

The Last Post
Vice Admiral Willis Augustus Lee, Junior, USN
The 'Gun Club's' Big Gun
By
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General Alexander Vandergrift's First Marine Division and Colonel "Red Mike" Edson's 1st Marine Raider Battalion had been on Guadalcanal since August 7, 1942, landing just eight months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor precipitated the United States' entry into World War II. During that time they had fought hard and eaten and slept little. For three consecutive nights in mid November their sleep would continue to be disrupted. This time it would be the thunder and lightning of naval gunfire as Imperial Japanese and United States forces slugged it out in a series of sharp surface actions fought in the stygian darkness on Iron Bottom Sound.

Chief among the key players in this battle was a fatherly looking, businesslike, bespectacled, chain-smoking veteran of the United States Navy Rifle Team and the 1920 Olympic Rifle Team. Willis Augustus Lee, Jr., who liked nothing better than swapping sea stories with his fellow watch standers, discussing gunnery problems, or shooting a rifle match, was born in Natlee, Kentucky on May 11, 1888. His father, Willis Augustus Lee, was a local lawyer who rose to a judgeship. Susan Arnold Lee, his mother, remained at home, as was the custom of her time and social class. Lee was descended from a prominent American family. Charles Lee, his great-great-grandfather, who served as Attorney General during the administrations of George Washington and John Adams, was the brother of Revolutionary War hero Colonel Henry

“Light Horse Harry” Lee and the uncle of General Robert E. Lee of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Lee received his early education in the public schools of Owenton, Kentucky and, in 1904, at the age of 16, entered the United States Naval Academy. There he lettered on the rifle team and competed in the inaugural National Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio in 1907, where he won both the individual rifle and pistol matches, the only person ever to have done so. Rifle shooting was a well-established sport at Annapolis during Lee’s day and the school year book, *The Lucky Bag*, commented that the rifle team had, “...established for itself, in a modest sort of way, quite a name for both individual and team shooting. Although not spectacular when compared with football..., rifle shooting for the competitor, is nevertheless one of the most fascinating of all sports.” In his senior year Lee’s team went undefeated.

The Lucky Bag also noted that Lee was “...the star of the team, has covered himself with glory-and medals. Wears horn-rimmed spectacles and swears he is as blind as a bat, but we think he can hit a fly at 600 yards. Merely as a divertissement, he picked up a revolver at the Perryville match and beat out all of the ‘sharks’.” While at Annapolis it is reasonable to presume that he crossed paths with fellow midshipmen and future Olympic teammates Carl T. Osburn ’07 and Harold T. Bartlett ’11.

Upon graduation from Annapolis, standing 106th of 201 in the class of 1908, Passed Midshipman Lee spent the summer with the Navy Rifle Team, the first of five appearances he would make after graduation. When the shooting

season ended he was ordered to the battleship *Idaho* to begin the two years of sea duty required by law to complete his naval education prior to commissioning. Here he entered what was informally known as “The Gun Club”, those officers who were destined for a life of service aboard capitol ships, the big gun dreadnaughts.

The Navy ordered him to duty with the rifle team during the summer of 1909 after which he reported to the cruiser *New Orleans*. While in transit from the New Orleans to the gunboat *Helena*, then serving on the Asiatic Station, he completed his mandatory sea service and was commissioned an Ensign on June 6, 1910. Lee, whose Annapolis classmates, prompted by his oriental sounding last name, had given him the nickname of ‘Ching’, would now serve in the Far East patrolling the Yangtze River and the Chinese littorals.

After nearly three years abroad he returned to the United States in 1913 to once more participate in the National Matches. His third trip to Perry behind him he proceeded to the *Idaho* for a few short months. He was soon packing his cruise chest to begin a two-year tour aboard the *New Hampshire*. While in *New Hampshire* he was a member of the expeditionary force that occupied Vera Cruz, Mexico on April 21, 1914 in retaliation for the arrest of US sailors at Tampico on April 9th of that year.

As The Great War began in Europe, Lee went to shore duty in East Moline, Illinois as the Inspector of Ordnance, a position he held from December 1915 until he entered the war zone in November of 1918. Lee reached Queenstown (now Cobh), Ireland to join the wardroom of the destroyer *O’Brien*

during the last few weeks of the war; but soon found himself transferred to another destroyer, the *Lea*. On July 14, 1919, just before attending the National Matches at Camp Perry he managed to find time to marry Mabelle Elspeth Allen, the daughter of a Rock Island, Illinois businessman.

Greater responsibility fell to him after the Nationals when he assumed the duties as the executive officer of the submarine tender *Bushnell* then engaged in operating and evaluating German U-Boats taken as war reparations. Lee's tour of duty in the *Bushnell* would not be long. His standing as a marksman earned him an invitation to tryout for the United States Shooting Team. This time the venue would not be Camp Perry but rather the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp.

