Chester William Nimitz

Fleet Admiral
United States Navy
1885-1966

Midshipman (left to right) Chester Nimitz, G.V. Stewart and Royal E. Ingersoll swab the deck of an unidentified ship, circa 1905. Photo courtesy of the National Archives, photo 80-G-701064.

A report prepared by
Special Collections & Archives
Dudley Knox Library
Naval Postgraduate School

January 27, 2012

Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz

1885-1966

Highlights

Chester William Nimitz, renowned as one of the nation's greatest war heroes, was also a leading advocate for higher education and research in the Navy. Nimit'ss pre-World War II strategic vision for the Naval Postgraduate School had a profound and enduring impact on the evolution and advancement of NPS.

"A Career of Chance"

Nimitz was born February 24, 1885, in Fredericksburg, Texas. In 1959, he wrote a biographical note titled, "A Career by Chance." It began:

> *Fifty seven years ago in the small town of Kerrville, Texas, a fifteen year old youth worked feverishly at his studies in algebra, geometry, arithmetic, history and grammar determined to win an appointment as a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. What sparked that activity?*
>
> *It was the presence of Battery K, Third Field Artillery encamped in the hills close by and engaged in routine training and gunnery practice.*

Nimitz was unsuccessful in his bid for a West Point appointment but he did receive a Congressional appointment to the Naval Academy, where he began studies in 1901. Thus began his career of chance.

Naval Academy Class of 1905
Source: *The Lucky Bag*, U.S. Naval Academy, 1902.

CLASS OF 1905

After graduation in 1905, he cruised to the Far East aboard *USS Ohio.* Following the two years of sea duty then required by law, Nimitz was commissioned ensign in 1907. He took command of the gunboat *USS Panay*, then commanded *USS Decatur,* which he grounded on a mud bank in the Manila Bay. Nimitz overcame the court martial and was assigned to the submarine community.

Nimitz becomes Navy's diesel engine expert

In 1913 the Navy sent Nimitz to Germany and Belgium to study diesel engines in Europe's leading industrial plants. He was not formally registered as a student in the Postgraduate Department of the Naval Academy,[1] but his assignment was comparable to those given to postgraduate students during that highly innovative, nascent period as the Navy took steps to formalize its advanced education programs.[2]

One of Nimitz's lifelong friends - Albert T. Church, his Naval Academy classmate - was among the ten officers selected for the inaugural course in the School of Marine Engineering (predecessor of today's NPS). Another, Richmond Kelly Turner, began postgraduate studies in 1913 after the School of Marine Engineering had been renamed the Postgraduate Department of the Naval Academy. Turner's industry assignment was very similar to Nimitz's.

Along with Nimitz, these friends would play a role in the future development of NPS, their ideas likely influenced by the pre- and post-WWI debate about the value of officer education. Those who were speaking and publishing articles about postgraduate education at the time included: Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Commodore Dudley Knox, Captain Ernest J. King, Commander William Pye, Commander John Halligan, and Captain Reginald Belknap.

Nimitz later wrote about this formative period in his career: "The airplane and the submarine both began to join the Fleet early in this 20th Century, as invention and engineering...brought incredible new power. I early joined submarines as a young officer, engaged in experimental developments...studied diesels in Germany and helped to introduce them into our Navy."

---

[1] The inaugural School of Marine Engineering had only 10 students in 1909. Its successor, the Postgraduate Department, was larger but still had a peak capacity of 25 students per year.

[2] The U.S. Navy's venture into graduate education had begun in 1879 when it sent sent two officers to the Royal Naval College, Greenwich.

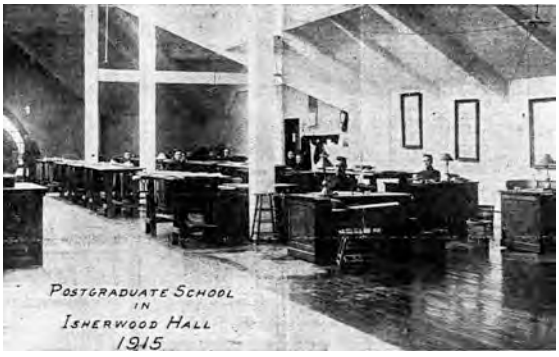
Initial "NPS" facilities in Naval Academy attic

The Navy began to map out plans for a formal advanced education program in 1909. Secretary of the Navy George von L. Meyer's executive order established the School of Marine Engineering at the Naval Academy and the Bureau of Steam Engineering cut orders to send ten officers for studies.

