

[Williamson on Trimble, 'Admiral John S. McCain and the Triumph of Naval Air Power'](#)

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William F. Trimble. *Admiral John S. McCain and the Triumph of Naval Air Power*. Studies in Naval History and Sea Power Series. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019. Illustrations, maps. xv + 370

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Reviewed by Corbin Williamson (Air University, Air War College) **Published on** H-War (May, 2020)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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William F. Trimble's biography of Admiral John S. McCain (grandfather of the late Senator John McCain) is the most recent of a wave of recent biographies of World War II American admirals. Thomas Hughes's book on Admiral William Halsey (*Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life* [2016]), Phillips Payson O'Brien's biography of Admiral William Leahy (*The Second Most Powerful Man in the World: The Life of Admiral William D. Leahy, Roosevelt's Chief of Staff* [2019]), and David Kohnen's forthcoming book on Admiral Ernest King (*Two Kings and the Navy "Second to None": The U.S. Navy and Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King in the Fifty Years War for Command at Sea, 1897-1947*) illustrate ongoing scholarly interest in reassessing senior US Navy officers of that era. Trimble has previously written several books on American naval aviation in the early twentieth century.

Trimble uses McCain's naval career as a lens through which to examine the development of naval aviation within the US Navy with a particular emphasis on World War II. McCain entered the aviation community late in his career and commanded the aircraft carrier *Ranger* in the late 1930s. Soon after the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he was assigned to the South Pacific as the overall aviation commander. This position required him to coordinate closely with US Army Air Force units and Allied units, such as the Royal New Zealand Air Force. Operationally McCain allowed US Army Air Force units to retain control of their administration and operations though they reported directly to him. The South Pacific command suffered from very limited quantities of aircraft and facilities in the summer and fall of 1942. During this time, the US invaded the island of Guadalcanal leading to a series of battles between Japanese and Allied forces for control of the island and the surrounding area. McCain's maritime patrol aircraft provided aerial reconnaissance and advance warning for Guadalcanal especially of approaching Japanese ships. These patrol aircraft operated from austere forward bases as the navy had envisioned in the interwar period.

After his time in the South Pacific, McCain was sent to Washington, DC, to become the head of the Bureau of Aeronautics, the organizational hub for aviation in the US Navy. As head of the bureau, McCain delegated significant authority to his subordinates. Trimble surveys the major administrative challenges McCain faced in Washington, such as training pilots and air crew in sufficient numbers to man the thousands of aircraft coming out of American factories. The pilot training program took eighteen months to produce a combat ready pilot, which in turn required the bureau to forecast

personnel requirement well into the future. McCain worked well with army aviation officials though tensions over control of land-based, anti-submarine warfare aircraft foreshadowed debates over military unification after the war. He did not permanently resolve these challenges but took important steps to sustain the naval air war effort.

McCain also became involved in a debate within the navy over naval aviator personnel. Many aviators felt that they were underrepresented in the navy's highest ranks, especially in light of the growing role of aviation in the war at sea. In an effort to partially respond to this concern, Admiral King, the chief of naval operations, created the position deputy chief of naval operations (DCNO) (air). This new office took over the bureau's planning and training responsibilities, leaving the bureau with material development functions. McCain became the first DCNO (air). One of his most significant accomplishments was to create the Radford Board, a group of officers who examined aircraft production and maintenance. The board's recommendations helped ensure a steady flow of newer model aircraft to the fleet in 1944 and 1945. McCain also helped establish a new command policy that required naval aviation commands to have an aviator either as the commander or the chief of staff. Trimble nicely uses McCain's time as DCNO (air) to explore the wider context of challenges facing the wartime US Navy.

In 1944 McCain headed back to the Pacific to prepare for a command at sea, one of his goals ever since moving to Washington in 1942. He arrived in the Pacific in time to witness the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944 before assuming command of the navy's principal aircraft carrier force later that year. This force launched air strikes on the Philippines and then Taiwan before the October 1944 Battle of Leyte Gulf. At that engagement, Admiral Halsey's decisions left part of the American fleet vulnerable to a powerful Japanese surface force. Ever since the battle Halsey's decision-making has been the subject of historical controversy. Trimble surveys scholarly opinion of the topic while emphasizing that Halsey's decision reflected a wide strain of thought in the Pacific Fleet to prioritize the destruction of the Japanese fleet. After the battle, McCain assumed command of the carrier task force, working directly under Halsey.

