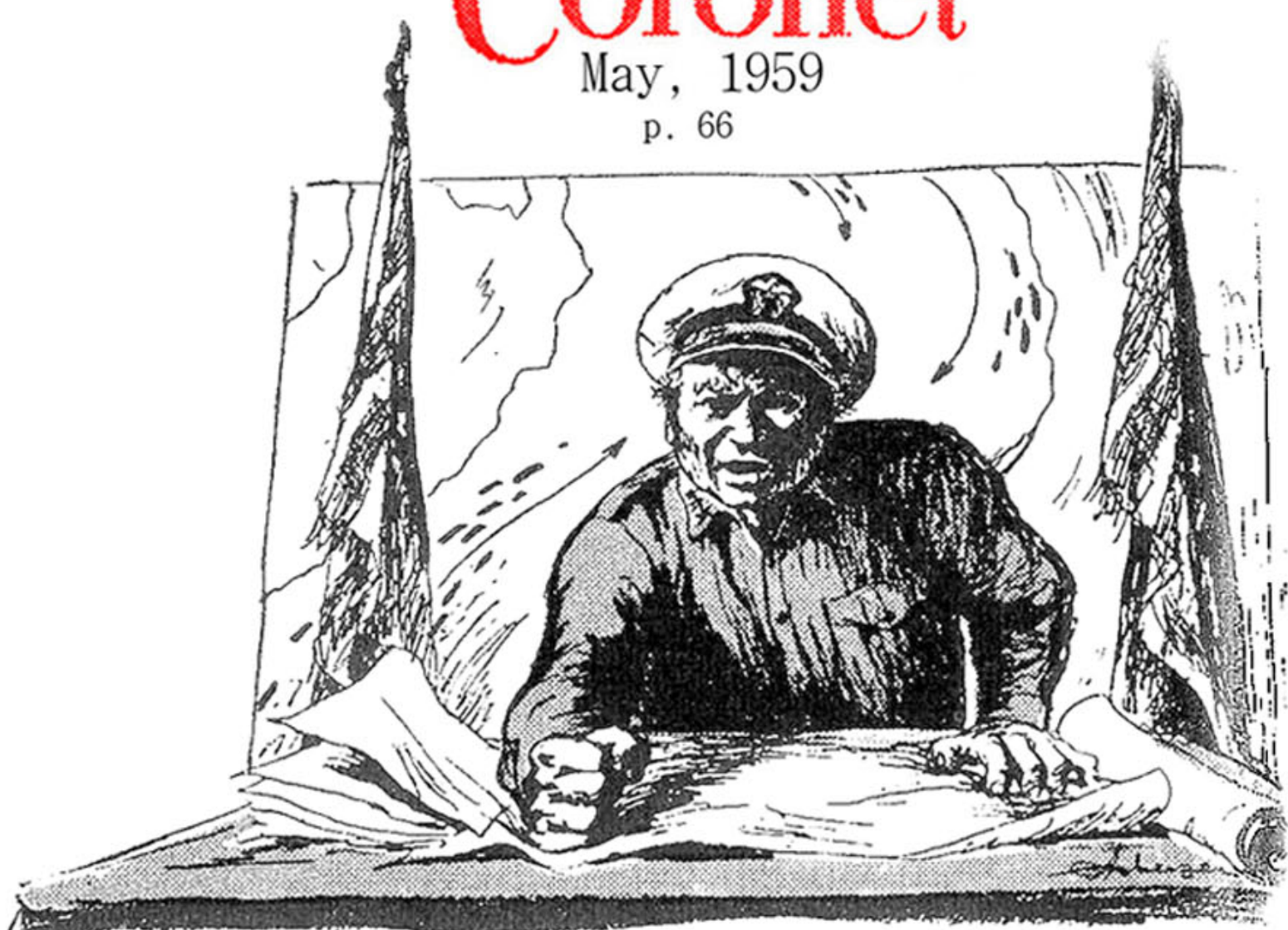




Broomstick Admiral

by Richard G. Hubler

He was just a janitor, play-acting as an officer. "We shall attack!" he cried. But his words, spoken in jest, helped in the war

ON A RECENT sunny day, I paid a sentimental visit to a U.S. Government cemetery not far from Los Angeles. It is a huge plot of ground with long rows of marble markers, each numbered for the soldier or sailor who rests there.

I sought out a marker with the number 3759, and put on the turf a bunch of red carnations I had bought on the street corner outside.

I did it—as I have done every year—in honor of the man who lay beneath, the man responsible for winning the war in the South Pacific. You will be the first to know this besides myself. His name was Murphy, and even Murphy never knew he won the naval battle of Sula Straits in 1942, the turning point of the whole South Pacific campaign.