Already work has been begun in making plans to carry out the ideas of Rear Admiral H. I. Cone, the new engineer in chief, as to instruction of young officers in marine engineering. He believes that the instruction should be given in a postgraduate course at Annapolis, instead of by instruction at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as had been intended by Secretary Meyer. Lieut. Comdr. John K. Robison, who was lately ordered to duty in the bureau of steam engineering at the Navy Department, has been engaged on plans for instruction at Annapolis.

Source: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post, June 6, 1909, page E2.

Early images of Isherwood Hall. The School of Marine Engineering occupied attic rooms in the building.



The Naval War College

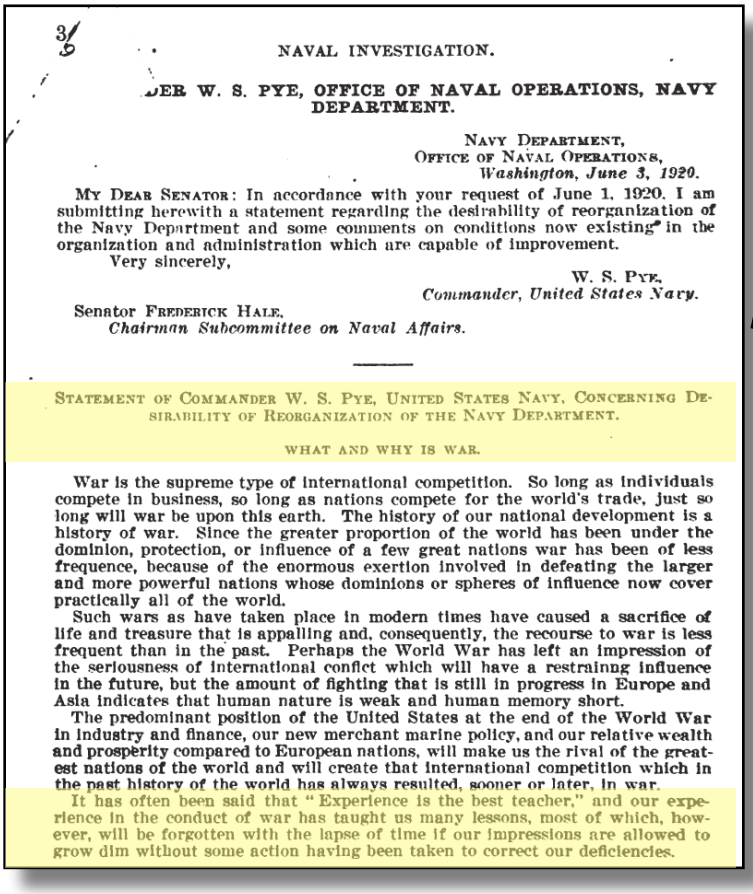
Nimitz entered the Naval War College in 1922, during a period of intense self-scrutiny by the Navy as it examined its capabilities and operations during World War I. Following the war, in 1919, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels had commissioned a study of officer professional development that became known as the Knox-King-Pye Report, so named for the board's members -- Commodore Dudley Knox, Captain Ernest J. King and Commander William S. Pye.

Daniels drew from this study to support his case for expansion of advanced education and to reopen the Postgraduate Department of the Naval Academy, which had been closed during the war. He also renamed it the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School.

Naval Institute *Proceedings* published the Knox-King-Pye Report in 1920. That same year, Commander Pye served as one of the Navy's expert witnesses testifying with SECNAV Daniels during the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs' investigation of WWI naval operations. Pye presented a detailed summary of the Knox-King-Pye Board to support Daniel's case for increase funding of advanced education and research.

After graduation from the Naval War College, Nimitz became chief of staff to Commander Battle Forces (later redesignated Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet). In 1926, became the first professor of naval science and tactics for the newly formed ROTC program at the University of California at Berkeley.

Nimitz would advance quickly to Flag rank and hold several major commands in the era of the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression.



NAVAL INVESTIGATION.

...ER W. S. PYE, OFFICE OF NAVAL OPERATIONS, NAVY DEPARTMENT.

NAVY DEPARTMENT,
OFFICE OF NAVAL OPERATIONS,
Washington, June 3, 1920.

