

VICE ADMIRAL ROBERT L. GHORMLEY: IN THE SHADOW OF THE FLEET

An Essay

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By

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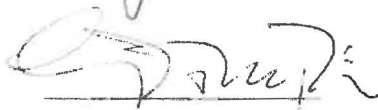
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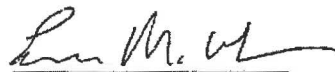
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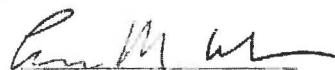
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VICE ADMIRAL ROBERT L. GHORMLEY; IN THE SHADOW OF THE FLEET

by CDR Maxwell L. Oliver

Abstract

Robert L. Ghormley had a mixed experience during the Second World War. During the European phase, while the United States remained neutral, he served as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Special Naval Observer in London, where his duties were mostly diplomatic and clandestine. In this role, Ghormley proved most effective. In the second phase of his World War II career, he served as theater commander of the South Pacific, where history has judged him harshly. Ghormley set up the South Pacific command on short notice with inadequate resources, and within a month, he was ordered to launch Operation Watchtower, the American invasion of Guadalcanal, in August of 1942. After a series of setbacks and mostly unanswered complaints for more support, Admiral Chester Nimitz relieved Ghormley by replacing him with the more aggressive William "Bull" Halsey. This paper argues that Ghormley's contributions as a leader have been overlooked because of his leadership failures in the South Pacific. While Ghormley erred in some of his decisions as the South Pacific Commander, he contributed critical strategic leadership in London before the United States' entry to the war. Ghormley also made key diplomatic contributions negotiating with the Free French to safely establish parts of the South Pacific command on French islands. Although Ghormley foresaw the pending logistic problems the remote and sparsely populated islands would present while being supplied from half a world away, most of the disappointments of his command tenure were the results of material shortages. His command was plagued with poor communications, and his lack of presence due in part to his poor health.

Subject Items: Ghormley, Robert L.; Guadalcanal; South Pacific Theater; Anglo-American Relations in World War II

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is in the arena," -Theodore Roosevelt

Introduction

On October 18, 1942, in the midst of a grinding campaign on Guadalcanal, Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, abruptly relieved the Commander of the South Pacific Area, Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley. Later, when asked why he had done so, Nimitz replied that he believed that Ghormley was "on the verge of a nervous breakdown."¹ Because Ghormley's successor, Vice Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., subsequently compiled a notable combat record, ending the war as a Fleet Admiral and a national hero, historians have generally portrayed Ghormley's tenure of command as a failure. A common view is that Ghormley's passivity and lack of aggressiveness made him ineffective in theater command. In making such a judgement, historians often overlook Ghormley's other accomplishments that contributed to victory in World War II, many of them in the field of diplomacy: first in dealing with the British in London from 1940 to 1942, and then in dealing with the Vichy French in the South Pacific in 1942. In addition, historians have sometimes failed to appreciate the tremendous difficulties Ghormley faced in setting up the South Pacific Command and sustaining the Guadalcanal invasion.

Representative of the kind of assessment historians have accorded Ghormley is the one by Richard B. Frank, the leading historian of the Guadalcanal campaign. Frank acknowledges Ghormley's physical ailments (severely abscessed teeth), and the difficult conditions he faced. Nevertheless, Frank blames Ghormley for allowing his staff to be housed in crowded spaces on board his command ship, the USS *Argonne*, a twenty-year-old transport in Noumea Harbor, as

¹ Nimitz to Ghormley Jr., 27 January 1961, Papers of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, Box 2, titled Correspondence and Memoranda March 1942 to October 1942, H DCL/28, October folder, at the Operational Archives (OA), Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), Washington Navy Yard. I am indebted to Elliot Carlson for sharing this source with me.

well as for a generally passive command style, and most of all for failing to get out of his headquarters to visit the battlefield.²

This negative view of Ghormley's service in the South Pacific began almost immediately with newspaper assessments soon after his dismissal. Ghormley was not entirely surprised to be relieved in October 1942. After all, the campaign on Guadalcanal had reached a difficult moment, and Halsey, who had been hospitalized just prior to the Battle of Midway, was again healthy and available. Ghormley was surprised, however, when he returned to the States in November to find that the newspapers were blaming him for the disappointment of the campaign, and in particular for the American defeat in the Battle of Savo Island on August 8th. "It was presented," he wrote later, "as being an indictment of me."³

Following his relief, Ghormley all but disappeared from public awareness. As a result, many of his contributions have been overlooked including his role in crafting the Anglo-American Alliance in 1940-41 and in resolving a potentially volatile confrontation with the Vichy French in 1942. Ghormley's greatest skill, it turns out, may have been his diplomatic prowess.

Originally from Portland, Oregon, Ghormley was the son of Presbyterian missionaries and the eldest of six children. He graduated from the University of Idaho before attending the Naval Academy from which he graduated in 1906. He had a traditional career progression serving in destroyers and battleships.⁴ He served in Nicaragua in 1912 and in England during the First World War. Joseph Straus, the captain of the battleship USS *Ohio*, remarked that, "If I was

² Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 335.

³ Robert L. Ghormley, "The Tide Turns: A History of the South Pacific Force and South Pacific Area," unpublished manuscript, Ghormley Papers, folder 1153.32.d, Joyner Library, 139.

⁴ William Thomas Johnsen, *The Origins of the Grand Alliance: Anglo-American Military Collaboration from the Panay Incident to Pearl Harbor* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 96.

going to send a landing party ashore, I would have put Ghormley in charge of it because I thought he was the most capable officer I had.”⁵

Ghormley hit all the career milestones as both an executive officer and captain of a battleship, and he completed a year at the Naval War College.⁶ Upon his selection to rear admiral in 1938, he became the Director of War Plans for the Navy Department, and then the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations. With over 38 years of naval experience, Ghormley was clearly a rising star in the Navy, and one of forty admirals on a closely held list of likely leaders in a future war-- a list that did not include Nimitz or Spruance.⁷

Ghormley’s Battle of Britain

Ghormley entered World War II a full sixteen months before the rest of the nation. In the spring of 1940, as Germany prepared to launch its *Blitzkrieg* into Belgium and France, the British Ambassador to the United States, Phillip Henry Kerr, Lord Lothian, urged Roosevelt to choose someone to represent the United States at staff talks in London. At the time, Ghormley was looking forward to taking command of Cruiser Division 9 (CruDiv 9), and the call from the White House was a mixed blessing. Given the need for secrecy, Ghormley did not receive written orders. Instead he met privately with the president for two-and-a-half hours. Neither man ever recorded what was said, but surely President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) impressed on Ghormley the sensitivity of the issue and the need for discretion.

⁵ Oral history of Rear Admiral Elliot B. Strauss (November 1986) 187-188, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, (Hereafter NWC).

⁶ Johnsen, *Origins of the Grand Alliance*, 96.

⁷ Richard B. Frank, “Picking Winners?,” (*U.S. Naval Institute*, September 7, 2019, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2011/may/picking-winners>).

Ghormley was initially scheduled to leave for England in June, but his departure was delayed by the Allied defeat in France and the British evacuation from Dunkirk. In the interim, he assembled a small staff consisting of Lieutenant Commander (later Vice Admiral) Bernard Austin as his flag secretary, and Lieutenant (later Rear Admiral) Donald J. MacDonald as his aide and communications officer. Ghormley had worked with Austin in the War Plans department where Austin had impressed him as not only capable but even brilliant. In fact, Ghormley had planned to take Austin with him to CruDiv 9, and when it turned out he was going to London, he offered him the position. Austin was not thrilled with the assignment fearing that it would take him away from sea duty. The Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Harold "Betty" Stark, assured Austin that the job would not last more than six weeks (which proved untrue) and that it would not hurt his subsequent selection to command (which was true).⁸ As for MacDonald, he had already served as an aide in the White House and thus was familiar with protocol at the highest levels.

