

A TALK WITH ADMIRAL NIMITZ

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PEARL HARBOR, HAWAII -- In moments of crisis there is nothing that relaxes Adm. Chester W. Nimitz more than hitting a few bull's-eyes on the pistol range at U.S. Pacific Fleet headquarters.

The morning I saw him was certainly a time of crisis. A few minutes before he strolled out of the office and headed for the range, the admiral had issued one of the most important communiques of the Pacific war, reporting that heavy units of the Jap fleet—after sulking in safe waters for months—had suddenly been sighted somewhere between Luzon in the Philippines and Guam in the Marianas.

At the very minute that the admiral was drawing a bead on his target, the Fifth U. S. Fleet was steaming through enemy waters, perhaps toward a sea and air battle that might determine control of the entire Pacific. At the same time, on Saipan in the Marianas, battle-weary soldiers and marines were inching their way toward Nafutan Point and north along the western shore of Magicienne Bay against terrific opposition.

If these grave thoughts were passing through the admiral's head, he did not betray them. His strong, sharp face and calm but piercing eyes showed complete self-possession. The admiral was taking a 15-minute break.

I am able to report what happened during those 15 minutes because the admiral had promised me an exclusive interview, and I waited near the pistol range until called.

The admiral took an easy, confident stance, drew a bead and fired. His aide, a stocky young lieutenant commander, looked toward the target with his binoculars, raised one finger and said: "Check, sir—10—a bull's-eye." The admiral smiled, and the two marine guards watching him smiled back.

When he had fired his clip, Adm. Nimitz passed the pistol to the aide and took his place at the binoculars, checking hits and misses.

A minute or so later a high-ranking officer came up to the admiral and spoke to him in a confidential tone. The admiral became intensely serious, then seemed to smile in every muscle of his face. He nodded, and the other officer began to walk away. "Stick around," the admiral called, adding the officer's nickname. "We ought to have some news pretty soon now."

Then, as if some postponed thought were knocking at his consciousness, the admiral looked down at his watch. The 15 minutes were up. He headed for his office. With each step the lines in his face seemed to lose, little by little, their warm and good-natured look for a grim and fixed expression. Finally the admiral disappeared through the door into one of the world's most restricted areas—the inner office of the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet.

Two hours later Pfc. George Burns, YANK staff photographer, was standing with me at the same doorway, waiting to be admitted. The outer

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room was alive with bustling yeomen and messengers. There were armed marine guards all over the place. Presently a tall Naval lieutenant opened the door and said: "The admiral will see you now." I checked my tie and buttons hastily and once more wondered whether I should salute when I entered. The admiral considerably answered that question for us by standing as we entered, smiling and extending his hand.

The admiral nodded slightly to indicate that the interview could begin. "There are two questions," I said, "that GLs all over the world would give a lot to ask you, sir. The first is, 'How do the current operations in the Marianas fit into the general pattern of the grand offensive we must ultimately launch against Japan proper?' The second is, 'Now that the Sunday punches are falling, how long do you think it will take to force the Japs to their knees?'"

Adm. Nimitz had a ready answer. "The invasion of the Marianas does not constitute the start of a new phase of the Pacific war," he said. "It is the normal continuation of the phase started at Midway and which will end with the U. S. in control of the seas surrounding Japan."

"It is futile to offer any estimate of the time still required to defeat Japan. There are too many unknown factors involved, too many opportunities for unpredictables to alter our timetables. But there are some certainties in the situation which provide us with a cause for optimism."

"The schedule we have maintained in the Pacific war since Midway gives us confidence born of the certainty of things past. We have driven the Japanese from the Solomons—all but the remnants of garrisons who now languish completely encompassed and without hope of succor in a pocket well within our sea control."

"Gen. MacArthur has neatly and thoroughly outflanked the enemy garrisons throughout the vast island of New Guinea, assuring the Jap's doom while preparing for still deeper encroachments into Japan's stolen empire."

"In the Central Pacific, we have in three swift leaps advanced our sea power thousands of miles to the west of Pearl Harbor. Now our westernmost bastions face the Philippines and undoubtedly worry the man on the street in Tokyo concerning the immediate safety of his own skin."

"We have greatly strengthened the security of our lines and communications leading to the western Pacific. These results were achieved by the combined power of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, all harnessed together and all working harmoniously and effectively in one team. The fact that the team clicks smoothly is one of the guarantees of ultimate victory."

The admiral explained the background of our blow against Saipan, his finger tracing the long sweeping lines on a wall map.

"In order to turn the heat on the Marshalls," said Adm. Nimitz, "we first had to get the Ellice and Gilbert Islands. We had to have the Marshalls because we had to get forward bases for our land-based planes. Six of the Marshall Islands are still in Jap hands, but they're having a tough time of it there."

I asked the admiral how many Japs he thought were left in the Marshalls. Estimates varied a little, he said, but a safe guess would be 20,000.

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Then he pointed to Ponape and Truk in the Carolines. "They're getting it, too," he said. "Regularly." His finger rested again on the Marshalls. "Our objective here was to extend our seapower farther west. That has been accomplished. We now have important sea anchorages for further westward plunges."

The admiral traced the path from the Marshalls to the Marianas. "The strategy here is the same. We're projecting our seapower farther and farther westward. As you can see, the Marianas occupy a key spot in the western Pacific. They constitute an ideal springboard for westward drives, but you can see they're as vital to the Japanese as they would be for us, and that's why the Japs are fighting so hard to hold them."

He paused. "Saipan," he said with emphasis, "is going to be a tough nut to crack."

Then the admiral summarized the early results of the operation. "We moved into Saipan in great strength. We have seized two airfields—the only two we were certain existed on the island. One of these apparently is too small for very effective operations. The other is already being used by our aircraft. We have killed a lot of Japs, and we have had losses.

"We went out to seize the Marianas and we have made a good start. Whenever the Marianas are firmly in our grasp, we will then move on to —." The admiral left the sentence unfinished, but his eyes seemed to dart toward the Philippines, the China coast and then Japan.

I asked Adm. Nimitz about the Jap air force. "I think it's probable that Japan has been able thus far to restore all plane losses," he said. "Whether they can keep it up, I don't know."

THE interview was over. I hadn't been able to pin the admiral down on how long the war would last, but he had discussed the vital factors that would ultimately write the answer to that big question.

As I left, I remembered the target practice two hours earlier. When things get snafued or the news is bad, someone had told me, the admiral stalks to the range, grabs a pistol and peppers the target with a rapid succession of shots. On the range this morning, he had been buoyant and confident—and he had hit plenty of bull's-eyes. Maybe that supplies part of the answer, at least to the big question.