MY DEAR SENATOR: In accordance with your request of June 1, 1920, I am submitting herewith a statement regarding the desirability of reorganization of the Navy Department and some comments on conditions now existing in the organization and administration which are capable of improvement.

Very sincerely,

W. S. PYE,
Commander, United States Navy.

Senator FREDERICK HALE,
Chairman Subcommittee on Naval Affairs.

STATEMENT OF COMMANDER W. S. PYE, UNITED STATES NAVY, CONCERNING DESIRABILITY OF REORGANIZATION OF THE NAVY DEPARTMENT.

WHAT AND WHY IS WAR.

War is the supreme type of international competition. So long as individuals compete in business, so long as nations compete for the world's trade, just so long will war be upon this earth. The history of our national development is a history of war. Since the greater proportion of the world has been under the dominion, protection, or influence of a few great nations war has been of less frequence, because of the enormous exertion involved in defeating the larger and more powerful nations whose dominions or spheres of influence now cover practically all of the world.

Such wars as have taken place in modern times have caused a sacrifice of life and treasure that is appalling and, consequently, the recourse to war is less frequent than in the past. Perhaps the World War has left an impression of the seriousness of international conflict which will have a restraining influence in the future, but the amount of fighting that is still in progress in Europe and Asia indicates that human nature is weak and human memory short.

The predominant position of the United States at the end of the World War in industry and finance, our new merchant marine policy, and our relative wealth and prosperity compared to European nations, will make us the rival of the greatest nations of the world and will create that international competition which in the past history of the world has always resulted, sooner or later, in war.

It has often been said that "Experience is the best teacher," and our experience in the conduct of war has taught us many lessons, most of which, however, will be forgotten with the lapse of time if our impressions are allowed to grow dim without some action having been taken to correct our deficiencies.

HEARINGS

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
COMMITTEE ON NAVAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

SIXTY-SIXTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION

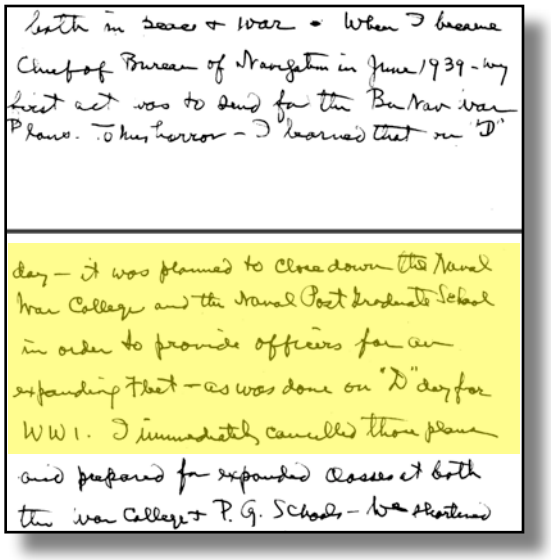
"The officers of the United States Navy were the first to use torpedoes, submarines, sea planes, airplane carriers, antennae mines; the first to develop electric propulsion for naval vessels; the first to conceive the all big-gun ship and the torpedo plane...technical initiative is vital to success in war."

Commander William S. Pye
Testimony delivered June 3, 1920,
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Naval Affairs

Dudley Knox Library Special Collections & Archives

Nimitz's Strategic Vision for NPS

In 1939, Admiral Nimitz became Chief of the Bureau of Navigation with broad responsibilities that ranged from war planning to oversight of the Navy's advanced education programs. He later discussed this period of command in a 1965 personal letter to Vice Admiral Charles L. Melson, president of the War College.


both in peace & war. When I became
Chief of Bureau of Navigation in June 1939 - my
first act was to send for the BuNav War
Plans. To my horror - I learned that on "D"
day - it was planned to close down the Naval
War College and the Naval Post Graduate School
in order to provide officers for an
expanding fleet - as was done on "D" day for
WWI. I immediately cancelled those plans
and prepared for expanded classes at both
the War College & P.G. Schools - We started

"I...prepared for expanded classes at...P.G. School."