The 23 members of The Olympic Rifle Team of 1920 had a decided leaning toward the Naval Services. Besides Lee, now a Lieutenant Commander, shooter Commander Carl Osburn and medical officer, Lieutenant Commander William McDonnell, also represented the Navy. The Marine Corps contributed coach Major W. Dulty Smith and shooters Second Lieutenant Joseph Jackson, Gunnery Sergeant Ollie Schriver, and Sergeants Ralph Henshaw and Morris Fisher.

The team would capture team gold medals in Military Rifle Prone at 300 meters, Military Rifle Prone at 600 meters, Military Rifle Prone at 300 and 600 meters, Any Rifle Prone at 600 meters, and Smallbore Rifle Standing at 50 meters while they added a silver in 300 Meter Standing Military Rifle Match and a bronze in Running Deer. Lee shot in all seven matches and, incredibly, did it all in one day. Shooting 200 record shots in three different disciplines kept him

hopping and gainfully employed but, perhaps, prevented him from winning an individual medal. A shooter went to the line but once at this match, the score counting for both team and individual honors. The United States Team would be as successful in individual honors as in the team events, various shooters taking five gold, three silver, and five bronze medals in the rifle events.

The ten years following the Olympics would be professionally rewarding for Lee. He learned his trade well, spending four years at sea as the commanding officer of the destroyers, *Fairfax* and *William B. Preston*. He took the *Preston* to the China Station, via the Suez Canal, and won the Far East Interport Rifle Championship after arriving. Lee found himself on shore during 1925 as an ordnance inspector at the New York Navy Yard. This tour was broken up by summer of shooting as he captained the Navy Team at Camp Perry.

Sea duty followed as executive officer of the repair ship *Antares* and then as the captain of the *Lardner*. Lee attended the senior course at the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island in 1929, a posting that set him on the path to greater responsibility. Duty as captain of the Navy team at the 1930 Nationals marked the end of a distinguished competitive shooting career that stretched over two decades. From this point on his shooting experience focused on large naval rifles as he served in various capacities including two years in charge of the Division of Fleet Training's Gunnery Section.

Various administrative and staff postings, interrupted with a tour of sea duty aboard the battleship *Pennsylvania* and command of the cruiser *Concord*,

filled his professional life until the outbreak of World War II. After spending the first months of the war as Chief of Staff to Admiral Ernest King, the Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet, he reported to the Pacific where he reached the pinnacle of success in the “Gun Club: command of battleships in combat. Lee, as Commander Battleship Division Six, flew his flag from the mast of the *Washington*. Once in the Pacific he participated in all the major naval engagements fought during the war, save the Battle of Midway.

The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, fought almost continuously between the 12th and the 15th of November 1942, was a turning point in the war. Its beginning did not auger well for the Allied forces. The opening engagement with the ‘Tokyo Express’ was like a bar room brawl. It was quick, vicious, bloody and chaotic. The United States had five ships crippled or sunk, the much beloved Rear Admiral Daniel “Uncle Dan” Callaghan and his academy classmate Rear Admiral Norman Scott killed, and the Sullivan family of Waterloo, Iowa lost all five of its sons, Albert, Leo, George, Joseph, and Francis when the cruiser *Juneau* was sunk.

The afternoon of November 14, 1942, found Rear Admiral Lee’s hastily organized Task Force 64, consisting of the battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota* and the destroyers *Walke*, *Benham*, *Gwin*, and *Preston*, cruising about 100 miles southwest of Guadalcanal to avoid being spotted by the Japanese. About an hour before midnight, Lee entered Iron Bottom Sound to intercept a much stronger Japanese force lead by the battleship *Kirishima*, heavy cruisers *Takao* and *Atago*, and a screening force of destroyers.

Lee, who understood the tactical significance of radar, watched the blips on the Combat Information Center's radarscope and patiently waited while the Japanese closed. After 24 minutes of nerve-wracking tension he at last ordered his ships to open fire. The Japanese did not have radar, but they were brave and pressed forward. Joining the battle, the Japanese met the destroyers of Lee's van and sunk *Preston* and *Walke* within minutes and quickly placed the other two out of action.

Alone the two US battleships raced headlong towards the Japanese through the wreckage of their escorts, tossing rafts and Carley floats overboard to the swimming destroyermen. Lee, concerned about the location of some US PT boats that were operating in the area, picked up the microphone of the Talk Between Ship radio and barked into the ether, "Stand aside! I'm coming through! This is 'Ching' Lee!" The flimsy torpedo boats, in obedience to the commanding voice that overcame the crackling static, scampered out of harm's way as the two battleships roared though.

Just when things seemed as if they could not get worse the *South Dakota* lost electrical power, rendering her virtually ineffective. Without regard to the odds heavily stacked against them the two ships plunged toward the larger enemy force, "bones in their teeth". While the disabled *South Dakota* drew the enemy's fire, the *Washington* took advantage of the situation, hitting the distracted *Kirishima* with nine 16 inch and 40 five inch shells. Her crew soon scuttled the helpless flaming hulk of what had been a proud Japanese battleship.

