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Actions Above Words:

A Biography of Vice Admiral Clifton “Ziggy” Sprague

John Kirwan

Honors – 451 Thesis

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Introduction:

Vice Admiral Clifton A.F. “Ziggy” Sprague. A name unfamiliar to many and yet celebrated by those that know it. A name which while just as decorated as his peers has been largely forgotten by the public eye. When considering those leaders who captured popular sentiment and held onto it, individuals like General George Patton, Supreme Commander and later President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Admiral William “Bull” Halsey all come to mind. These giants of the American army and navy are recognized as the commanders which led the United States and the Allies as whole to victory in both Europe and the Pacific. They commanded thousands of soldiers and sailors into battle against the most terrifying forces which the Third Reich and Imperial Japan could unleash.

Many other heroes were produced during the Second World War though. These heroes were counted from among not only the admiralty but also lower officers and enlisted men. The praises of these individuals are also sung and kept alive through their accounts of battles, the medals they wear upon their uniforms, and their families. But among these many heroes is the name Vice Admiral Clifton A.F. “Ziggy” Sprague. Sprague was a man of devotion, with a work ethic and devotion to the United States Navy unparalleled. He served the country for near 35 years and rose through the ranks of the Navy from an average officer fresh from the Naval Academy to become a commander of Fleet Aircraft Carriers and full task groups. Surely a person of such renown should be remembered and praised. But Admiral Sprague has become just as the many other thousands of soldiers and sailors, forgotten by time. It is thus the purpose of this thesis to reintroduce Admiral Sprague to the public. To tell his story and of his accomplishments and achievements and of the kind of man he was. There are accounts of his finest hour, the Battle Off Samar, a truly David vs. Goliath moment in which all of Admiral Sprague’s experience and

training culminated in the defense of many thousands of lives from an assault by the largest warship ever built. But there are few accounts of the life spent leading up to this moment, and that is the primary focus of this thesis, not just the kind of sailor and commander that Sprague was, but the kind of man he was.

As a part of the upper echelons of the military, Admiral Sprague experienced the politics and jockeying which any other flag officer would have and would still experience. Sprague refused to play into these political games. He was known for letting his actions speak louder than his words and while we celebrate those men that talked the talk as they walked the walk, Sprague walked without the need to put himself on a pedestal. He should serve as an example of not only an ideal sailor, but of a good man. One who put the lives of his men in front of all else and thought little of attempting to bolster his own career with self-promotional lip service. Even when he was a part of that grand David vs. Goliath moment, the Battle of Samar in late 1944, Sprague is remembered as the man that commanded the American task group there and for little else. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to bring attention to not just a forgotten hero of which there are many, but also to a good man.

Literature Review:

Preparation for this thesis came in the form of extensive reading and research. Admiral Sprague is not a well-recognized individual and even though there are numerous accounts of his actions in the line of duty while at Leyte Gulf and off Samar, few people have written on his life as a whole. In my research I found only one full biography which has ever been published on his life, *Devotion to Duty* by John F. Wukovits, and this biography is now 25 years old. I think it is time to again tell Admiral Sprague's story and to present the perspective of other experts while

also reviewing Admiral Sprague's life in order to refresh his story and reintroduce him to the world.

As mentioned, *Devotion to Duty* by John Wukovits is the only complete and proper biography of Admiral Sprague's life and thus serves as a starting point from which a thesis concerning Admiral Sprague's life can be written. It is comprehensive and tells of his childhood, his entrance into the Naval Academy, his time spent serving aboard the *USS Wheeling* (PG-14) during the First World War, as a Naval Aviator following the end of the war, his first commands prior to the United States entrance to the Second World War, his time spent as Captain of the *USS Wasp* (CV-18), his promotion to Rear Admiral and his actions during the Battle Off Samar, and then his life after the war. *Devotion to Duty* does an excellent job of presenting Sprague the sailor, aviator, and commander. This thesis will present not only this side of Admiral Sprague but also emphasize the kind of man that Sprague was, calm under pressure, focused, and a firm but fair man both in the midst of combat and outside of it.

The Pacific Campaign by Dan van der Vat serves as the first of multiple deep resources which assist in illustrating the Battle Off Samar itself. While it broadly paints the Battle of Leyte Gulf as it relates to the war between the United States and Japan, it does an excellent job of putting Admiral Sprague's role in the Battle Off Samar into context as a pivotal point in the Battle of Leyte Gulf as being an action which helped to define the rest of the war. It is used in this capacity in this thesis.

The Battle Off Samar Taffy III at Leyte Gulf by Robert John Cox is the most comprehensive of the accounts of the Battle Off Samar which contributed to this thesis. It tells of the actions of each ship, squadron, and all major actors in the lead-up to, during, and action after the battle. While it does this excellently, Cox's account is all that this is and thus it is used to

primarily to tell of the actions of Admiral Sprague during the Battle Off Samar, his actions in response to the arrival of Admiral Kurita's Center Force, and his orders which would ultimately save the American marines who had landed on Samar and prevent the elongation of the campaign for the Philippines.

Albert Furlow's contributions to both the *Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Biography* and the *Biographical Dictionary of World War II Generals & Flag Officers* are both short yet detailed accounts of Admiral Sprague's life. They served this thesis by providing outlines from which the focal points of Admiral Sprague's story can be emphasized and have narratives built around them. While they contribute no new information relative to the more comprehensive sources here, they were a great help in creating an outline for this thesis.

Commander Mark Stille's (ret.) books *US Navy Carrier Aircraft vs IJN Yamato Class Battleships* and *US Navy Escort Carriers 1942-1945* both served as technical accounts of the ships and aircraft while fought on Admiral Sprague's behalf in his time as Captain of the *USS Wasp* and in his time commanding Taffy III. While they do not contribute to the biography of Admiral Sprague himself, they provide insight into the ships and aircraft that he commanded and fought against thus helping to paint a picture of what Admiral Sprague encountered daily.

These many comprehensive sources thus served as the foundation upon which this thesis is built. Along with primary sources from the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C. these are the sources upon which the life and service of Vice Admiral Clifton A.F. "Ziggy" Sprague will be presented and reintroduced to a country which has all but forgotten him.