Ghormley and his team left for Liverpool on August 8, 1940 aboard MV *Britannic*.⁹ His arrival was so closely guarded that the U.S. naval attaché to Britain, Captain Alan G. Kirk, had to learn about it from casual conversation at a cocktail party, a classic example of FDR's chaotic management style in keeping the right hand wondering what the left hand was doing. Kirk wired the Navy Department to ask if Ghormley's arrival meant that he was being replaced. The Navy Department could not give him an answer, for Ghormley's mission was a mystery to them as

⁸ Oral history of Bernard Austin (August 1969), 91, NWC.

⁹ RADM D. MacDonald and author James Leutze both mention the *Britannic* as the name of the ship that brought Ghormley and his staff to England. MV *Britannic* should not be confused with HMHS *Britannic* a sister ship to the *Titanic* that was sunk in 1916 when she struck a sea mine.

well. Stark suggested to FDR that Ghormley be given the title Special Naval Observer to clarify that he would not fall under the U.S. Ambassador, Joseph P. Kennedy, or usurp Kirk as attaché.¹⁰

Upon arrival, Ghormley was met and closely questioned by Kennedy, Kirk, and Colonel Raymond E. Lee, about his mission. For his part, Ghormley was shocked by their sense of gloom; in his diary he later confided, "They all think England is licked."¹¹ The trip to the Dorchester Hotel was a treacherous one as Ghormley, Austin, and MacDonald made their way past rubble in the streets while fires still smoldered in the dockyards of the Thames. On their first night in London, they were treated to an aerial bombardment by the Luftwaffe. Barrage balloons floated over the city and search lights pierced the sky as bombers passed overhead. The Embassy had arranged a special rate for Ghormley's rooms on the top floor. With the Blitz in full swing, there were no other guests on that floor. Someone suggested that it might be dangerous, but Ghormley replied, "I'd rather be on the top floor and come down with the building than be on the bottom floor and have the building come down on top of me."¹²

Ghormley's primary mission in London was to determine if the British were likely to hold out against the Germans, and to encourage them to share their intelligence and any technology that could prove useful if the United States were to enter the war. Kennedy and Kirk both expressed doubt that the British could hold on. As Kirk stated, "This island [Britain] is no more fortified or prepared to withstand invasion in force than Long Island, New York."¹³ FDR worried that if the British were to collapse, the 50 destroyers the U.S. planned to refurbish and trade to them for bases in the Atlantic and Caribbean could end up serving in the German Navy

¹⁰ James Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy: Anglo-American Naval Collaboration, 1937-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 140-147.

¹¹ Ghormley Diary (Aug. 16, 1940) cited in Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 146.

¹² Oral history of Bernard Austin, 96, NWC.

¹³ Kirk to Anderson, June 11, 1940, cited in Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 83.

and be used against the United States.¹⁴ FDR also wanted assurance from the Admiralty that if the Germans compelled the British government to surrender, the British fleet would sail to Canada or the United States. The thought of facing a combined Italian, British, and German fleet was a genuine fear of U.S. Naval war planners in the late months of 1940. The British had feared a similar situation with the French, which is what provoked their attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir on July 3, 1940.¹⁵ The signing of the Tripartite Agreement between Germany, Italy, and Japan on September 27, 1940, compounded that fear.

Within days of his arrival, Ghormley was received by Churchill and the Admiralty. Churchill ended their first meeting stating, "Admiral, if there is anything you feel you need... you come to me personally and you will have it."¹⁶ Like FDR, Churchill had a special affinity for the navy. The British prime minister was eager, if not desperate, to see the U.S. enter the war with its navy, and therefore treated Ghormley especially well. Churchill had recently been the First Lord of the Admiralty and knew that if and when the U.S. entered the war, the initial primary demand on the United States would be naval support.¹⁷ While Ghormley talked with Churchill, who showed him through the Admiralty war room, Austin met Royal Navy Commander Michael Goodenough, beginning a relationship that would be crucial later in the mission and throughout the war.¹⁸ Churchill led the party on a tour to the southern half of the country to see British preparations to repel a German invasion. Next, Ghormley engaged in a

¹⁴ Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 142.

¹⁵ On July 3, the British surrounded the French Fleet at the port of Mers-el-Kebir outside Oran. The British admiral requested the French surrender or they would be destroyed. The French did not comply and the British destroyed the French fleet at anchor. This contributed to touchy relations with the French in Africa and the Pacific.

¹⁶ Oral history of Bernard Austin, 87, NWC.

¹⁷ Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 149.

¹⁸ Commander Michael Goodenough was a "brilliant fellow" according to Bernard Austin. The nephew of Admiral Sir William Goodenough, veteran of the Battle of Jutland, he made flag rank himself later in his career. Austin would benefit from his relationship with Goodenough later in his career as a deputy at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

series of meetings with British Admiral Sir Sidney Bailey, who acted as Ghormley's liaison with the Royal Navy and the British government. The British were desperate for an American pledge of support, and Ghormley was careful not to make any commitment. The British pressed hard for full staff negotiations in preparation for an American entry into the war, but Ghormley made it clear that he had come only to observe and report.

Austin recalled that in every meeting with the Admiralty, Ghormley had prefaced his remarks by saying, "he was not authorized to make any commitments, but, that he had been told to discuss these matters with the British and that he hoped the discussion would provide the basis for whatever commitments the two governments might wish to make."¹⁹ This assertion allowed Ghormley to proceed with almost any topic without making formal commitments. After all, with FDR vying for re-election for an unprecedented third term in office, anything perceived as a promise to enter the war in Europe would have enormous consequences for the presidential campaign. The America First Committee and other isolationist groups had gained popularity and attracted elites and socially acclaimed members like Charles Lindberg. The Republican nominee, Wendell Willkie, gave speeches warning Americans that a vote for FDR was a vote to enter the war. Despite dispatching Ghormley and lobbying to increase aid to Britain, FDR told voters in September 1940, "We will not participate in foreign wars and we will not send our army, naval or air forces to fight in foreign lands outside of the Americas *except in case of attack*."²⁰ FDR had to win the election first before he could help Britain with the Nazis. A diplomat by instinct, Ghormley understood his role in representing the United States' intentions to Britain without offering a commitment.

¹⁹ Oral history of Bernard Austin, 102-103, NWC.

²⁰ "November, 1944 - FDR: Day by Day," FDR (Pare Lorenz Center at the FDR Library), accessed November 11, 2019, (<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/daybyday/event/november-1944-9/>).