Murphy—we never knew his first name—was an old Irishman, plump as a dove, with a ruddy complexion. His hair was a thicket of gray about his ears, his eyebrows a spray of white over eyes the color of faded denim breeches.

Murphy was the janitor at the Navy Film Services Depot in Hollywood. This organization was charged with the production of training films—a series of "visual education" aids, they were called—which ranged from the basic tactics to be used in avoiding an enraged aardvark to the proper soundings of the shoals off Zanzibar.

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Among the first rush requests that came from Washington for production was a two-reel training film with the assigned title, *Taking the Offensive*. The subject concerned the strategy in naval attack of all kinds. It was classified "Top Secret."

Speed and secrecy were essential in such a case. And the whole affair—including models and miniature work as well as live action—was scheduled to be produced on the tiny sound stage at the rear of the depot by members of the staff.

Things went well until the very end of the picture. The approved script demanded an inspirational finish—something which, at that time, the Navy needed badly. The trouble was that the ending required an actor whose role was seemingly impossible to cast.

It needed an admiral.

Since there were no off-duty admirals in those days—and in any case, admirals were rarely young men—this presented an insuperable problem. For no officer or enlisted man in the depot was over 30; and make-up was a poor cover up for the real article.

I recommended Murphy for the part. He would have only four words to say.

The old Irishman was hustled into a khaki shirt, open at the throat. (His pants did not matter since they would be below the table and out of camera range.) Three stars were affixed to each tab of his shirt collar.

I recall how deliberately the camera moved in for a close-up of his grim, red face, a Navy cap with a resplendent, gold-braided visor on the back of his head. He was scared to death. So we faked a few minutes of shooting with an empty camera and assured him his job was over. He could relax, we said, while we took a few more "shots for the sake of cover."

Apparently Murphy began to enjoy himself the moment he thought he was unrecorded on film. For he gave way to the histrionic instinct that is innate in his people and put full force into his words.

"Gentlemen," cried Admiral

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Murphy went back to swabbing the floors and burning the rubbish.

A YEAR OR TWO later a commander from CINCPAC made a routine inspection of the depot. I showed him around. He looked over a chronological list of our productions and, of course, *Taking the Offensive* was among the first.

The commander's face lit up when he saw the title.

"Did you make that film?" he demanded.

"Yes," I said. "It was a rush job. We weren't very proud of it."

"The devil you weren't!"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Do you remember the Battle of Sula Straits?"

No one in the Navy could ever forget it. Within those narrow, shoal-strewn waters of the South Pacific, an American heavy cruiser had met and engaged a Japanese enemy flotilla of a light cruiser and two destroyers. All three had been sunk in a duel at dawn.

It was a classic example of courage and coolness at sea. It inspired the whole Navy and made the captain of the cruiser one of the great heroes of the day.

"Your picture," said the commander, "had a hand in that battle. I know because I was aboard that cruiser, a j.g. running errands for the captain. I can tell you that the ship was so tense the vibrations shook the gun-mountings.

"We picked up nothing the night before—radar was really nonexistent in those days—but we had the kind of feeling that somehow always precedes battle. The captain wanted to relax. He *had* to relax. All our Hollywood films had been seen a dozen times over. So he told me to order a training film. It happened to be that one."

"Did he like it?"

The commander smiled. "To tell the truth, he didn't see much of it. He was worrying. His orders gave him great latitude. He was debating what he should do if he encountered an enemy force, especially a stronger one. Fight or duck. That was the question."

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"I see," I said.

The commander eyed me sharply. "It wasn't a question of being afraid," he said. "It was a question of what would serve the best interests of the fleet in the long run.

"That picture didn't make up his mind, naturally, but it did help crystallize his thinking. Especially that close-up of the old admiral."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, the captain remembered the admiral very well. The admiral was an upperclassman when the captain entered the Academy at Annapolis. The admiral had been very kind to the captain. He couldn't think of the admiral's name but the face was familiar. When he said at the end: 'Gentlemen, we shall attack!' it was as if he were speaking directly to the captain."

I had difficulty swallowing. "Perhaps he made a mistake," I said.

The commander shrugged. "We don't know how you got the old man to do it," he said, "but the captain wasn't mistaken. Anyone can tell when a man has had the habit of command ingrained in him by years of quarter-decking."

I made no attempt to disabuse the commander. I am fond of the Navy, and he wouldn't have believed me anyway if I had told him the truth.

Murphy died a month or two after the end of the war. I decorate his grave each year. He was never a Navy man, of course, but we pulled a few strings, cut some red tape and had him buried in a Government cemetery. It was little enough to do for the man who won the South Pacific for the Navy.