Rear Admiral Chester Nimitz
Chief, Bureau of Navigation
June 1939

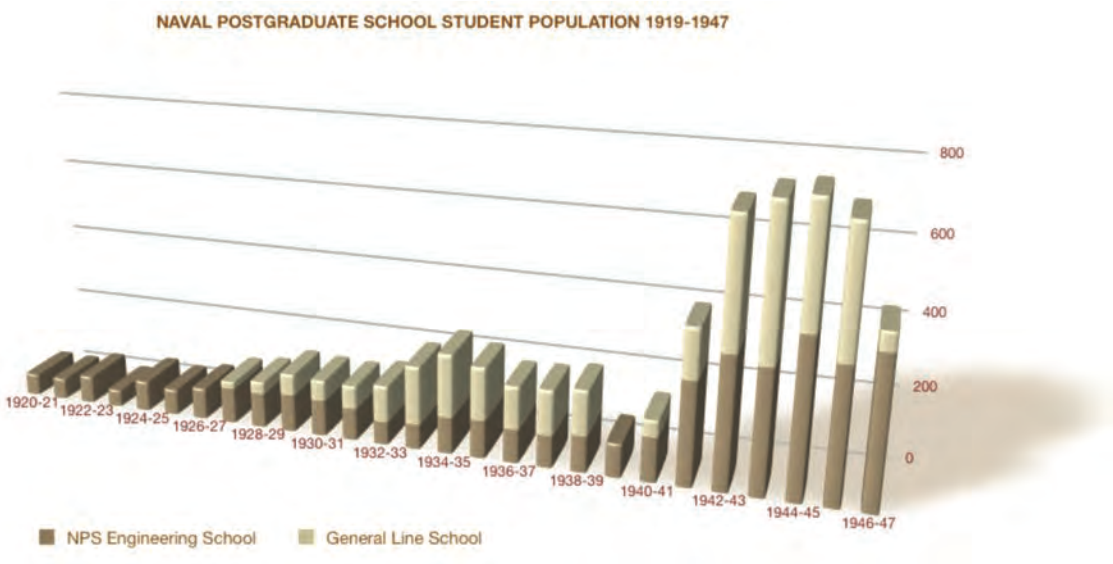
The letter offers a rare glimpse into Nimitz's deep personal interest in NPS and the War College.

Nimitz's letter chronicles his strategic vision and actions in 1939 that would alter the course of history for the Naval Postgraduate School and begin a process of wartime transformation.

He wrote: "When I became Chief of Bureau of Navigation in June 1939 - my first act was to send for the BuNav War Plans. To my horror - I learned that on 'D' Day - it was planned to close down the Naval War College and the Naval Post Graduate School in order to provide officers for an expanding Fleet - as was done on 'D' Day for WWI."

The native Texan, who began his Navy career by chance, did not hesitate to act: "I immediately cancelled those plans and prepared for expanded classes at both the War College & P.G. School."

Nimitz's decision immediately set NPS on a new course. Previous actions to gut the program were reversed. And, as the United States mobilized forces in the aftermath of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, student population at NPS climbed to new heights. His war plan would ultimately lead to the school's move to Monterey.



Nimitz, King, Pye and Spanagel

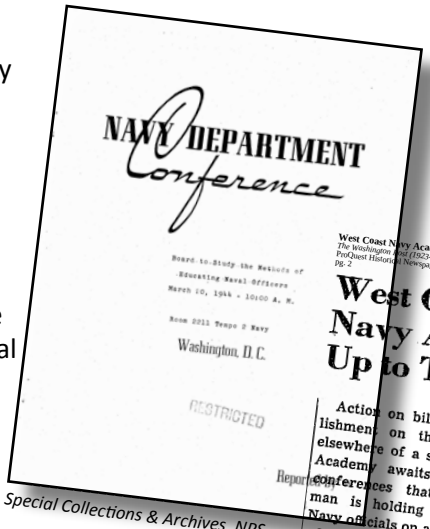
Rapid advances in military technologies and capabilities were hallmarks of World War II. Ernest J. King had become the Chief of Naval Operations and, for the first and only time in Navy history, the CNO was also Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Fleet.

Upon King's death in June 1956, *Washington Post* reporter John Norris wrote: "Fleet Admiral Ernest Joseph King will go down in history as the man who commanded the greatest sea force ever afloat - the World War II United States Navy of 92,000 ships, 41,000 planes and four million men.

King, who had been a staunch advocate for the Naval Postgraduate School since its establishment, wholeheartedly supported Nimitz's visionary war plan for NPS and the War College.