Section 1: Early Life

Clifton Albert Frederick Sprague was born on January 8th, 1896 to Henry and Hazel (nee Furlow) Sprague in Dorchester Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Sprague's parents both had immigrant backgrounds, with Henry Sprague's parents immigrating from Prussia in 1860 to escape persecution in opposition to conscription and Hazel Furlow an immigrant to the United States from Nova Scotia, Canada. Young Clifton would be the eldest of four siblings with two younger sisters Hazel and Dorothea born in 1899 and 1903 respectively, followed by a younger brother Edwin born in 1907. Henry Sprague worked as a businessman acting as one half of the Sprague-Nugent company working in the relatively new field of advertising billboards, though he would move on to other ventures after the company was sold to the rivaling Donnelly Advertising Company in 1914. In this time the family had moved from Dorchester to the nearby town of Milton, Massachusetts. The lot upon which the new Sprague residence sat had many acres of free space and so Clifton was free to roam and play with his siblings in the area. It was not this land upon which the adolescent Clifton Sprague would come to adore the sea from which he would make a career and serve his country. That honor would go to the seaside cottage his father owned in Rockport, Massachusetts at Cape Ann.¹

The summer's spent at the cottage no doubt contributed to Sprague's love for the sea and the sense of adventure which he built around it. Even after entering the Naval Academy Sprague would still return here from time to time, partaking in fishing, crab-hunting, and simply enjoying the sitting in the salty air of the northeastern resort town. His sister Dorothea recalled that Clifton, "loved it", at Rockport and while they would crab hunt together, she would ask him to

¹ Wukovits, John F. 1995. *Devotion to Duty: A Biography of Admiral Clifton A.F. Sprague*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press.

come pick up the crabs she had found. Dorothea further recounted that Clifton would, “never complain” about her requests and always performed quietly and effectively.²

Sprague also found himself drawn into the spiritual life of his mother. While his father was not the religious type, Sprague’s mother went to Church each Sunday and would bring Clifton with her, encouraging him to assist the Church, which he did in the form of serving as an altar boy. Dorothea recalled that their father Henry, “never went to church” as he criticized those who would act religious each Sunday but not act serviceable to others on the other six days of the week. It was this religious clashing between his mother and father which motivated Clifton to recall years later that his father, “talked too much”, adding to the quiet countenance that he would be known for.³

Sprague’s school life was similarly quiet but of note was his disposition in relation to the military. He wrote in a composition in the sixth-grade that he wished to attend “West Point” in order that when he would march down the street people would cheer and call him “General Sprague”. After graduating from his grade school, Milton’s Consolidated Grammar School, Sprague went on to attend Highland Military Academy. Highland was known to be strict in its rules and in relation to the conduct of its cadets. The schedule that followed from this proved to be rough for Clifton’s family as Dorothea recounts that he was often an “absentee brother” rarely visiting home and devoting himself to his studies as the rigors of the academy. Thus, the foundation for Sprague’s career began to be set, as a quiet, hard-working, and ever focused military man.⁴

² Dorothea Harvey interview with John Wukovits, 25th October 1991.

³ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁴ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

Sprague's academic career before the navy was bookended with time spent at Roxbury Latin School, a prestigious academy which sees many of its candidates go on to attend Harvard. It was in this time that Sprague began to leave the quiet shell that he had grown up inside most of his childhood. He was recalled by the school's graduation publication as "sitting high in people's hearts". While at Roxbury, Sprague would earn average grades. This combined with the competitiveness which he faced applying to the Naval Academy meant that his first attempt at applying to West Point was a failure. Sprague would thus make the calculated decision to move to a less competitive state post-graduation and attended Norwich University, a military college in Northfield, Vermont. Sprague there would focus upon his studies extensively, attaining a top ten class ranking in his first year and reapplying to the Naval Academy. Upon securing a recommendation as an alternate from Vermont representative Frank Plumley and later from Vermont Senator Carroll Page, Sprague found himself a primary candidate for admission to the Naval Academy in the Spring of 1914. He made the journey to take the entrance exam in Montpelier, Vermont on April 21st. One month later, Sprague received his scores in the mail, finding that he had passed as the number one candidate with the highest score in two of three sections and was to report in June to Annapolis for a physical exam. Senator Page sent a personal letter of congratulations along with the scores. That June Sprague again made a trip to his examination and passed the physical with flying colors. Clifton Sprague, at first a quiet boy with a love for the sea from Dorchester, then a beloved and well-behaved classmate at Roxbury, was now a cadet in the United States Naval Academy.⁵

⁵ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

Section 2: The Naval Academy and the First World War

Sprague arrived at the Naval Academy for enrollment that same June in which he passed the physical exam and quickly received his books, uniform, and other materials.⁶ Of note was the manual *Regulations of the United States Naval Academy*. It contained pages upon pages of rules of conduct for each cadet to uphold with transgressions all assigned a different number of demerits. Sprague was then thrown into the daily life and classes which could be expected of the cadets at the Naval Academy. His classes entailed studies on the innerworkings of the ships they would soon command, including on the electronic systems, engineering, machinery, and other practical learning. Courses were often end-capped by cruises. These week or month-long trips would see the cadets join the crew of operational ships on peacetime assignments. It was through these cruises that Sprague would first see the Panama Canal and was even given the opportunity to see his family. On a cruise with the *USS Missouri*, Sprague would accidentally return to the ship too late after a short shore leave and was awarded 50 demerits for it. This translated to disallowance from going ashore at the next stop,⁷ which was Rockport, Massachusetts, the home of his family's summer cottage. Even as Sprague's family had prepared a meal for him, he would not be allowed to visit them.⁸ Such a mistake did not keep him down long though. Sprague is remembered by that year's yearbook that he was simply happy to be back near his old stomping grounds.⁹

While he continued his studies at the Naval Academy with success, ranking 66th and later 43rd out of a class of near two hundred cadets, Sprague began to find himself influenced by the

⁶ "Sprague, Clifton Albert Frederick." Naval History and Heritage Command. Naval History and Heritage Command, November 20, 2020. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/modern-biographical-files-ndl/modern-bios-s/sprague-clifton-a-f.html>.

⁷ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁸ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

⁹ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

geopolitics of the time. The Japanese had become increasingly bold in the past few decades and began to challenge United States influence in the mid-Pacific. Sprague held the Japanese as a rival similar to many Americans for control over the high seas and thus the Naval Academy Curriculum and the focus of his classmates and himself on Americas primary possession in the region, the Philippines, prefacing what would become Sprague's most recognized naval action at Leyte Gulf.¹⁰

Though he still remained relatively quiet in comparison to his classmates, Sprague found himself drawn into the machoism and aggressiveness of Navy life, with his sudden quips and quick wit being remembered by fellow cadets. Even so, Sprague remained wary of the politics which pervaded those in the highest command positions and believed that a person's work should speak for itself.¹¹ In this way, Sprague let his own performance distinguish him and while this mindset may have contributed to part of the reason Sprague would never reach beyond Rear Admiral in his active time serving, the fact that he became a member of the admiralty alone speaks to the quality of man and the quality of service.