Trimble's discussion of Pacific naval operations in 1944 and 1945 relies heavily on the voluminous action reports prepared by US Navy commands. These reports are now available on the website www.fold3.com, which has widened access to these important primary sources. Trimble makes extensive use of these reports and other electronic resources, such as www.combinedfleet.com, which has a wealth of information on the Imperial Japanese Navy. He also relies on several collections of McCain papers at various archives around the US.

After Leyte Gulf, the American forces that had invaded the Philippines called for air support from the navy's carrier task force. In response, McCain's ships struck airfields and shipping targets throughout the Philippines. The raids highlighted the mobility of carrier aviation which could attack Mindanao one day and Luzon the next. However, the need to support the army limited the fleet's mobility just as the Japanese began to employ kamikaze suicide attacks. McCain oversaw the development of the basic defensive tactics used against kamikazes, such as placing radar equipped destroyers at a distance from the fleet to provide early warning.

In December 1944, McCain and Halsey sailed their carriers into a typhoon, sinking three destroyers and damaging twenty-seven other ships. An inquiry found both responsible but Admiral Chester

Nimitz, the Pacific Fleet commander, and Admiral King kept them in command. After repairs, McCain's carriers sailed into the South China Sea to cover further American landings in the Philippines. Striking targets from Cam Ranh Bay to Hong Kong to Formosa, they caused considerable damage. Trimble highlights the frequent refueling meetings between the carriers and oilers that allowed McCain's force to remain at sea for weeks at a time.

Following further strikes on Okinawa and other targets in January 1945, McCain and Halsey turned over the carrier force to Admiral Marc Mitscher and Admiral Raymond Spruance. As others, such as Clark Reynolds have noted (*The Fast Carriers: The Forging of an Air Navy* [1992]), Halsey and McCain's style of command involved more last-minute changes to operations than occurred under Spruance. During his command, McCain's defensive tactics against kamikazes were generally effective, though a fully effective defense required a major commitment of aircraft. McCain and Halsey differed on whether the fleet's defensive mission should take priority over offensive operations. McCain tended to think so while Halsey was not so sure.

The carriers supported the landings on Iwo Jima and Okinawa in 1945. The force struggled to effectively defend against growing Japanese kamikaze attacks. McCain advocated for increasing the fighter and fighter-bomber strength on carriers since their primary role was now attacking land rather than naval targets. In May, McCain and Halsey returned to command of the carriers. In early June they ran into a second typhoon. The resulting investigation found Halsey primarily and McCain partially responsible for this error in judgment and recommended their removal. Nimitz and King disagreed and McCain stayed in command.

July saw further strikes on the Japanese home islands before Japan surrendered in mid-August. McCain's final action report looked to the future of naval aviation, arguing that carriers would be called on to strike targets ashore for years to come and that consequently fighters and fighter-bombers should dominate carrier air groups. Days after Japan's surrender, McCain suddenly died on September 6, 1945, of stress and heart problems just after returning to California.

In a brief conclusion, Trimble emphasizes McCain's pragmatic approach to the development of carrier aviation. In contrast to some aviators who were overly focused on future developments, McCain sought practical solutions to current problems, such as the kamikaze threat.

Trimble's organization emphasizes McCain's World War II service in the South Pacific and Washington and with the principal carrier task force late in the war. While naval aviation was one of the US Navy's strengths during World War II, Trimble's work emphasizes the development of naval aviation capabilities in response to wartime demands.

The writing style is clear and engaging. The book includes a number of helpful maps as well as photographs that illuminate the text. This first full biography of Admiral McCain provides a thoughtful perspective on a critical figure in the US Navy in World War II and is recommended for general readers interested in the war at sea.

The views presented in this book review represent those of the author and are not necessarily those of the US government, the Department of Defense, or the US Air Force.

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