



Battleship Commander: The Life of Vice Admiral Willis A. Lee Jr.

by Paul Stillwell.

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Late on the evening of 14 Nov. 1942, four US Navy destroyers and two fast battleships engaged nine Japanese destroyers, two light cruisers, two heavy cruisers, and one fast battleship off the island of Guadalcanal. The Japanese sank three of the American destroyers, damaged the other destroyer, and pounded one of the battleships. The Japanese, in turn, lost their battleship and one destroyer. Though the Americans lost more ships, the Japanese lost the battle and withdrew from their mission of bombarding Henderson field on Guadalcanal. Historians have deemed this, the Second Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, to be the pivotal engagement that ended Japan's hopes of recapturing the island. Although the American commander at the battle, then-Rear Admiral Willis A. Lee Jr., has been generally praised for his command of the engagement, his life and career have remained little documented. Independent historian Paul Stillwell's *Battleship Commander* fills this gap.

Stillwell is well known to naval historians, having written/edited over a dozen histories, including illustrated histories of various battleships and the recollections of the first Black naval officers. Since the mid-1970s, he has worked in various capacities at the US Naval Institute, becoming the first editor-in-chief of *Naval History* magazine and director of the Institute's oral history program, in which capacity he interviewed many influential naval officers of the Second World War and the Cold War. *Battleship Commander* has been a labor of love for Stillwell, who started research for it in 1975. In that time, he made good use of 200-plus interviews, oral histories, letters, and unpublished manuscripts.

Willis Lee's life revolved around guns. Growing up in post-Civil War Kentucky, he quickly became an expert shooter, despite a childhood prank with gunpowder that nearly blinded him and left him reliant on eyeglasses for the rest of his life. His father's political connections enabled him to attend the US Naval Academy, where he stood out as a champion shooter—the only American to win the individual rifle and pistol national championships in the same year. Well after he graduated in 1908, the Navy still assigned him to duty involving shooting events. After World War I, Lee was a member of the US rifle team at the 1920 Olympics, where his teams won six gold medals, one silver, and one bronze.

At sea, Lee served in a series of warships, where he was noted for his superb seamanship and gunnery skills. His assignments ashore concerned ordnance and training, where, once again, his natural interest in gunnery served him well. It was fitting that he eventually commanded the Navy's battleship force in World War II. After winning the Second Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, Lee remained a battleship force commander almost to the war's end, escorting fleet carriers at the battles of the Philippine Sea, Leyte Gulf, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. At the very end of the war, the Navy's leadership handpicked Lee to lead experimentation to counter *kamikaze* attacks. He died of coronary thrombosis a week before the formal Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay (2 Sept. 1945).

Lee's interest in gunnery extended into the science and engineering behind his weapons. When James Van Allen of Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory (the same Van Allen who discovered the cosmic radiation belts that bear his name) reported to the south Pacific to test and improve the newly developed proximity fuse, Lee took an immediate interest. After thoroughly studying the internals of the fuse, Lee became one of its advocates. Indeed, Van Allen believed "Lee's personal influence was, in large part, responsible for the highly successful use of the radio-proximity fuse in anti-aircraft defense of the Pacific Fleet" (179). Van Allen told Stillwell that Lee was "my favorite person of all of those that I had contact with during my World War II service as a naval reserve officer" (178). This was no small praise: Lee's championing of the proximity fuse was likely a greater contribution to the Navy's Pacific victory than his leadership at Guadalcanal.

Stillwell describes Lee's marriage and personal life in as much detail as could be gleaned. Though Lee clearly loved his wife, his consuming passion remained his work. On shore duty, he frequently stayed up late working (in an era when one could bring home even classified paper-work) and slept in his chair before returning to work in the morning. Aside from shooting, a fondness for mystery novels, and his tenderness toward his wife, Lee truly embodied a life of naval service.

Stillwell is evenhanded in assessing Lee's shortcomings as a senior leader. Tactically, he had been successful at Guadalcanal, but he was not an innovator like future admirals Arleigh Burke or J.C. Wylie. Presented with a chance to independently engage the Japanese fleet at the Battle of the Philippine Sea (19–20 June 1944), Lee balked, messaging that "Possible advantages of radar more than offset by difficulties of communications and lack of training in fleet tactics at night" (210). But by mid-1944, the US Navy had taken major strides in its surface tactical doctrine, radar technology, and information data management.¹ That Lee had not grown beyond his experience of November 1942 and did not believe he had adequately trained his forces for such an engagement was unsatisfactory. Additionally, the mild-mannered and reserved Lee was "respected because of his sound opinions and the fact that he generally proffered those opinions only after being asked" (226). At the Battle of Leyte Gulf, when Lee twice attempted to contact fleet commander Adm. William F. Halsey to discuss leaving San Bernadino Strait unguarded, that same unassertive nature led him to stoically accept being brushed aside by Halsey's staff. Just as at Philippine Sea, Lee lost an opportunity to decisively engage the Japanese fleet in a surface battle that the US Navy's fast battleships would likely have won. Although Stillwell draws no strong conclusions about either instance, it is hard not to fault Lee for his caution and reluctance to make a stand when it would truly have mattered. As it was, however, none of Lee's contemporaries in Halsey's fleet did any better, and Lee likely tried to change Halsey's mind more than any of them.

Paul Stillwell has written a detailed account of the life and career of a typical US naval officer in the first half of the twentieth century. His attention to his subject's education, training, service, and life in general is so meticulous that readers will walk away feeling they have known Lee personally. While other historians may provide additional insights into Lee's tactical decision-making and contributions to the Navy's technical progress, *Battleship Commander* will remain the definitive biography of Admiral Willis A. Lee.

1. See Trent Hone, *Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898–1945* (Annapolis: Naval Inst. Pr, 2018).