It was also here that his eponymous nickname came to be. Classmates recalled that Sprague would "zigzag" up and down the halls of the Naval Academy between courses which along with his quiet "tough as nails" persona would endear him to many. Thus, the nickname "Ziggy" came to be and stuck by 1918.¹²

The now dubbed Ziggy Sprague would find himself and the rest of his class pulled into the drama of war as the United States began to consider actions in Europe. The First World War had been raging for three years starting in 1914 following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand

¹⁰ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

¹¹ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

¹² Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

and so the Naval Academy began to accelerate the timeline for cadet graduation while simultaneously taking on more prospective sailors with the newest class. When the class of 1917 was graduated three months in advance, Sprague's class of 1918 knew that they would soon follow. News soon followed telling the class that they would graduate that coming September, 8 months ahead of the initial schedule.¹³

With the sinking of the US cruise liner *Lusitania*, the following German refusal to restrict their submarine attacks on Entente and United States ships in the Atlantic, and the diplomatic disaster that was the Zimmerman telegram (in which Germany promised Mexico Texas among other US states in the event the war spread to North America), President Woodrow Wilson requested from Congress a declaration of war. On the 6th of April 1917, the United States declared war on Germany.

For Sprague, if the declaration of war affected him in any sort of way, he did not show it. Writing to his mother, Hazel, that spring, Sprague told her of how the academy was just the same as it was with the accelerated graduation schedule and beyond that it seemed to be business as usual.¹⁴ This "business as usual" attitude was almost interrupted by a decision to advance the Naval reserves ahead of the class of 1918 in seniority as they would be deployed before the graduation of Sprague's class. The class reacted poorly with much the cadets expressing their anger to the Naval Academy to such an extent that graduation was again moved up, this time to June of 1917, a full year before originally due. Thus, on June 28th, 1917, Sprague, joined by the other 198 cadets of the class of 1918 found themselves graduating and soon to be shipped abroad to join the European fray.¹⁵

¹³ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

¹⁴ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

¹⁵ "Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

Sprague's first assignment came through as an appointment to the *USS Wheeling*, in July 1917. The ship was a gunboat designed to escort American troop and supply ships to their destinations, acting as the primary defense against the unrestricted submarine warfare which helped to prompt the American declaration of war. Here, Sprague would begin his naval career as an ensign assigned to command groups of men first as a gunnery officer and later in communications, navigation, and as an executive officer.¹⁶ Ziggy was thus well equipped to take on command of the gradually larger ships to which he was assigned later in his career having experienced not only the innerworkings of such ships at Annapolis, but also commanding a variety of sections while serving with the *Wheeling*.¹⁷

Ensign Sprague and the rest of the crew aboard the *Wheeling* would make for repairs in New Orleans before being directed to cross the ocean and make base in the Azores island chain of Portugal in the mid-Atlantic. Even though she was slowed by a hurricane and the repairs that came from it, *Wheeling* and Sprague arrived in the Azores with the destroyers *USS Whipple* and *USS Truxtan* on the 16th of September 1917. Much of the time spent here was quiet and it would not be until the Spring 1918 that Sprague would first encounter action, though in that time, his leadership style would begin to show itself, reminiscent of the quiet, respectful youth who spent summers at Cape Ann. Sprague was remembered by those who first served under him as quiet leader who let people do the jobs they were meant to do while cultivating an aura of respect for his assigned unit.¹⁸ Sprague would treat his crew not as disposable sailors and soldiers, but each as a man. Even when scolding would occur, Sprague would remain soft in his vitriol and encouraging and respectful in his praise.

¹⁶ "Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

¹⁷Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

¹⁸ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

Sprague would first encounter action in May of 1918, while the *Wheeling* was escorting a convoy through the western Mediterranean. A German U-boat approached the convoy and was engaged by other destroyers protecting the convoy. This attack was followed a week later by a more complete attack in which a wolfpack of U-boats descended upon the convoy in the evening. The British ship *HMS Sculptor* came under torpedo fire at 1848 hours, 6:48 pm, and *Wheeling* responded in turn by turning into the attack and dropping a depth charge screen alongside two other escort vessels. While there was no debris to indicate a successful strike against the U-boat, later reports indicated that *U-39* had been damaged and forced to return to port.¹⁹

The attack by *U-39* was followed an hour and a half later by another attack which saw the British ship *Mavisbrook* come under fire. It was overwhelmed by debris and survivors that had been thrown from the ship by the torpedo attack. *Wheeling* was under orders to protect the convoy itself and so could not respond, not doubt causing Sprague distress and his ship was forced to sail past those trapped in the freezing water of the Mediterranean Sea. The hit and run tactics continued throughout the night, though *Wheeling* stayed at its station and saw through the escort of the convoy.²⁰

While this one notable week was the only time Sprague would see action during the war, the moment stuck with him for months and presumably years afterwards, as he wrote to his sister Dorothea that he could do “little more than throw things...for men to cling to.” She went on to recall that the inability to save those men “bothered [Sprague] a lot.”²¹

¹⁹ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

²⁰ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

²¹ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

Section 3: The Interwar and Aviation

Much of the rest of the war saw the *Wheeling* engage in quiet escort duty. While the threat of U-boats was always present, Sprague did not see any more action himself through the end of the war. He would remain with the *Wheeling* ceasefire and most of the way through 1919 until it was decommissioned in October of that year and Sprague was transferred to the *USS Manley*, and then just a few months later to the crew of the fledgling battleship *USS Tennessee*. Both of these assignments were extremely short and saw the now Lieutenant Sprague look for more chances to advance vertically rather than horizontally. The young field of naval aviation caught his eye in 1920 and he soon joined the newest class of soon-to-be naval aviators on December 3rd, 1920 alongside 33 others²² including Thomas Sprague (no relation), a high-ranking classmate from the Naval Academy who would go on to be Vice Admiral Thomas Sprague serving in many of the same battles as Clifton Sprague.