Ghormley's presence in London gave the president a separate communications channel to the British government and a view that was often at odds with lugubrious predictions and proposals of his Ambassador. Kennedy's involvement with the Cliveden set, an affluent group of British aristocrats tied to the pre-war appeasement of Adolf Hitler, his support of the appeasement of Germany, and his continued belief that Britain could not hold out against Hitler's assault put the ambassador out of step with the President. Kennedy made many cringe worthy remarks during his time in London, openly clashed with the U.S. State Department, and spoke out against policies that provided aid to Britain. FDR may have kept Kennedy in the role longer than he should have in order to keep him out of the United States where he could interfere with the reelection campaign. FDR often used Ghormley to bypass Kennedy in communicating with the British government and Admiralty.²¹

The United Kingdom and its population continued to suffer from the effects of the war. Scarcity had become the norm for food, clothing, and all kinds of consumer goods. Churchill was not the only one buttering up the visiting Americans. To encourage the feelings of goodwill, many of the social clubs extended invitations to Ghormley to become an honorary member. Social and dinner clubs became the primary places upper class Londoners would go to ensure that they could get a good meal. These elite clubs somehow managed to have full pantries despite rationing.²² Ghormley had dozens of invitations, all of which he accepted. Some of these clubs endure to this day like the Royal Thames Yacht Club and the Carlton Club. Their relevance, beyond providing a good place to eat, was the social and business culture they provided. Austin, Ghormley's aide, remarked: "I quickly learned though, very often you could

²¹ Laurence Leamer, *The Kennedy Men* (Harpercollins e-book, 2002) 268, 286. Also see James D. Hornfischer, *Neptunes Inferno: the U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York: Bantam Books, 2012) 54.

²² Oral history of Bernard Austin, 105, NWC.

accomplish something at a three-hour lunch; that you couldn't accomplish in much more time by letter and by phone calls. So, it isn't just a social proposition. It does have a practical function."²³

At these social events, Ghormley was asked about his views on a wide variety of the long-standing issues of the United Kingdom such as the Republic of Ireland, the continuation of British colonialism in India and the Pacific, and the attitudes of the Cliveden set. Ghormley wisely and gently rebuffed these attempts to draw him out or redirected them to the proper channels while distancing himself and the United States.²⁴ Despite the occasional interlude, the club culture offered a sea of information which Ghormley regularly took advantage of to gain a better understanding of Britain's capacity and capability to resist.

After a few weeks of tours and meetings, Ghormley proceeded to ask the most delicate questions of his hosts. First, he had to challenge their assurances that Britain could withstand an attack on its home island. He wanted to know what the backup plan was if their resistance crumbled. Air Chief Marshall Sir Cyril Newall, Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, replied: "No alternative plans had been prepared." The British strategy was framed on the hypothesis that any attack on the British Isles would be repelled; as Sir Newall said, "it was the fixed determination of the whole Nation to do so."²⁵

Next, Ghormley asked hypothetically if the United States was forced to enter the war, had the British considered what active cooperation they would expect. Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the Royal Navy First Sea Lord, told Ghormley that the British had prepared a report from what was called the Bailey Committee, which outlined a strategy for cooperation with the United

²³ Ibid., 96.

²⁴ Sharp to Ghormley, November 24, 1940, Ghormley Papers, folder 1153.8.a.

²⁵ The existence of the Bailey Committee shows that Newall was not telling the literal truth. Minutes of meeting 31 August 31, 1940, Cited in Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 152.

States.²⁶ The report was quickly revised for the Americans and delivered to Ghormley. Its contents applied many lessons from World War I, but its most important point was that Germany was the primary threat. The British believed that they could control the Mediterranean from Egypt and soon knock Italy out of the war, but that defeating Germany would take time. In order for Britain to return to the continent with an army, they must weaken Germany with a long-term plan of strategic bombing and a naval blockade. Ghormley transmitted the Bailey report to Admiral Stark with lengthy notes and findings from his other conversations.²⁷ Almost certainly, Ghormley's contributions aided Stark in the development of his famous plan to focus on Germany first, the so called "Plan Dog memorandum." This memorandum codified Allied strategy as it was further developed into Rainbow 5, better known as the Germany First strategy. Admiral James O. Richardson, Pacific Fleet Commander (1940-41), credits Ghormley for the rapid development of Plan Dog into Rainbow 5. He believed the informal talks and information Ghormley gathered in London in 1940 and during the subsequent American, British, and Canadian (ABC-1) staff talks in January 1941 were essential to the formulation of the plan.²⁸

In his role as Special Naval Observer and as the senior naval member of the ABC-1 conference, Ghormley deftly represented the president's priorities. His unwillingness to make any firm commitments to the British was a direct extension of presidential policy. His presence allowed for active negotiation, and bought FDR the time he needed to consolidate power domestically, as well as time for the United States to prepare its industrial complex for war.

²⁶ Ibid., 138.

²⁷ Ibid., 156.

²⁸ James O. Richardson and George C. Dyer, *On the Treadmill to Pearl Harbor: The Memoirs of Admiral James O. Richardson* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, Naval History Division, 1973), 301.

Another of Ghormley's accomplishments was the retrieval of British naval technology and lessons learned in the war time laboratory of the Atlantic theatre. Kirk, the U.S. Naval Attaché, contributed to the flow of information; but with Ghormley's arrival, the British became even more accommodating in sharing technology such as advancements in shipboard radar and sonar, ship degaussing, mine hunting, and damage control techniques. Ghormley cabled the Navy Department, "I am impressed, that under present conditions we are getting advantage of priceless information from an actual war laboratory which will not be available to us in case of German victory."²⁹ Ghormley acted as a shepherd for all parts of the naval service, including special warfare, to ensure the United States harvested as much military technology as it could from the British. At times, Ghormley even circumvented Kirk's role as he deployed as many U.S. Naval officers as he could on British vessels. These officers gained firsthand experience studying British tactics for anti-submarine warfare and convoy duty. Sir Henry Tizard's mission to the United States further reinforced the idea of Britain's technological value and the dire consequences if it were to fall into Nazi possession. Tizard's mission, prompted by the fall of France and the insistence of Churchill, led to the exchange of science technologies like self-sealing tanks for aircraft, gyroscopic gun sights, and the cavity magnetron which delivered radar to the Americans. Many historians credit Tizard's information exchange with the eventual development of the atomic bomb.³⁰

Some of the early talks between Ghormley and the Admiralty revolved around the disposition of naval forces in the Pacific. The British wanted the United States to move the Pacific fleet, or at least a strong strike group consisting of battleships, cruisers, and carriers, to

²⁹ Ghormley to Stark, Aug. 18, 1940, quoted in Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 147.

³⁰ Ferenc M. Szasz, Review of David Zimmerman, *Top Secret Exchange: The Tizard Mission and the Scientific War*, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* (1997), 29:3, 533-34.

Singapore. The British could then withdraw their forces from the Pacific to concentrate in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. During an evening social call, Commander Goodenough presented Austin with a letter to be given to Ghormley the next day. Once Austin read it, he realized why Goodenough had brought the letter to him first. It was political dynamite; when Ghormley read the letter, he was apoplectic. Ghormley and Austin dissected the letter and identified subtle, yet, significant changes that would make it palatable for Ghormley to send to the United States for consideration.³¹

The next day, the Admiralty presented Ghormley with a letter identical to the one Goodenough had given to Austin. Now prepared for it, Ghormley swiftly responded: "I would like to strike out this and substitute that."³² The British agreed to make all the changes he requested. The amended document initiated planning for how the American and British fleets would subsequently support each other in the South Pacific. Though FDR rejected the idea of sending the U.S. fleet to Singapore, he did order it to remain in Hawaii which he had hoped would control Japanese ambition by having a strong force positioned on the Japanese flank.³³

If the United States entered the war, it would be as a full partner. A more accommodating response to British pressure could have drawn the U.S. into the war before it was ready, and made the United States a junior partner in the alliance. FDR sent Ghormley to the British to evaluate their capabilities to survive, gather technology that would advance U.S. forces, and to buy time for the Presidential election and the United States to prepare for war. Ghormley was

³¹ Oral history of Bernard Austin, 102-4, NWC.