Even though three US destroyers were lost and the *South Dakota* and the remaining destroyer heavily damaged, the Japanese efforts to reinforce and resupply its forces ashore failed and were not resumed. Lee's decisive leadership and the seamanship of the *Washington's* skipper, Captain Glenn Davis, gave them a singular victory. The *Washington*, her admiral, skipper, and crew could claim to be the only United States battleship to sink an enemy battleship in a one-on-one gunnery duel during World War II. It is, most certainly, the last time the world would witness such a battle of leviathans.

Heroic in its own right, the action was strategically significant as the turning point of the Pacific War. The battle, fought in the confined and shallow waters adjacent to Guadalcanal, would check the expansion of The Greater South East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, as the offensive momentum would shift from the Japanese to the Allies. The Japanese would soon know Guadalcanal as "Starvation Island". Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal said that Lee's interception and destruction of the Japanese convoy bound for Guadalcanal, "...undoubtedly saved that island for the American cause as well as the lives of the Marines on it." In recognition of his leadership and heroism Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, United States Fleet personally presented Lee with the Navy Cross, the nation's second highest award for valor.

As the war progressed, Lee would assist in the reduction of Japanese strongholds as the commander of Battleship Division Six and eventually Commander of Battleships, Pacific Fleet. In this role Lee came tantalizingly close to his second battleship duel during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Early in the

morning of October 25, 1944-the 529th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt- Admiral William Halsey, the Third Fleet commander, directed Lee's Task Force 34 to pursue the Japanese Northern Force. Just before Lee closed with the Japanese fleet off Cape Engaño, Halsey recalled him to defend 'Taffy Force', a group of six escort carriers, three destroyers and four destroyer escorts. Armed with nothing larger than 5-inch guns, Taffy Force was under attack by a Japanese force of four battleships and six heavy cruisers supported by a host of destroyers.

In what would become known as "The Battle Off Samar" the gallant doomed ships were vastly outgunned and outnumbered. The commander, Rear Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, desperately signaled Halsey "Where is Lee XX Send Lee." Lee's five fast battleships quickly reversed course and steamed south at flank speed only to arrive too late. The Japanese had done their damage and fled to safety. The question of how the Japanese *Yamato's* 18.1-inch main battery, the largest naval rifles ever built, would have stacked up against the 16-inch guns of the *Iowa* class will forever be open to conjecture. What is certain is that Lee and his captains were bitterly disappointed to lose the opportunity to answer that question in a Line of Battle shoot out.

The run north became known somewhat derisively as 'The Battle of Bull's Run' and was highlighted by a communication fiasco of epic proportions. Admiral Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, needing up to date information, directed that the message, "Where is, repeat, where is Task Force 34?" be sent to Halsey. To reduce the possibility that the enemy might break a code all

messages were sent with innocuous and unrelated phrases, called padding, separating the sentences.

The signal sent read, "Turkey trots to water GG From CINCPAC XX Where is, repeat, where is Task Force 34 RR The world wonders." Unfortunately, the last padding phrase, encoded by someone who seemed to be under the influence of Tennyson, broke the unrelated rule. Handed the message by a yeoman Ensign Burton Goldstein removed the first padding but believed that the final padding was part of the text and did not delete it. His superior, Lieutenant Charles Fox agreed. Their job was not to reason why. The message was passed to the bridge with the padding attached, giving a whole new meaning and tone to Nimitz's query. Halsey's explosive reaction was predictable.

The four battles that, in aggregate, made up the Battle of Leyte Gulf accounted for over a quarter of all Japanese combat tonnage lost since the attack on Pearl Harbor. Four aircraft carriers, three battleships, six heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, ten destroyers, and most of their crews lay shattered on the floor of the Philippine Sea. After October 25, 1944 the Imperial Japanese Navy ceased to exist as an effective fighting force.

The Navy recognized Lee's expertise in the use of radar, success in protecting the aircraft carriers in his task forces, the accuracy of his shore bombardments, and his diligence in training anti-aircraft gun crews. Even though it would cost the Navy one of its premier fighting admirals Lee was relieved of his combat command for a more important job. The Navy, preparing to mount Operation Olympic-the invasion of the Japanese home islands,

expected a *Kamikaze* fury that would make previous mass suicide attacks pale in comparison. Lee, now a Vice Admiral, was ordered to direct his considerable talents to develop and test tactics and equipment that would neutralize the expected Japanese fury. He returned to the United States in the early summer of 1945 to begin carrying out this assignment. His flagship, the old battleship *Wyoming*, had been designated as a test bed for Lee's ideas and was stationed on the east coast.

The admiral and his wife established a comfortable home in Falmouth, Maine, near Portland, the base of operations for the top-secret tactical assignment. After a night ashore, Lee stepped into the stern sheets of his launch and directed the coxswain to cast off and make for the *Wyoming*, swinging on her anchor off Portland. Somewhere between the ship and the shore, on August 25, 1945, the admiral's barge became Charon's ferry, and Casco Bay the River Styx, when the "Gun Club's" big gun was stricken with a fatal heart attack. He was laid to rest with full military honors in section six of Arlington National Cemetery to be joined by his wife four years later.