The first month of training consisted of classroom work concerning the groundwork surrounding flight, aircraft maintenance, and some actual flight time. This culminated in Sprague soloing for the first time on January 11th, 1921. While the Curtiss N-9 seaplane he flew was a far cry from the complex, high-performing fighters and bombers he would command twenty years away, Sprague found he had caught the “bug” of aviation. His eight months of training at Pensacola continued with success until he graduated with his class on August 11th of 1921 joining just a few hundred other sailors registered to fly. He was assigned to Squadron 3 there at what is now the Pensacola Naval Air Station and began to fly relentlessly, logging 1500 hours of flight time within two months of his assignment. With Sprague as skilled as he was, the command at Pensacola assigned him the Squadron leader of Squadron 3²³ and soon Sprague

²² “Sprague”. Naval History and Heritage Command.

²³ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

would begin to help in naval aviation experimentation and test flying, defining his career for much of the 1920s.

One of his most important assignments during this era saw Sprague assigned to the Naval Aviation Factory in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was here that Sprague would assist in the development of aircraft catapults and the arresting gear which would retrieve naval aircraft upon landing on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. As an aircraft carrier has an extremely short runway by aviation standards, it is necessary that aircraft be launched with an assist either in the form of a ramp launch in which an upward-sloped ramp at the far-end of an aircraft carrier would assist in giving an aircraft lift upon takeoff or via a catapult in which the aircraft are slingshot by their landing gear forward to a speed which allows them to gain the necessary lift to maintain flight before leaving the takeoff ramp. Sprague at first contributed to the develop of the latter while he was in Philadelphia in 1923. This time was soon followed in 1926 when Sprague was assigned to the Hampton Roads Naval Air Station in Virginia.²⁴

Hampton Roads had been graced by the presence of the famed inventor Carl Norden. Norden was well renowned for developing the Norden bombsight, a precision bombsight which allowed for the bombing of strategic targets with a lower chance of causing civilian casualties in dense enemy population regions. The bombsight served as an important resource for the United States in the Second World War and thus Norden came to be well known for his contributions for both naval aviation and military aviation as a whole.

It was there at Hampton Roads that Sprague would join Norden in his lab developing the Mk-1 arresting gear, the predecessor to modern hydraulic arresting wire systems. Similar to the required catapult or ramp for takeoff on an aircraft carrier, arresting gear to retrieve aircraft upon

²⁴ “Sprague”. Naval History and Heritage Command.

landing is necessary in order to bring the aviator and their craft to a full stop safely. If an aircraft were to be too slow upon landing, the aircraft could stall and fall into the water or into the side of the carrier. Thus, arresting gear is necessary to slow an aircraft still at flight speed to a stop on the flight deck of a carrier. Originally, the arresting gear used was little more than crude rope with sandbags tied off on each end to slow the aircraft landing. Norden and Sprague would develop a system much more reliable and safe in the Mk-1 arresting gear.²⁵

The Mk-1 gear consisted of a series of both wires strung across the deck which would capture incoming aircraft via a hook which extended from its belly. This hook would grab one of the deck wires which would then stretch to slow the aircraft while vertical wires would capture the aircraft on each side and prevent it from tilting either left or right off the carrier or into part of the carrier's superstructure. Such an advancement set the stage for the success of American naval aviation in particular and global naval aviation in general. The development of not only a relatively safe and reliable way to takeoff and land on aircraft carriers means that even if he was not the one to design the systems, Sprague's testing and experimentation with Norden marks Sprague as one of the most important naval aviators to have lived. Though his contribution has been questioned had been questioned in the past because of Sprague's nature to allow actions to speak for themselves and lack of wanting to participate in the self-promoting which came with officer advancement, there is certainty that he assisted in these tests, as his daughter Patricia would recall that Sprague suffered from "instrument face" in which because of the sudden stop early arresting gear caused an aircraft to experience, a pilot would often find themselves hitting their noses and mouths into the instrument panel. Sprague would go on to have to replace many of his teeth.²⁶

²⁵ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

²⁶ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

This period of test flights and experimentation with saw Sprague assigned to roles which gave him steadily higher command potential. The first of these was assignment to the *USS Lexington* (CV-2), one of the carriers which he had assisted in testing the arresting gear aboard.²⁷ Here he was assigned as a flight deck officer, and later promoted to assistant air officer, and in these capacities began to work not only in flying, but also flight operations, overseeing the movement and transferring of aircraft on the deck of the ship as well as those being launched and those that are being retrieved. While aboard the *Lexington*, Sprague participated in numerous carrier tactics exercises including theoretical defenses of both Pearl Harbor 13 years before the infamous attack would occur as well as the Panama Canal, where a force commanded by Rear Admiral Joseph “Bull” Reeves Black Fleet surprised the defending Blue Fleet with a dawn strike which had it been a real engagement would have crippled the Blue Fleet.²⁸

Following this time aboard the *Lexington*, Sprague would find himself assigned back to the Naval Academy as a flight instructor for two years. Between 1929 and 1931, Sprague would give back to the academy that first trained him by training the next generation of cadets and presenting them with naval aviation.²⁹ His success in motivating hundreds of new recruits towards being pilots further solidified Sprague as a giant of naval aviation.

This time at the Naval Academy saw the turn of the decade to the 1930s and Sprague’s assignment to VP-8 Patrol Squadron attached the *USS Wright*, a seaplane tender, and led the squadron south to act as the defending squadron at the Panama Canal. As Sprague’s first proper command position, his leadership style further was exhibited to those around him as represented through an incident which occurred while he was attached to VP-8. Sprague had been notified

²⁷ “Sprague”. Naval History and Heritage Command.

²⁸ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

²⁹ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

that a nearby Army fort would be conducting artillery practice that day which would restrict the lane through which VP-8 aircraft would fly on approach to landing. Sprague passed the message over to his crew in order to prevent an accident from occurring, but E.H. Eckelmeyer, a member of his squadron would soon find himself on the receiving end of a scolding. Following a flight of gunnery practice that day, Eckelmeyer found himself pulled into Sprague's office. The now Lieutenant Commander Sprague order Eckelmeyer to explain why he had violated the no-fly zone even after giving direct orders not to do so. Though he knew himself not the culprit, Eckelmeyer complied with Sprague's order to write a statement explaining himself and apologizing. Upon leaving Sprague's office though, Eckelmeyer retrieved the "yellow sheet", a squadron flight log showing takeoff and landing times exonerating him. Upon presenting the dossier to Sprague, he read the sheet, handed it back to Eckelmeyer, and quietly dismissed him without any further fuss. Upon later reflection, Eckelmeyer recalled that Sprague was a "fine skipper", a man "we didn't fear... just respected", and that he was "proud to have served with [Sprague]."³⁰