³² Ibid., 104.

³³ Admiral Richardson did not agree with FDR's assumptions, and let him know about it in November 1940. FDR replaced Richardson 90 days later with Admiral Kimmel.

successful in all these tasks, and his work set the stage with secret approval from the U.S. president for the ABC-1 staff talks held in Washington in January 1941.

As Easy As ABC

The first meeting of American, British, and Canadian officers was kept secret; FDR's credibility would have been greatly undermined if it was discovered two months after his reelection that he had sanctioned military collaboration with a belligerent power only blocks from the capital. Indeed, he might have been impeached. The members of the British delegation represented themselves as members of the "British Purchasing Commission" and dressed in civilian clothing. Ghormley and Brigadier General Raymond Lee (U.S. Army attaché to Britain) traveled with the delegation onboard the new battleship, HMS *King George V*.³⁴ The trip was made in an icy gale with rough seas. Ghormley noted, perhaps with amusement, that the Army officers mostly disappeared from the wardroom when the ship encountered rough weather. The KG-V (as it was known) dropped anchor in the Chesapeake Bay on January 23, 1941. Ghormley met Admiral Stark, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, and Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner the next day. Lieutenant General Stanley Embick, U.S. Army, acted as the U.S. chair of the conference, while Ghormley and Turner were the senior Navy representatives.³⁵

Having grown accustomed to Ghormley's even tempered non-committal and often hypothetical rhetoric, Turner's confrontational manner shocked the British. Embick and Turner were both suspicious of British suggestions throughout the conference. As a veteran of World War I, Embick felt the British strategic handling of that war bordered on criminal. Turner thought the British had little to show in the way of success on the high seas. Turner took every

³⁴ The *King George V* was one of the ships that tracked down the *Bismarck* in May 1940.

³⁵ Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 223.

opportunity to antagonize the British as he frequently dismissed any ideas that they offered. In his typical diplomatic fashion, Ghormley kept the conference on track, at times moving forward on votes and agreements when Turner was out of the room, so that progress could be made.³⁶

Meanwhile, the House of Representatives was debating House Resolution 1776, the funding of U.S. lend-lease provisions to the United Kingdom. The numbering of the bill was deliberate and representative of the attitude many Americans held about pulling Great Britain's "chestnuts out of the fire again."³⁷ A Republican amendment prohibited U.S. forces from fighting outside the western Hemisphere. Isolationists argued that convoying supplies to the United Kingdom would be inviting the Germans to contest our neutrality and draw us into the war. The bill did not affect the deliberations of the ABC-1 conference, but it reminded FDR about the precariousness of public support for preparedness.³⁸

The ABC-1 conference concluded in March 1941. Much of the early work Ghormley and Lee accomplished in London contributed to the progress made in the conference. The preliminary statements indicated a general agreement on the Germany First strategy. The United States did not commit to entering the war, but the outline of cooperation between the two nations had begun to take shape. Ghormley returned to London with Colonel Lee in their respective Special Observer roles. Roosevelt loosened the reins of specific convoy capabilities including the range of U.S. Naval forces now allowed to patrol to the thirtieth degree west parallel, and later to the twenty-sixth. U.S. Army forces also occupied Iceland to free up British soldiers and to provide Reykjavik as a handover point for U.S. convoys. Under some pressure, Denmark's

³⁶ Ibid., 224.

³⁷ P. F. Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the Birth of the Pax Americana* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 41-50.

³⁸ Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 218.

displaced government invited the U.S. to occupy Greenland. Ghormley coordinated convoy data and naval dispositions in the Western Atlantic and British home waters with the British Admiralty, and continued planning for U.S.-British naval cooperation.³⁹ Ghormley also reached an agreement on the location, construction, and equipping of U.S. naval bases in the United Kingdom. Finally, Ghormley coordinated a plan for repairing and refitting a large part of the British fleet in U.S. shipyards.⁴⁰ In short, Ghormley was central to negotiating the role of the United States as major partner in what would later become the Grand Alliance.

In recognition of his contributions, Ghormley was promoted to Vice Admiral in September 1941, and he remained as the Special Naval Observer in England until the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁴¹ On December 8, he and all the other officers shed their civilian clothing and donned their military uniforms. Ghormley briefly served as Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe, though once Admiral Ernest J. King replaced Stark as CNO, FDR sent Stark to Britain making Ghormley available for other duties. Ghormley returned by air to the United States on April 17, 1942, but his time in Washington would be dramatically short.

No Rest for the Weary

In March 1942, the Anglo-American Allies reshuffled the command arrangements in the Pacific. The British agreed to allow the Americans to have supreme command in the Pacific; and Roosevelt, after a lengthy conversation with King, divided the Pacific into two theaters. Army General Douglas MacArthur was assigned command of the Southwest Pacific, including both Australia and the Philippines. Admiral Chester Nimitz took command of the Central and South

³⁹ Ghormley's letters dealing with these subjects are in the National Archives at Kew in the United Kingdom (Serial 00176). I am indebted to Nicholas Sarantakes for retrieving this source with me.

⁴⁰ Johnsen, *Origins of the Grand Alliance*, 174.

⁴¹ Oral history of Rear Admiral Elliot B. Strauss (November 1986), 185, NWC.

Pacific and would exercise direct command of everything north of the equator, and appoint another officer to command everything south of the equator up to the 159° East Meridian. Nimitz nominated his immediate predecessor, William S. Pye, but Roosevelt chose Ghormley. Pye had briefly served as Pacific Fleet Commander after the relief of Admiral Husband E. Kimmel in the wake of the Pearl Harbor disaster, and while in that job, Pye had recalled a relief force that Kimmel had sent to Wake Island. FDR considered this a shortcoming in Pye's character and would not consider him for another combat command, which resulted in Ghormley's appointment.⁴²

Ghormley reported to Admiral King in Washington the morning after his return from London on April 18, 1942. King, in his typically brusque manner, wasted little time in issuing Ghormley a new directive. "You have been selected to command the South Pacific Force and South Pacific Area. You will have a large area under your command and a most difficult task. I do not have the tools to give you to carry out that task as it should be. You will establish your headquarters in Auckland, New Zealand, with an advance base at Tongatabu. In time, possibly this fall [1942], we hope to start an offensive from the South Pacific."⁴³

King wanted Ghormley to be on his way to Auckland in a week's time. With very little time to prepare, both professionally and personally after his 20 months stay in London, Ghormley did his best to use the precious time he had. Staff relationships are not built overnight; a commander's strategy must be imparted as core capabilities like communications and logistics must be fully developed. According to Captain (later Vice Admiral) John R. Redman, "No

⁴² Edwin T. Layton, *"And I Was There": Breaking the Secrets -- Pearl Harbor and Midway* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 344-52.

⁴³ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 8. See also Ernest J. King and Walter Muir Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1952), 386.

