval officer not only embraced technological advancements and innovations, but the professionalization of new fields and the education that came with it in intelligence, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious warfare, and joint operations. Also, his experience teaches adaptability to the growth of large administrative systems of bureaucracy. He developed the knowledge, skills, and abilities in diverse areas of interests that matched the needs of the naval service. Kirk respected learning as part of his heritage and very nature. From reading classics while on deck watch as a young officer in southeast Asia, to studies and instructing at the Naval War College, Kirk always made time to gain knowledge.

Kirk’s ability to effectively network with seniors is a model for career progression. Having an influential uncle and role model in the naval service motivated and directed him, and provided early confidence. He nurtured a professional network of friends and showed that personal relationships were crucial in advancing in the navy as well as prosecuting war. Dalton mentored him into the “gun club.” His former skippers Holmes and Anderson guided his career as attaché and DNI. Cunningham championed him in England. King and Stark ensured his key assignments in the Normandy landings and Paris naval support roles.

Kirk’s ambition and strong desire for advancement did not hinder his grit in fulfilling the needs of the navy in critical roles in naval gunnery, staff work, intelligence, and amphibious command. He got into trouble with the head of the Bureau of Ordinance when bad news about gun accuracy had to be addressed. He went with Stark to be his chief of staff and administrator, even though Stark’s reputation was tarnished by Pearl Harbor and Stark had fostered conflict in naval intelligence – and this at a time when the Pacific was considered the primary navy fight.
He irritated Ramsay during Normandy planning and execution over procedures and notably E-boats. He offered a plan over Stark’s head for King to consider unifying overall navy command structure in Europe. Any of these episodes could have derailed Kirk and seriously jeopardized his career— even to the point of firing. However, he was not held back, reprimanded nor removed in any of these cases because Kirk did these out of a sense of duty, was trustworthy and capable, and King and Stark and Ramsay knew this.

When Kirk was born in 1888, people lived in many respects like the ancients. For most, one horsepower was adequate to life and war. At his death 75 years later, rockets with thousands and even millions of horsepower were threatening continents and taking men to space. As innovations introduced new technology and tactics in war, Kirk adapted. Early in his career he sought opportunities in big guns. He became expert. But as the World War I drawdown limited options, he had the foresight and flexibility to branch out into non-traditional duty, declining conventional wisdom and the advice of his uncle Goodrich and mentor Dalton, and took on the role of Executive Officer of Mayflower where his comfort and interest in working near and persuading “the great” and powerful blossomed. Kirk was not a leader in technical innovation the way Ernst King was in aircraft and Chester Nimitz was in submarines, and he was not a ground-breaking maverick like Washington Chambers, but he was a leader in and early practitioner of naval intelligence, anti-submarine warfare, amphibious warfare, and joint operations.

Kirk was a consummate navy progressive. Historian Scott Mobley noted that progressive “officers aspiring to command cultivated strategy, logistics, and operational art as their highest professional callings.”

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how to organize and prepare large endeavors like the invasion of Sicily and Normandy. World War II required effective staff officers at top levels. Douglas MacArthur said Dwight Eisenhower was “the best clerk I ever had.” Eisenhower’s effectiveness as a staff officer and diplomat vaulted him to supreme command. Likewise, Kirk learned to be a great staff officer at Indian Head and the Bureau of Ordinance and on various flag staffs. Mobley also noted gunnery and diplomacy were both highly regarded for the progressive naval professional.\textsuperscript{20} At Indian Head his effective communication with many people of diverse character and backgrounds both in and out of the navy – from aviators and factory workers to math professors - was a natural strength. He learned to a much deeper level the bureaucratic systems of Washington and how to influence them – how to stand out and achieve. He leaned about munitions becoming an expert even in the largest 16-inch guns. But the larger education was in learning administration and staff work along with the importance of knowing and keeping information safe.

As naval attaché’ Kirk was key in arranging the earliest talks between American and British military officers that laid the foundation for solid cooperation early in the war and served to guide the “Europe first” policy once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Kirk’s toughest assignment was Director of Naval Intelligence. Kirk was ineffective and miserable because of the tumultuous in-fighting and chaotic realignments of intelligence agencies throughout government. Even in all this Kirk performed well enough that Stark brought him to London to be his chief of staff. Kirk instinctively enjoyed and had the charm and knack for dealing with important people – especially foreigners. From the brief encounter with the President of China to deeper relationships with British and French officers – Kirk was capable and charming – even with contentious and prickly Charles de Gaulle.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 54.
Kirk is most remembered for amphibious command at Normandy, but he should also be credited as innovative in joint warfare. He serves as a model for commanding effective joint-operations for future generations. Kirk was from the start a “team player,” an early adapter and early practitioner of joint warfare – of what in the modern military is called “jointness.” Kirk learned from naval theorists like Mahan to support big guns, and he learned from theorists like Julian S. Corbett to apply big guns to naval gunfire support for the army. “The paramount concern of maritime strategy,” according to Corbett, “is to determine the mutual relations of your army and navy in a plan of war.” Kirk grasped this instinctively, and his primary career field of guns helped him relate to the army and ensured naval gunfire support was effective. Normandy was inherently joint, and both he and Bradley modeled “jointness.” He made cooperation with Bradley – thus the army, seamless.

Kirk was a key figure in the Normandy invasion and was in on the planning from the start. Before most understood, Kirk grasped the magnitude and significance of America’s contribution to NEPTUNE and OVERLORD and helped persuade the British naval officers of the need for expanding the operation with a second American beach (also advocated by General Montgomery) and the organizational structure that was successfully used. He and his joint-service partner Bradley ensured adequate resources in men and machine were devoted to the effort.

Kirk was reliable, experienced, and versatile as diplomat in Belgium and the Soviet Union as tensions with the communists of Europe developed. He was a living reminder for Belgians as well as for Soviets, of the contributions of their American ally in the opening of the much desired second front that brought the end of the threat of Nazi domination. At first, Kirk

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favored a confrontational approach with the Soviet Union until deep into his tenure as ambassador. Soon after the beginning of the Korean War, Kirk supported the new policy of containment and the preservation of peace. In fact, his final diplomatic mission to Taiwan was to avoid war and coax Chiang Kai-shek to stand down from warlike rhetoric and plans for a cross channel invasion when the mainland seemed to be vulnerable while broiled in the disarray of the Great Leap Forward. Through his reliability, experience and versatility, Kirk’s place is as a founder of modern amphibious operations, a pioneer and model in joint operations, and leading light in Anglo-American cooperation. These are also why Kirk’s efforts as a chief character in diplomacy brought peace and security in the Cold War.
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- Donald Mac Donald, “Moving into Germany,” 278.


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