Following its time at the Panama Canal, VP-8 was reassigned to Pearl Harbor in 1933, which Sprague would celebrate by attempting and succeeding at a roundtrip from Hawaii to Midway Island near the mid-point of the Pacific Ocean. The island was near 1300 miles away and took 13 hours. While at Pearl Harbor, Sprague again represented that he treated each of his men as a person when his operations officer, A. Lincoln Baird found himself in hot water after one of his orders' ambiguity caused confusion amongst other commanding officers. Sprague covered for Baird's mistake by saying Baird had a Naval War College student draft the orders for him, as Baird was completing a course there at the time. Sprague was a leader who took care of

³⁰ E.H. Eckelmeyer interview with John Wukovits, 27th September 1993.

his men and protected them not only from the enemy without but also from controversy within. This was similarly represented when at Sprague's immediate next command, a reassignment to Norfolk as the air operations officer, he immediately called in his new staff and asked each what he could do as the new operations officer to improve conditions at Norfolk.³¹ Truly, Sprague was a sailor's commander and did what he could to promote and protect his men while letting his actions speak for themselves.

Sprague's time at Norfolk was also notable in that within a few weeks of being assigned to the Naval Air Station in May 1934, Sprague was tasked by commanding officer Captain Aubrey Fitch with coordinating dozens of aircraft and men as squadrons were transferred from the Fleet Air Department to San Diego.³² Sprague spent the next three months effectively moving men, aircraft, and supplies through the field in order to get them all sent to San Diego. Afterwards, Fitch afterwards received a letter praising his crew for their success which Fitch passed on to Sprague personally praising him for "careful planning, sound judgement, and efficient administration."

Sprague was next transferred in July of 1936 to the *Yorktown* (CV-5) as an air officer for the new carrier. His duties covered nearly all aspects of air operations including not only the day-to-day operations of the aircraft and pilots, but also served in a test pilot role once again. In November of 1937, Sprague made the first two landings aboard the *Yorktown* and followed it closely by making the first launch of the ships hangar catapult, which could launch an aircraft directly from the hangar without moving to the flight deck. Sprague made these flights in order to make sure that he could do what his men could do.³³

³¹Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

³²"Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

³³Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

Much of Sprague's time spent aboard the *Yorktown* consisted of him participating in naval exercises in coordination with other carriers including the famed *USS Enterprise (CV-6)* in Naval Problem XX, a demonstration of an aircraft carrier's effectiveness in convoy escort, submarine defense, and offensive air attacks. Adm. James Russel, who at the time was the flight deck officer underneath Sprague recalled that he "never had to yell at people to get the job done. He was very reasonable and... We liked him very much." But Sprague's relatively quiet career throughout the 1920s and 1930s was soon to come to an end. European geopolitics was again beginning to stir, and the impact would be far reaching. The Navy ordered now Commander Sprague to the Naval War College to take three months of courses related to command.³⁴

Sprague and many of his War College classmates found themselves rushed as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration rushed to put more ships on active duty commanded by upper officers from the Naval War College and the Naval Academy's Postgraduate School. Sprague was given command of the oil tanker *USS Patoka (AV-6)*, his first seagoing command. Sprague's short time with the *Patoka* would result in little more than frustration as he found the ship's engines underpowered, its supplies improperly equipped, and unable to fulfill the duties assigned to it to no fault of his own.³⁵ The Navy quickly assigned him back to the Naval War College in order to complete the courses he had been forced to leave behind, but his time here would soon again be cut short by another small ship: the *USS Tangier (AV-8)*.

Section 4: The Second World War

Sprague was only at the Naval War College for another month before the Navy assigned him to command of the *Tangier* and ordered he make way for Pearl Harbor following its

³⁴ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

³⁵ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

conversion to a seaplane tender and shakedown.³⁶ The *Tangier* was fully converted and commissioned on August 25th of 1941. Sprague began its shakedown cruise following the west coast and arming itself throughout September and October before turning towards Pearl Harbor in late October. The roster at Pearl Harbor listed the ship's compliment as forty officers, twenty-one of them reserve, with the others largely veterans, speaking to the mixed bunch with which Sprague had to work. He was remembered as being a fair and loose commander by those under him on the *Tangier* as long as men were on time, completed their duties, and were not disruptive. Sprague would also often delegate well, allowing his officers to follow a general set of guidelines in tasks and allow them and their respective crews to optimize the work.³⁷

Upon arrival to Pearl Harbor, Sprague allowed his men leave in order that they could find housing for their families, but he asked his wife Annabel to wait until January, as he "didn't like the look of things."³⁸

The final days of November and the first days of December saw Sprague and crew make ready the ship for engagement. He would each night blackout the *Tangier*, ordered all his men back to the ship, and sat in wait each night for what felt like an impending attack from the Japanese. On December 6th, the day before, Sprague ordered a series of drills to keep his men on their toes. In the debrief which followed, he sanctioned his men saying, "How do you know that the Japanese won't attack tomorrow?"³⁹ Sprague was near prophetic.

The next morning, December 7th, 1941, the *USS Tangier* sat in its berth at F-10 on Ford Island. At 0749 hours, the Japanese began their first attack run.⁴⁰ Sprague's men jumped into

³⁶ "Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

³⁷ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

³⁸ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

³⁹ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁴⁰ USS *Tangier*, Report of Pearl Harbor Attack. Naval History and Heritage Command, College Park, MD.

action as he called “Quarters! Quarters! Dammit! Hurry!” Tangiers gunners were among the first, and in Sprague’s mind were among the first to engage the Japanese fighters and bombers as they tore through the sky. The *USS Utah*, astern of the *Tangier* took heavy torpedo strikes and was torn apart. Similarly, other larger nearby ships suffered heavy fire from the Japanese strike.⁴¹ Sprague, to his credit, remained calm and quiet throughout much of the action. He did interfere with the actions of his crew, respectfully allowing them to perform in the face of certain danger even as gunfire ripped through the skies and bombs fell about them.⁴²

The first wave of the attack ended at 0825 allowing 15 minutes for Sprague’s crew to evaluate any damage and ammunition stores.⁴³ Sprague’s crew largely remained at their stations though, prepared for any further action as Sprague’s command and leadership style contributed to his men’s performance.

The second wave came at 0843 as Japanese aircraft once again descended upon Pearl Harbor. With the first wave having crippled the United States battleships, the eyes of the attackers now turned to the north side of Ford Island where Sprague and the *Tangier*.⁴⁴ In the midst of the fray, Sprague took over for one of his men who had suddenly gotten sick on the floor of the radio room. The sailor took his station back over after the mess was cleaned up and Sprague didn’t bring it up again.⁴⁵ In that time multiple dive and torpedo bombers took aim at the *Tangier*, but Sprague’s crew reacted properly, downing the aircraft or forcing them off before damage could be caused to their ship.