Admiral is self-sufficient; he's got to have a good staff. He [Ghormley] had a very very short time in Washington after he came back from London."⁴⁴ Ghormley had left familiar and capable staff officers in Austin and MacDonald in England, but his new staff in the South Pacific was green, inexperienced, and too small for combat operations. Most of his staff would not report to him until June 1942 after he arrived in New Zealand. Ghormley did not complain; the worst he would say of his staff was, "The will to do was there, and that did much to bridge the uncertainties."⁴⁵

Meanwhile the American victory at Midway encouraged King to accelerate the timetable for an American offensive. Instead of the fall, he now demanded that the offensive begin August 1. King considered Guadalcanal and the Bismarck Archipelago as necessary steps to Tokyo as early as January 1942.⁴⁶ He introduced the idea as the defensive-offensive to conform to the Germany first policy that had been adopted by the Combined Chiefs of Staff. At that point in the war, the Japanese were rapidly swallowing the Western Pacific, and an Allied offensive was not realistic. King was not deterred, for he saw occupation of the Solomon Islands as the only way to prevent the Japanese from cutting off the sea lines of communication to Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁷

In preparing the offensive to Guadalcanal, Ghormley had to start from scratch; he did request an additional week in Washington D.C. in order to complete forming a staff, to visit the War Plans Division, and to review the existing operations plans for the South Pacific. Ghormley

⁴⁴ Oral history of John R. Redman (June 5, 1969), U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland, 21. I am indebted to Craig L. Symonds for sharing this source with me.

⁴⁵ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 11.

⁴⁶ King to Nimitz, January 27, 1942, "Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, USN, Dec. 7, 1941 – Aug. 31, 1945," 1:197. Hereafter cited as Nimitz Graybook.

⁴⁷ Samuel E. Morison, *The Two-Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963; reprinted Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 164.

had previously served three tours in the Pacific, and he had seen parts of Manchuria after the Japanese invasions. As director of War Plans in the Navy Department, he had helped prepare operational plans for war with Japan, and he was aware of the difficult logistics in the Pacific. Before his departure for Auckland, he wrote Turner in the War Plans Division and requested him to ready the supplies for an all-purpose advanced naval base capable of repairs, all the equipment for loading and unloading vessels, and a smaller sub unit for setting up a fuel supply depot and the personnel to support those operations. In the Navy Sea Bee vernacular, this was known as a "Lion" and a "Cub."⁴⁸

Ghormley's request was never acted on. Ghormley exchanged messages with Nimitz requesting that a Lion and Cub be sent to Noumea both prior to and during the occupation of Guadalcanal. Nimitz considered it dangerous to store such materials so close to the front and denied the request.⁴⁹ Ghormley responded with a two-part message explaining why he needed the supply bases to bootstrap his logistics capabilities after the operation was already underway.⁵⁰ During the subsequent Guadalcanal campaign, the lack of such bases contributed to a major logistics log jam because ships would sit unemptied and unable to return for additional supplies.

Before receiving his orders as Commander of the South Pacific Amphibious Forces, Turner involved himself in the distribution of the Lion and Cub inventory while he was in San Francisco. As Turner's biographer put it: "With respect to the LIONS and CUBs, he [Turner] had taken liberty of advising the logistic people at San Francisco, that such logistic units required for organized operations should take precedence over units being assembled for ROSES [Efate, New

⁴⁸ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 13.

⁴⁹ Nimitz to Ghormley, June 23, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 1:590.

⁵⁰ Ghormley to Nimitz, Aug. 14, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 1:806.

Hebrides] and other locations.”⁵¹ The result was at least one Cub was distributed amongst five ships with personnel on some ships and supplies on others. These ships were sent to forward operating bases where their unloading took considerably longer, putting the ships at greater risk. Ghormley had requested the ships with cub material be sent to Auckland so they could be combat loaded and distributed properly. This was just one of many instances when Turner undercut Ghormley’s plans and did not inform him in a timely manner. Indeed, the message traffic contains no evidence that Turner even informed Ghormley of these decisions.⁵² Yet Turner seemed to be completely unaware that he may have disrupted the logistics of the South Pacific and took pride in being “the man to take the necessary steps.”⁵³

Ghormley had studied the South Pacific as a student at the Naval War College and had a firm grasp on the challenges involved and the transit times needed to move supplies across vast distances. Long before he ever left for London, Ghormley had drawn the conclusion that the Japanese would be hard to contain in such a vast area. Nimitz also understood the logistics problems the South Pacific faced, but he may have failed to understand how Ghormley intended to solve them.⁵⁴ Ghormley should have pressed the issue when Nimitz first denied his request for a Lion and Cub. Instead, Ghormley backed down, and by the time he took up the issue again, the transit time from the United States made it impossible for the equipment to arrive in time.

Additionally, the Navy War Plans division did not initially cooperate with the Army in planning logistic operations in the South Pacific. When Ghormley visited Wellington, New

⁵¹ George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer: The Story of Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972), 272-3.

⁵² Ghormley, “The Tide Turns,” Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 37-38.

⁵³ George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer: The Story of Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972), 272-3.

⁵⁴ Ghormley, “The Tide Turns,” Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 6.

Zealand, Colonel Boyer, U.S. Army, arrived with orders from Washington to set up a U.S. Army port. The colonel had little knowledge of the South Pacific command, or the Navy's intent to place a headquarters at Auckland. Ghormley coopted the colonel and received his full cooperation, but was surprised that the colonel had not been briefed of the Navy's intentions. In close succession, Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, U.S. Army, reported to Ghormley as the first member of the Joint Purchasing Commission. Ghormley immediately put him in charge of the local sourcing of goods and materials the South Pacific command would need. Westbrook's civilian career as a Texas legislator suggested that he would understand the needs of a new commission. Unfortunately, they both quickly discovered the Army and Navy war planners had overestimated the availability of food and materials in New Zealand. The excess that New Zealand produced was already committed to Great Britain. Ghormley was able to arrange through Washington a one-for-one swap with Great Britain, yet the supplies still fell short of what the war planners expected. New Zealand simply did not have the industry to produce the heavy equipment, cranes, and pontoon bridges needed for conducting supported amphibious operations.⁵⁵

When he took command in June, Ghormley did not yet know Guadalcanal would be the objective, but he had visited Noumea and knew whatever operations he would conduct in the South Pacific would probably springboard from there and the New Hebrides. General Alexander Patch was already present in Noumea with a large garrison, and the need for additional port equipment was obvious. Planning for Operation Torch had taken priority in most respects; the "Shoestring" nature of the campaign developed before it ever began.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28-30.

⁵⁶ "Shoestring" is used as a descriptor by Ghormley throughout his manuscript and by many others when discussing Guadalcanal. Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library.

Before Ghormley's departure from Washington in May of 1942, many of his closest friends in the Navy warned him about his new assignment to the South Pacific. The Japanese were moving through the Pacific unrestrained and the U.S. had inadequate resources to counter them. This was compounded by the long logistic lines and shortages of both shipping and aircraft. Furthermore, many of them knew, as Ghormley was keenly aware, that the European theatre would get the lion's share of new equipment and men. He concluded later that Admiral King's warning that he would "not have the tools" would ring "much more deadly true than he realized at the time."⁵⁷

Friction

Ghormley started his journey with a few members of his new staff on May 1, 1942, and arrived at Pearl Harbor via San Francisco on May 8. He met with Nimitz and Rear Admiral John S. McCain, Ghormley's choice as Naval Air Forces commander for the South Pacific. The Battle of the Coral Sea had just concluded. The U.S.S. *Lexington* had been lost, the U.S.S. *Yorktown* was damaged, but the Japanese assault of Port Moresby had been turned back. Nimitz was already engaged in thinking about the forthcoming Japanese assault on Midway Atoll. After an all-day conference on May 13, Ghormley left Pearl Harbor with the intention of touring his operating area in route to Auckland.

Nimitz refined Ghormley's orders before his departure. Nimitz would retain overall strategic planning responsibility, and King would maintain overriding authority over both of them. This became clear almost at once when Ghormley received an early reproach from King for suggesting that the New Zealand troops garrisoned in Fiji should remain there. The fate of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8 and 11.

New Zealand garrison in the Fiji Islands had been resolved by a Joint Chiefs' decision several days before, but Ghormley did not receive the message. Nimitz's staff and King may have looked at Ghormley as meddling in a matter already decided.⁵⁸

The exchange of messages highlighted two early problems in Ghormley's command: communications access and deciphering glitches often created friction between Ghormley and Nimitz's staff. Sorting this out created extra work for members of Nimitz's staff when they were already busy with the Midway operation, and these glitches may have soured the working relationship with Ghormley. When Ghormley arrived in Auckland, he found out that his coding officers had come with no training. Their commissions were attached to their orders, and they had first put on uniforms to board the transports to New Zealand.⁵⁹

Ghormley further weakened his relations with Nimitz's staff when he broadcast a warning of the impending attack on Midway which jeopardized the secret that the Americans had broken the Japanese code. He had received this information from intelligence he gathered from New Zealand naming the day and composition of the attack. Ghormley sent his message on May 29, seven days before the assault began. A special note was added to the bottom of the message: "Note: THIS WAS BROADCAST ON THE NPM FOX SCHEDULE."⁶⁰ NPM was the acronym to describe the Navy's High Frequency Short Wave Radio Telegraph station. Thus, it transmitted throughout the Pacific simultaneously on many frequencies to improve reliability.⁶¹ This note was probably added by the decrypting CWO to alert Nimitz's staff that this Top Secret encrypted information had been broadcast all over the Pacific. Ghormley probably did not know that

⁵⁸ Ghormley to Nimitz, Ghormley to King, several messages from May 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 1:428-539

⁵⁹ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 32.

⁶⁰ Ghormley to Nimitz, May 29, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 1:540.

⁶¹ Claude C. Connor, *Nothing Friendly in the Vicinity: My Patrols on the Submarine USS Guardfish during WWII*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004) 368.

Nimitz's staff was already preparing to set a trap for the Japanese at Midway. Nimitz had previously told his intelligence officer, Edwin Layton, "If I were you, I would not put anything in your intelligence bulletin about the possibility of an attack on Midway. I think the thing to do is to hold this one really close, so there will be no leaks."⁶² Nimitz was therefore perturbed by the careless release of decrypted information. Ghormley's broadcast message created additional friction with Nimitz's staff. Curiously, Layton, did not mention the message in his memoir, but he did assert that he twice urged Nimitz to relieve Ghormley of command.⁶³

If he had difficulties coordinating with Nimitz and his staff, Ghormley continued to prove his skills in diplomacy as he tactfully smoothed over other issues in the South Pacific. After his arrival in Noumea, New Caledonia, on May 17, 1942, Ghormley called on Rear Admiral Georges Thierry D'Argenlieu, the leader of the Free French in the Pacific theatre.⁶⁴ D'Argenlieu had already caused considerable trouble by expelling the popular Governor of the French colonial island because he thought Governor Sautot was a Vichyite sympathizer. His removal resulted in riots throughout New Caledonia. General Patch, the head of the nearly 20,000 U.S. Army garrison there, was on the verge of declaring martial law when Ghormley arrived. Ghormley was quickly able to decipher the root of D'Argenlieu's resentment and managed to diffuse the situation by assuring him that the U.S. had no imperialistic visions on French Territory. D'Argenlieu was angered because the U.S. and Britain had not consulted him as a representative of the Free French in the occupation of Noumea or other French Pacific colonies. But Ghormley appeased the quick-tempered Frenchman by offering to let Free French Forces

⁶² Layton, *"And I Was There,"* 419.

⁶³ Ibid., 458-459.

⁶⁴ French Vice Admiral D'Argenlieu, a Naval Lieutenant, in the First World War, then later a Carmelite monk. He joined the Free French forces under General Charles de Gaulle in 1940 after twice being captured by the Nazis. D'Argenlieu was sent to the Pacific as French high commissioner, and returned in 1943 to take over the command of the French Naval Forces stationed in Britain. He was French high commissioner in Indochina 1945-47.

lead U.S. troops in the occupation of Wallis Island. Ghormley's diplomatic sensitivity thus defused a potentially volatile situation.

In assuming his new command, Ghormley confronted a number of difficulties consequent to setting up a new command in any new location, and more particularly to the South Pacific. Admiral McCain set up his headquarters immediately thereafter in Noumea on the U.S.S. *Tangier*, an aircraft tender anchored at Noumea.⁶⁵ Partly to avoid angering D'Argenlieu, Ghormley did not seize office and dock space. McCain's small staff did not require much in the way of space and the *Tangier* had a rudimentary aviation and naval communications capability. The galley and berthing were resident to the ship which allowed McCain's men to focus on the task of organizing the combat air power in the South Pacific. Ghormley was not concerned about the lack of dock space at the time for he intended to set up his major command in Auckland, New Zealand as King had ordered.

Ghormley initiated a request to add aviation facilities to accommodate the increase in heavy bombers planned for the area. He was frustrated because the Joint Chiefs did not want to build new airfields until the defensive capabilities were in place. In addition, Operation Torch was claiming all available Army units at that time. Ghormley experienced frustration in making planners understand that everything would take longer than estimated. First, his command area was larger than the distance from Berlin to New York, and the sparse islands held few port facilities while the populations were mostly primitive. Second, though the U.S. was entering the summer months, the Southern Pacific was beginning its cold wet season which turned existing dirt airstrips to unusable mud pits. Third, a lack of heavy equipment, Marsten mat, and

⁶⁵Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 19.

construction personnel stalled preparations. And finally, a lack of aircraft and severe weather made reconnaissance difficult.⁶⁶

Another problem was that no system existed at this time to determine the material and combat readiness of the ships that reported to Ghormley's command area. Most of the ships were manned by inexperienced crews and units that had scarcely had time to train together as a tactical unit. Many of the more experienced officers had been stripped off their ships to man new construction vessels as they came on line. There was no time for Ghormley to inspect or even meet with the individual ship commanding officers to impart a strategic vision. Most of the fleet arrived in theatre just in time to support the Guadalcanal invasion.⁶⁷

Ghormley had been ordered to set up his headquarters in Auckland, New Zealand, while his Air Forces Commander (McCain) was to set up his headquarters in Noumea, 1000 nautical miles (nm) away. Auckland is over 1800 nm from Henderson field in Guadalcanal. Ghormley arrived in New Zealand on May 24, 1942. He had initial meetings with local leadership and then proceeded to Wellington. Though Auckland had been designated as the South Pacific headquarters since April 15, no advance party had arrived to begin work -- an action Nimitz's staff had overlooked.

Ghormley raised his pennant on the USS *Argonne* anchored at Auckland. He would continue to manage the situation on Noumea and receive the rest of his staff piecemeal through the end of June. During that time, the Battle of Midway was fought, destroying four Japanese aircraft carriers and stopping the invasion of Midway. The Japanese shifted their efforts to focus on the South Pacific and the capture of Port Moresby and New Caledonia.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 21-25.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24.