⁴¹ Tangier, Report of Pearl Harbor Attack

⁴² Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁴³ Tangier, Report of Pearl Harbor Attack

⁴⁴ Tangier, Report of Pearl Harbor Attack

⁴⁵ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

The fallout from Pearl Harbor was monstrous in proportions. FDR requested an immediate declaration of war upon Japan which was followed by German and Italian declarations of war upon the United States. With the United States battleship fleet crippled, focus now turned towards the aircraft carrier and the carrier battlegroup. Sprague and the dozens of other early naval aviators that had stressed the importance of aviation had their beliefs put to the test as the Navy would now have to rely upon them for the defense of the United States and the eventual offensive thrust that would follow.

Sprague and the *Tangier* next found themselves on the way to Wake Island. Having received orders to prepare to take on supplies and contingent of marines, Sprague and the *Tangier* were ordered to join a task force led by the *USS Saratoga* (CV-3) in order to reinforce Wake Island which had come under fire from the Japanese four days after Pearl Harbor, and so on December 15th, *Tangier* joined Task Force 14 on its way to Wake Island. The Task Force had issues though. As they arrived at Wake, they would require scouting which Vice Admiral William S. Pye of the Pacific Fleet would assign the *Tangier* to perform. Sprague was nervous about the decision as Pye supplied no escort to the vessel, but as Sprague advanced his crew forward, Pye rescinded the order and hesitated over what course of action to take. In his indecisiveness, Sprague found himself astounded by the lack of decisiveness though he could take no action without Pye's orders. Even when the Admiral did decide to continue with the entirety of Task Force 14 towards Wake on December 21st, it was too late. Wake Island was occupied by the Japanese the next day. With morale as low as it was, the action was kept quiet to the American public.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

Following a continuation to Midway where Sprague and the *Tangier* unloaded their Marines and loaded up a number of civilians to transport them back to the United States. Upon his return to the West Coast, the Navy hastily elevated Sprague to the rank of Captain and order he take the *Tangier* to the south Pacific and the French possession of New Caledonia. On February 11th, the *Tangier* made its way to New Caledonia, arriving on March 3rd unloading military personal and serving as the seaplane tender there for a few weeks before he was ordered to return to the United States.⁴⁷ Here Sprague was assigned to Gulf Sea Frontier, Miami, a naval base from which he would serve as the air officer for a unit designed to counter attacks by German U-boats off the east coast.

At Miami Sprague immediately took it upon himself to fortify the poor defenses which the United States currently had protecting the east coast. For the next nine months Sprague set about improving all aspects of naval and aerial defenses in the region. He doubled the number of aircraft assigned to the defend the coast, put together what was referred to as a “Hooligan Navy” as he obtained a mishmash of naval and civilian ships with which a defense could be mustered in the event of an imminent German attack, and finally he began to employ the convoy system of crossing the Atlantic whereby destroyers and destroyer escorts of the United States and British navies would cooperate to escort transport ships in defense of U-boats. All of these changes to the defense of the east coast were praised by officers both above and below Sprague further contributing to his reputation as an effective commander and administrator.⁴⁸ Sprague was then assigned to command the Naval Air Center in Seattle and the attached Naval Air Station at Sand Point. It was at Sand Point that naval aviators would come for advanced training and here

⁴⁷ USS *Tangier* - War Diary, 5/1-31/42 (Enc A) [Electronic Record]. 133926066. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁸ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

Sprague was comfortable for a time, but he had been ashore for nearly a year by the time his tenure at Seattle began. Contemporaries from the Naval Academy like Thomas Sprague and Forest Sherman had been granted carrier-borne commands and thus were well-positioned for the admiralty. Captain Clifton Sprague was destined to receive his own carrier.

In October of 1943, Sprague received orders, report to the newly commissioned fast carrier *USS Wasp* (CV-18) and take command.⁴⁹ Following two months of initial preparations, Sprague led the *Wasp* and her contingent of three destroyers out on their shakedown. The voyage lasted a few weeks with a return on January 28th with no notable occurrences. Following another six weeks of preparations and the loading of supplies, *Wasp* took on a Marine contingent at San Diego and proceeded to steam for Pearl Harbor. Upon arrival, Sprague took to making preparations for combat that he knew the ship would soon encounter, and much of April of 1944 was spent in exercises, preparing his crew for combat. Following a period of more taking on supplies, Sprague was ordered to take *Wasp* from Pearl Harbor to the Marshall Islands and join Rear Admiral Alfred E. Montgomery's Task Group 58.6 under Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher in their strike on the Japanese occupied islands.⁵⁰

The *Wasp* joined the other carriers *USS Essex* (CV-9) and *USS San Jacinto* (CVL-30) in launching her aircraft the morning of May 19th at 0445 hours. Over the course of the day, three waves of fighter and bomber strikes were made against static Japanese targets on the island.⁵¹ Upon return to the ship alongside standard debriefs, Sprague did some personal debriefs of pilots in order to determine the effectiveness of the raid. He was disappointed by what he found, learning that while some buildings had been destroyed and gun emplacements wrecked, the

⁴⁹ "Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

⁵⁰ Department of the Navy, *Wasp* (Aircraft carrier). 9/1/1951-7/1/1972 Organization Authority Record (1972).

⁵¹ *Wasp*. Organization Authority Record

inexperience of many of the pilots aboard the green carrier and the heavy anti-aircraft fire encountered from the island may not have justified the resources wasted on the island.⁵²

Sprague would continue to lead the *Wasp* and her crew through three more major engagements. Following the raid on Marcus Island, the *Wasp* would join the raid on Wake Island, the same island Sprague had journeyed near two years prior in the *Tangier*, as well as joining in offensive actions in the Mariana Islands and the Battle of the Philippine Sea⁵³ as the United States drew closer and still closer to the Philippine Islands where Sprague would distinguish himself in one of the most revered battles in the history of Naval warfare.