Having seized Tulagi on May 3, 1942, the Japanese sought to expand their aviation capabilities in Guadalcanal by building a runway capable of supporting their heavy bombers. On July 5, a U.S. Army Air Corps reconnaissance mission discovered the new airfield under construction on Guadalcanal. King called for immediate action because a Japanese airfield at Guadalcanal would threaten the sea lines of communication to Australia. Nimitz designated Ghormley as Task Force Commander for Task One -- the seizure of Tulagi and surrounding areas on July 9. This order is notable in the language directing Ghormley to exercise "Strategic Command in Person." It also authorized him "to apply directly to Supreme Commander Southwest Pacific Area [MacArthur] for additional forces."⁶⁸

Nimitz may have been worried about Ghormley's health before the Guadalcanal operation ever started. A month later, after his relief, Ghormley was treated for severely abscessed teeth in San Francisco. Ghormley closed a brief letter to Halsey with "give 'em Hell: The dentist is doing that to me now."⁶⁹ Ghormley's health problems may have already been apparent even when he arrived in Pearl Harbor in May 1942. An abscessed tooth can present itself in many ways. Pain, bad breath, swelling, and fever are a few of the symptoms. Treatment for an abscessed tooth in the 1940s typically required a dentist with the tools and equipment to perform a root canal and plenty of time to recover. An abscess can also erupt, or an abrasion can drain the swelling temporarily relieving the patient. Alcohol and antibiotics could also keep the situation under control, but provide further complications such as difficulty eating, interrupted sleep, and delirium. Nimitz and King discussed Ghormley's health at a conference in San

⁶⁸ Nimitz to Ghormley, July 9, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 1:617-618.

⁶⁹ Ghormley to Halsey, Nov. 17, 1942, Ghormley Papers, folder 1153.5H, Joyner Library.

Francisco on September 8. They considered whether he should be relieved but postponed the decision. Nimitz said he would look into the matter further.⁷⁰

Ghormley's health may have been the reason why he chose not to attend the conference held near Koro Island, on July 26. Instead he sent his Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Dan Callaghan. Ghormley claimed he did not have the time to travel to the conference.⁷¹ This planning conference was the only meeting all the Task Force commanders held together before the invasion. Vandegrift, Turner, McCain, and General Laverne Saunders (who commanded the Army Air Corps B-17s) and Callaghan, all caught a ride on the destroyer U.S.S. *Dewey* to rendezvous with Fletcher's flagship, the U.S.S. *Saratoga*. Ghormley was not there to hear the bombshell Fletcher dropped on the planning group. Fletcher told the group that he would provide air cover for no more than two days because he did not want to risk an air attack on his carriers for a longer period. Callaghan was there as Ghormley's representative but only took notes; and Ghormley was not there to hear the vehement objections of Vandegrift and Turner or to intervene as theater commander.⁷²

The early part of the Guadalcanal campaign was touch-and-go for the Marines fighting in the jungles and enduring the nightly bombardments of the Japanese surface ships and submarines. The darkest time was the period from September 10 to 13. Naval intelligence warned of a pending combined fleet attack of cruisers, battleships, and carriers with enough transports to carry 25,000 troops.⁷³ Ghormley received a directive from King via Nimitz to make ready a

⁷⁰ Conference Notes, September 8, 1942, Nimitz Graybook 2:161.

⁷¹ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 64.

⁷² A. A. Vandegrift and Robert B. Asprey, *Once a Marine: The Memoirs of General A.A. Vandegrift*, United States Marine Corps, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 120.

⁷³ Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guadalcanal*, (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1999), 95-117.

regiment of Marines and auxiliary ships for transfer to the Southwest Pacific Area.⁷⁴ He was discouraged by this request as it seemed to him that King and Nimitz, or at least the Joint Chiefs, underestimated the perilous nature of the movement. Ghormley wanted to reinforce the Marines, and sending men and transports to MacArthur's theater would only weaken an already anemic situation in Guadalcanal. Aware that a strong Japanese striking force was heading toward Guadalcanal, Ghormley issued an estimate of the situation to ensure that his superiors understood how dire were the circumstances.⁷⁵

Despite the gloomy estimate he sent to his superiors, Ghormley did support the reinforcement of Guadalcanal. To do that, he returned to his role as diplomat. If he could not persuade the Joint Chiefs to send him the forces he needed; maybe he could compel them to with political pressure. At the end of August, Ghormley received a visit from the Undersecretary of the Navy, James Forrestal. After talking with Ghormley, Forrestal returned to the United States and forcefully presented the needs for the Guadalcanal campaign especially in terms of aircraft and heavy equipment. Forrestal's actions helped decide the campaign, but the forces he requested would arrive well after Ghormley's tenure had ended.⁷⁶

In a personal letter to his wife, Nimitz claimed that one of the reasons he had to replace Ghormley was the Vice Admiral's failure to be aggressive enough at the right time.⁷⁷ Especially after the disaster at Savo Island, Ghormley was reluctant to commit his limited number of surface ships to the waters immediately around Guadalcanal, particularly at night. He feared the green crews of his surface ships would be slaughtered if he did not give them more time to train and

⁷⁴ Conference Notes September 8, 1942, Nimitz Graybook 2:159. Also see Nimitz to Ghormley September 8, 1942 Nimitz Graybook 2:11.

⁷⁵ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 119-120.

⁷⁶ Vandergrift, *Once a Marine*, 152-155.

⁷⁷ E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 257.

amass greater numbers. Ghormley finally committed his fleet and challenged the Tokyo Express at the Battle of Cape Esperance. Fought in the nighttime hours October 11-12, the engagement was a tactical American victory. The battle did not stop the Japanese from landing reinforcements on Guadalcanal, and it also cost the U.S. a cruiser and a destroyer, with another destroyer heavily damaged. The battle was a vast improvement over Savo Island. The fact that the victory came over two months after the invasion of Guadalcanal adds credibility to Ghormley's belief that the crews needed time to train. The victory was also a morale booster and provided the Marines relief from the Japanese bombardment for one night, but it was too little too late to help Ghormley's reputation.

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander of Japan's Combined Fleet, decided to raise the stakes by sending battleships to escort the reinforcements he was sending to Guadalcanal. Yamamoto was also amassing a large combined fleet for a major thrust against the island. Ghormley reported to Nimitz via message, "Consider present forces inadequate for the task."⁷⁸ Some members of Nimitz's staff felt that in sending that message, Ghormley had abdicated command of the sea to the Japanese, and they openly expressed that view to Nimitz in a staff meeting. They argued that Ghormley's inaction had caused the Marines to be undersupplied and bombarded nightly by the Japanese. In a rare moment of anger, Nimitz said, "I don't want to hear, or see, such gloom and such defeatism. Remember the enemy is hurt too!"⁷⁹ Still Nimitz's staff persisted in their criticism, insisting that it was Ghormley's personality that was the root of the trouble. To them, Halsey's arrival in the area was the obvious cure for the dilemma. By then, the rumors of Ghormley's health had reached the point that they could not be ignored. His health

⁷⁸ Running estimate of the situation Ghormley to Nimitz October 15, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 2:233.

⁷⁹ Layton, *"And I War There,"* 460-61.

had already been discussed earlier in September, and Nimitz and some his staff had seen him two weeks later. If Ghormley had been that ill, Nimitz would have relieved him on the spot as he had done with Halsey in May.⁸⁰

By mid-October 1942, the situation grew bleaker as the Japanese continued to concentrate more power in the South Pacific as a result from their losses from the Battle of Esperance. Critically, Ghormley failed to comply with a direct order from Nimitz to make a personal tour of Guadalcanal. This was uncharacteristic of Ghormley, who had once said, "I have been raised to say 'aye, aye,' so there is no other answer."⁸¹ Nimitz gave the direct order to Ghormley during his tour of the South Pacific after visiting Guadalcanal himself in late September.⁸² Ghormley offered no explanation for why he failed to comply with the order; he had more than two weeks to comply. Ghormley's health may well have been a factor; the personal workload he chose to take on himself rather than to delegate, and his limited communications capabilities while at sea might have contributed to his decision not to embark on the trip from Noumea to Guadalcanal during such a critical time in the campaign.

Concerned, Nimitz reached out to King on October 16, laying out the situation. Halsey and his staff would be in Noumea soon in response to Ghormley's message of inadequate forces for the task. Nimitz wrote: "I have under consideration his relief [Ghormley] by Halsey at earliest practicable time."⁸³ King's response was "Your 160937 approved."⁸⁴ On October 18, 1942, Halsey relieved Ghormley as Commander South Pacific.⁸⁵ After Ghormley's relief, Knox

⁸⁰ Potter, *Nimitz*, 117.

⁸¹ Ghormley Diary (July 14, 1940), quoted in Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, 139.

⁸² Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno*, 262.

⁸³ Nimitz to King, October 16, 1942 Nimitz Gray Book, 2:36.

⁸⁴ Nimitz Graybook, Vol. 2, date time group (DTG) 160245 page 36* the Nimitz staff probably made a mistake in recording the DTG. It should have read 170245. Hawaii is on the same side of the international date line as Washington D.C.

⁸⁵ Halsey to All Task Force Commanders in the South Pacific, October 18, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 2:37.

wrote to Nimitz about his decision. Knox commented that he had the greatest respect for Ghormley, but agreed with Nimitz's decision, "I had repeated reports of his [Ghormley's] physical condition, which gave me a good deal of anxiety and I am satisfied that you acted most wisely... in ordering Halsey to relieve him."⁸⁶

Soon after Halsey assumed command, he began to receive all the supplies and material support that Ghormley had requested. In addition, the Joint Chiefs reassigned the Task Force 42 submarines to serve temporarily under Halsey's command in the completion of Task One, the seizure of Tulagi and Guadalcanal.⁸⁷ Ghormley had repeatedly requested control of the submarines both before and during the campaign.

Halsey is heralded by Frank and other historians for demanding the French provide office space ashore in Noumea, a noted critical shortcoming of Ghormley.⁸⁸ Allowing for such poor working conditions while housed on the *Argonne*, Ghormley claimed he did not have the time to move his staff because they were too busy and so few; and the French were unwilling to assist with space.⁸⁹ Frank's version is certainly easy to imagine given Halsey's reputation, but in reality, Halsey asked King for assistance for the headquarters relocation.⁹⁰ An impatient King wrote Stark to tell "General de Gaulle that it is necessary that COMSOPAC [Halsey] establish Headquarters ashore at Noumea immediately..."⁹¹ And he requested that de Gaulle delegate authority to the new governor Henri Montchamp to negotiate with Halsey. The delays for a

⁸⁶ Knox to Nimitz, October 24, 1942, Nimitz Papers, quoted in, Potter, *Nimitz*, 258.

⁸⁷ King to Halsey, Nimitz, MacArthur, October 19, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 2:37.

⁸⁸ Frank, Guadalcanal: *The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle*, 335.

⁸⁹ Ghormley, "The Tide Turns," Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 103.

⁹⁰ Frank, Guadalcanal: *The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle*, 335.

⁹¹ King to Stark, October 21, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 2:38.

response from D'Argenlieu would no longer be the accepted status quo. Finally, when Halsey requested a 'Lion' to be sent to Noumea, King saw to its shipment.⁹²

Halsey's assumption of command did not instantly revive Allied prospects. His aggressive fighting style neither stopped the Japanese counter-offensive, nor changed the logistics situation in Noumea overnight. The Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, October 25-27, 1942, resulted in an allied retreat and the sinking of the *U.S.S. Hornet*. This left the Pacific fleet with only two aircraft carriers -- the *U.S.S. Enterprise* whose forward elevator was so severely damaged in the battle, she could conduct only limited operations, and the *U.S.S. Saratoga* recovering from a torpedo.⁹³

Conclusion

Vice Admiral Ghormley reported to the South Pacific at a time when neither men nor material existed in sufficient numbers to fulfill expectations in Washington. Ghormley stood up the South Pacific command from scratch, and forces under his overall command seized the islands of Guadalcanal and Tulagi. From the manner in which the Japanese fled into the jungle when the Marines arrived, they were clearly not expecting the attack. The supplies, equipment, and buildings that the Marines seized along with the partially completed runway were instrumental in establishing a base on the island. The speed at which the plan went from concept to execution was in part due to Ghormley's work. Two days after the invasion, the Battle of Savo Island took place. Considered an Allied disaster, the Battle of Savo Island was due as much to Japanese efficiency as to Allied errors. From the start, Ghormley had feared that his untrained crews would not hold up well against the veteran Japanese. Ghormley's great error in the

⁹² Halsey to Nimitz, October 21, 1942 and King to Halsey November 28, 1942, Nimitz Graybook, 2:144, 240.

⁹³ Morison, *The Two-Ocean War*, 194-196.

campaign was not being present when his subordinate commanders met to discuss alternatives. Had he been present at the Koro Island meeting, he may have heard the objections to Fletcher's decision to only provide two days of air cover. Ghormley's absence from this meeting without providing Callahan with strategic guidance and the authority to act in his place was inexcusable.

Ghormley knew going into the campaign that logistics would be crucial to sustaining his forces. He made plans to support the logistics flow; but in the late summer of 1942, the Allies simply lacked the wherewithal and the sealift capability to ensure timely delivery of men and supplies. Nimitz and King had to weigh the risks in committing resources to the South Pacific. King's offensive-defensive plan made Guadalcanal the primary theater before the Americans were ready to supply it properly.

Nimitz executed his responsibility to ensure the best man was in the job, and he replaced Ghormley once Halsey was well enough to return to active duty. Nimitz did not make the decision to relieve lightly, as he knew it would have a profound impact on Ghormley, but acted in the best interest of the nation.⁹⁴ Unfortunately, many of the records that might have cast more light on the situation were lost with Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan when he was killed in the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal.⁹⁵ Perhaps a fair conclusion is that Ghormley should have requested relief by acknowledging that he was not fully functional; that he did not was likely the product of a professional culture where admitting weakness was perceived as failure.

Despite the cloud that hangs over Ghormley's reputation, the disappointments of his South Pacific command should not obscure the important contributions he made in the critical

⁹⁴ E. B. Potter, *Nimitz*, 258.

⁹⁵ Ghormley, *The Tide Turns*, "Ghormley Papers, Joyner Library, 10.

years 1940-42 as the Special Naval Observer in London and in resolving the awkward standoff with the Free French in Noumea 1942. In addition, his South Pacific command laid the foundation that his successor subsequently built on to achieve victory over the Japanese.

Epilogue

Vice Admiral Ghormley regained his health in the spring of 1943. At Nimitz's request, he returned as the commandant of the 14th Naval District Hawaiian Sea Frontier. The major functions of the frontier were the maintenance of picket ships and the port facilities in Hawaii, the escorting of island shipping, and search and rescue operations. In 1944, Ghormley served as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Germany and oversaw the dismantling of the Kriegsmarine and the handling of war prizes.⁹⁶ Ghormley demonstrated his true character by returning to work closely with the man that relieved him. Ghormley's story does not trace the arc of a hero's journey, but his service and sacrifice are part of the fabric of the history of the United States Navy.

⁹⁶ Potter, *Nimitz*, 281.

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