Section 5: The Battle Off Samar

On July 9th, 1944, having distinguished himself numerous times in the face of combat and leading multiple commands to great success, President FDR appointed Sprague a Rear Admiral, one of the youngest the navy had seen at just the age of 48. He was then ordered to take command of Carrier Division 25, made up of the escort carriers *Fanshaw Bay* and *St. Lo* alongside four destroyer escorts.⁵⁴ He would first join his colleague Rear Admiral Thomas Sprague's Task Force Group 77.1 in supporting the landing of American troops on the island of Morotai, an island which lay between New Guinea and the Southern Philippines. It was from there that the island-hopping campaign of the United States could set its sites on the Philippines proper and then even Japan itself. The landings on September 15th of 1944 went smoothly with little resistance from enemy units. Sprague and the *Fanshaw Bay* stayed at Morotai for the two weeks following the landing in order to provide air coverage while an airfield was set-up on the

⁵² Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁵³ *Wasp*. Organization Authority Record

⁵⁴ "Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

island. It was during this time that Sprague would use his signature style of leadership to prepare yet another new crew for action.⁵⁵

Sprague's predecessor, Rear Admiral Gerald F. Bogan had been a hard man for his crew to like, as he made it no secret that he wished to command fleet carriers, not the relatively smaller escort carriers which made up Sprague's Division. Sprague thus took to making it a habit of marching across the deck of *Fanshaw Bay*, conversing with sailors that were there, encouraging them to get sleep when they could, and the like. As a result, morale began to boost.⁵⁶ Sprague's doctrine of each man is a man and high morale equals high performance once again came into effect as he prepared his new crew for what would be the biggest battle of Rear Admiral Sprague's life.

Upon reaching the island of Manus on the 7th of October, Sprague received command of a more fortified escort carrier division, Task Unit 77.4.3. On the 12th of October, Sprague was ordered to steam from Manus to the coast of the island of Samar in order to support the landing of marines on the island along with Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf's Bombardment and Fire Support Group 77.2. Sprague and Task Unit 77.4.3. consisting of the escort carriers *Fanshaw Bay*, *St. Lo*, *White Plains*, and *Kalinin Bay* supported by the destroyers *Hoel*, *Johnston*, and *Heerman* along with destroyer escorts *Dennis*, *John C. Butler*, *Raymond*, and *Samuel B. Roberts*. From the north though, a force of immense size was slowly approaching Samar with the goal to destroy the primary American battlegroups where they sat with overwhelming firepower. The Japanese had dispatched a battle group they called Centre Force, led by the *IJN Yamato*, the largest battleship to ever sail, to lead a force which would smash the American force landing at

⁵⁵ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁵⁶ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

the Philippines in an effort to prevent the island hopping from reaching the shores of Japan itself.⁵⁷ The coming tide would see Sprague outnumbered and outgunned against terrible odds.

On the morning of October 25th, 1944 all was routine aboard the ships of Task Unit 77.4.3, known colloquially as Taffy III.⁵⁸ At 0630 hours, air operations were winding down for the morning and other routines took over. Seven minutes later at 0637 *Fanshaw Bay* intercepted excited Japanese chatter over the inter-fighter radio network. At 0643, anti-submarine patrol aircraft from nearby Task Force Taffy II sent a transmission to the flagship of Taffy II the *USS Kadashan Bay*. While Sprague did not hear the full transmission as it was garbled, he knew almost immediately that something was wrong. Two minutes later at 0645, Admiral Kurita's Centre Force and Taffy II sight each other simultaneously. Kurita had not expected any task force of American ships to be present at Samar as he had believed the larger Third Fleet commanded by Admiral Bull Halsey had moved off to intercept the Japanese carrier fleet sent on a diversionary route earlier that week. Kurita thus mistakenly believed he was fighting the Third Fleet. This belief by Kurita would contribute to Sprague's success in the battle to come.⁵⁹

Sprague immediately ordered his ships to flank speed and turn due East, 090 degrees in order to begin a fighting retreat while simultaneously prepping the launch of all aircraft the escort carriers could muster. At a range of 18 miles, the foreword facing batteries of the Japanese battleship *Yamato* along with other battleships and cruisers began to lay down fire on Taffy III and Sprague. Sprague responded by ordering his ships to zig zag back and forth throwing off the aim of Japanese gunners while his destroyers set a smokescreen to further protect the group. Sprague then sent a distress call out asking for the other Taffy groups to assist. Taffy II,

⁵⁷ Stille, Mark, and Jim Laurier. 2015. *US Navy Carrier Aircraft vs IJN Yamato Class Battleship : Pacific Theatre 1944-45*. Oxford: Osprey Military.

⁵⁸ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁵⁹ Cox, Robert Jon. 2010. *The Battle Off Samar Taffy III at Leyte Gulf*. Lulu Enterprises

commanded by Rear Admiral Felix Stump, would respond by sending air strikes alongside the waves sent by Sprague in order to assist in the defense.⁶⁰ Because Sprague had turned his ships away from the attacking force, he was able to force a fighting retreat in which Centre Force was only able to fire with its forward batteries.⁶¹

As shells began to fall around Taffy III, Sprague gave the order to his destroyers *Hoel*, *Johnston*, and *Herrman* to engage the approaching Japanese cruisers with torpedos as the quicker cruisers could catch Taffy III and begin to make devastation. He continued to order torpedo attacks as he turned through rain squall that had come up as the morning continued. His ships are forced to engage in more zigzagging and chasing splashes, that is sailing towards where a Japanese shell had just made impact in the hope that the gunners would not be able to sight in on the exact same spot again. Unfortunately, Sprague's force began to receive major hits. The destroyers *Johnston* and *Hoel* were each surrounded by cruisers and sunk in turn. The destroyer escort *Samuel B. Roberts* fought to the last man and would be later known as the "destroyer escort that fought like a battleship", and the *Gambier Bay* escort carrier would come under heavy fire around 0810 hours and after that used as a diversion in order to protect the other escaping escort carriers. *Gambier Bay* sunk beneath the waves at 0910 hours. Lastly, *St. Lo*, even after surviving the engagement itself, was set upon by a Kamikaze piloted by Lt. Yukio Seki. He made impact with *St. Lo* at 1051 hours and she sank shortly thereafter.⁶² In total, five American ships were sunk, almost all others of Sprague's Taffy III were sunk, and nearly 2,500 American casualties were sustained.⁶³

⁶⁰*The Battle Off Samar Taffy III at Letye Gulf.*

⁶¹ Hornfischer, James D. 2005. *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*. New York Bantam Books.

⁶² *The Battle Off Samar Taffy III at Letye Gulf.*

⁶³ President of the United State, TG 77.4.3 ("Taffy 3") Presidential Unit Citation. National Museum of the US Navy, Washington, DC.

By comparison, the much larger Centre Force of Admiral Kurita appeared still strong, but he made the decision to retreat around 0920 after the furious defense by Sprague and Taffy III contributing to the belief that Kurita was fighting Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet convinced Kurita that prolonging the battle any longer would be tactically wrong.⁶⁴ He had lost three heavy cruisers with another three seriously damaged and sustained at least 250 casualties. It was a stunning pyrrhic victory for Sprague in the face of odds referred to by many historians as the perhaps the greatest David vs. Goliath in history.⁶⁵

Section 6: The End of the War and Post-War Life

Upon his victory at Samar, Sprague was ordered to return to the United States in order to provide a report on the events of the day. He was granted a four-day leave after arriving in Washington and upon delivering his report quickly turned to visit his wife and children in Philadelphia. Sprague was exhausted from his time spent at Samar and the journey home, and though he was pestered to give reports and claim distinction for the actions which that day in October, Sprague never would. He remained a man who would let his actions speak for themselves and refuse to take any sort of acclaim. Sprague's final actions of the war would see him take command of Carrier Division 26 with his flagship as the *USS Naotoma Bay* during which he provided support to the landings at both Iwo Jima and Okinawa, right on the doorstep of the Japanese home islands. Following these actions on April 2nd he was given command of Carrier Division 2 with his flagship as the fast carrier *USS Ticonderoga (CV-14)*.⁶⁶ He was assigned to join Vice Admiral John Towers' Task Force 38 alongside his long-time friend

⁶⁴ Stille. *US Navy Carrier Aircraft vs IJN Yamato Class Battleship : Pacific Theatre 1944-45*.

⁶⁵ *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*.

⁶⁶ "Sprague". Naval History and Heritage Command.

Thomas Sprague, though they would not see any further action until the end of the war. With the dropping of the atomic bombs and the subsequent invasion of Manchuria by the Soviet Union, Japan surrendered to the Allies on September 2nd, 1945, and Sprague entered Tokyo Bay four days later on the *Ticonderoga*. The war was over.⁶⁷

With the end of the war, Sprague's duties began to wind down as well. He was a decorated officer with multiple years in command roles and aviation and test pilot experience to boot. In February of the next year, Sprague was given command of Navy Air Group 1.6 attached to Joint Task Force 1 on board the *USS Shangri-La*, from which his time spent experimenting with Carl Norden would allow him to join a command looking to create and fly remotely operated fighters. The group was assigned to serve as aerial photographers for Operation Crossroads, also known popularly as the Bikini Atoll Nuclear Tests. After each of these tests Sprague would again encounter press for his actions, this time more mixed than before. Much of the public was fearful of nuclear weaponry, and so Sprague was forced on a multi-month press tour that the quiet man was not pleased with in order to assuage criticism of the tests and argue for their necessity in a post-war world where the American navy stood unopposed.⁶⁸

Following his time with Operation Crossroads, Sprague was assigned to the Naval Air Basic Training at Corpus Christi where he was the chief, again flexing a past muscle in his time as an aviator and later an instructor at the Naval War College in order to lead the team which would train the next generation of Naval Aviator's ones who would soon find the jet age upon them. One of the only personal requests he would ever make came at the time, when requested that his old superior Rear Admiral Aubrey Fitch now the superintendent of the Naval Academy

⁶⁷ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁶⁸ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

with a wish to have the flag of his old flagship the *Fanshaw Bay* hang in memoriam at the academy. Fitch responded that he would be happy to have the flag hang in the school.⁶⁹

Following his time at Corpus Christi, Sprague was rotated through a number of post-war commands before he was granted one final voyage as commander of the *USS Kearsage* and Carrier Division 6. He spent his time aboard the *Kearsage* quietly, just as he lived, and visited many tourist attractions in the post-war United States and Europe. He requested retirement not long after this command ended, and officially retired on November 1st, 1951. He returned home to his family and lived a final quiet four years with his wife. In March of 1955, Sprague stretched out on his couch in the home he had with his wife Annabel in Coronado. She found him only partially responsive and rushed him to the hospital before he was transferred to the Naval Hospital in San Diego. Two weeks after his arrival on April 11th, 1955, Vice Admiral Clifton A.F. Ziggy Sprague passed away as a result of a heart attack in the Naval Hospital.⁷⁰

The life of Sprague was one of quiet, deliberate, and truly good man. He served valiantly and obediently in the navy for near forty years, the super majority of his unfortunately short life. In that time, he helped revolutionize not only the systems by which naval aircraft are operated off of carriers, but also taught the men who would fly said aircraft. He was a quiet man, generally soft-spoken but firm when he needed to be. He was fair, and a sailor's officer, always aware of his command's morale and the importance of maintaining a productive atmosphere. He was a good man, one who did much, but said little of it and allowed his actions speak louder than himself. Ziggy Sprague was a good man.

⁶⁹ Wukovits. *Devotion to Duty*.

⁷⁰ Harvey interview with Wukovits.

Section 7: The Contribution of this Thesis

When one thinks of the great commanders of the Second World War, who would one think of? Perhaps Patton and his tanks rolling across Europe to destroy the Third Reich. Perhaps its of Supreme Allied Commander and later President Dwight D. Eisenhower who half the world in a clash against the other half and came out on top. Or perhaps now one thinks of the late Vice Admiral Clifton “Ziggy” Sprague, underrated giant of the United States Navy who helped revolutionize aviation and led the fight as the greatest David vs. Goliath of all time. The purpose of this thesis is not to introduce any new information factually, but to reveal a picture of man.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to paint a picture of a reserved, devoted officer and navy man who successfully crafted a career in which he reached the highest echelons of the navy without needing to play into the politics of those who were about him. Even when men like “Bull” Halsey and even peer Admiral Thomas Sprague participated in the elaborate dance which is maneuvering through the ranks of other Flag Officers and the politicians they begin to become familiar with, Admiral Sprague refused to participate. Whether in combat or peacetime roles he put his men in front of himself in dozens of instances: Taking their station over in they became incapacitated and not reprimanding them for it afterwards; Performing risky tests on new equipment himself in order to make sure if there was an accident, he would be the one to suffer; and through the countless examples of his firm, fair, and compassionate command. He did not need to yell, he did not need to disrespect, and he felt no need to put himself at the top of a hierarchy.

Admiral Sprague was a good man amongst brave men and made no efforts to distinguish himself as their leader and yet did through his style of leadership. All through this, he gave of

himself in service to the United States. This thesis has sought to place Sprague back into the limelight that he himself would shun, but which he so deserves.

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