And, as CNO, he now pushed for more gains on the education front even as his Navy planned campaigns and fought grueling battles in the Pacific and Atlantic.

in early 1944, King assigned William Pye, his friend since the days of the Knox-King-Pye Board who was now a vice admiral and President of the Naval War College, to examine officer education and plan for further post-war expansion of NPS and the War College.


NAVY DEPARTMENT
Conference

Washington, D.C.

RESTRICTED

Special Collections & Archives, NPS.

West Coast Navy Academy Up to Truman
The Washington Post (1923-1954); Sep 13, 1945;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1994)
Pg. 2

West Coast Navy Academy Up to Truman

Action on bills proposing establishment on the West Coast or elsewhere of a second U. S. Naval Academy awaits the outcome of conferences that President Truman is holding with Army and Navy officials on a postwar military-educational program, an administrative source in the Senate disclosed yesterday.

Meanwhile, the Navy admitted it had made a concession to the growing forces who claim the West Coast area is of new importance since the Pacific war, and had sent a commission of five high-ranking officers to the coast to explore sites for a possible Navy post-graduate school.

The group, headed by Capt. H. A. Spanagel, director of the Navy postgraduate school at Annapolis, spent a week in the coastal region and made a report on its survey to Navy Secretary James Forrestal yesterday.

Contenst of the report were not divulged, but the commission indicated it made an extensive survey of St. Mary's College near San Francisco with an idea of acquiring outright the property, which has served during the war as a midshipman's school.

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post, September 13, 1945, page 2.

It was a stunning commitment.

Major, crucial invasions - including D-Day - lie just around the corner. The battles for Saipan, Okinawa and other Pacific islands are still over the horizon.

Despite the ongoing hardships of war, King selects combat-hardened Captain Herman Spanagel from the front lines as his action officer. By the time Fleet Admiral Nimitz signs the Japanese surrender documents on board the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945, Spanagel is surveying prospective west coast locations, searching for a new home that can accommodate the projected post-war growth.

So, while running NPS - hiring of new faculty, presenting awards to students, working with the Annapolis business community - Spanagel began to work closely with the Secretary of the Navy and CNO to craft legislation that would grant new authority for the Naval Postgraduate School.

Admirals King and Nimitz on Saipan, July 1944. *Courtesy of National Archives 80-G-307863*

Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz signing the Japanese surrender documents on board the USS Missouri. The autograph was signed for Ashton Stanley, son of long-time Hotel Del Monte manager Carl Stanley.
Special Collections & Archives, Dudley Knox Library, NPS

Nimitz and the move to Monterey

As Fleet Admirals King and Nimitz prepared for their change of command ceremony on December 15, 1945, they pushed for Congressional support for NPS. They succeeded. On December 7, 1945, four years to the day after the attack at Pearl Harbor, the Senate and House of Representatives passed Senate Bill 1493, an act that authorized the head of NPS to confer masters and doctors degrees in engineering and related fields.

Additional Congressional legislation and changes in Navy regulations soon followed. Chief among them:

- Senate Bill 1854 was passed as Public Law 402 in June 1946, establishing the civilian position of academic dean.
- House Bill 1341 was passed as Public Law 302 in July 1947, authorizing the Secretary of the Navy to establish the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

Many hurdles still remained for NPS, yet the future was shining brightly as a result of Nimitz's strategic vision and leadership.

Nimitz retired to Treasure Island and made many trips to Monterey and NPS in the ensuing years, participating in the formal dedication of NPS-Monterey in February 1952 and the dedication of the academic buildings in 1956.

Secretary of the Navy Dan Kimball was the keynote speaker for the 1952 dedication. The *Monterey Herald* quoted Kimball: "Nothing is more important for the advancement of Naval science and the future greatness of the American Navy than to provide adequate opportunity for its officers to carry on their advanced study and individual research. This school provides this opportunity."

U.S. Opens Annapolis of the West: [1]
Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Feb 17, 1952;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1987)
pg. 1

U.S. Opens Annapolis of the West

MONTEREY, Cal., Feb. 16 (AP) The Annapolis of the West is now open.

Secretary of the Navy Kimball and other high officials participated today in ceremonies officially activating the naval postgraduate school, shifted from the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md.

"The naval postgraduate school provides the link between the laboratory and the flight deck, cockpit, conning tower, or the bridge of any of our ships," Kimball said.

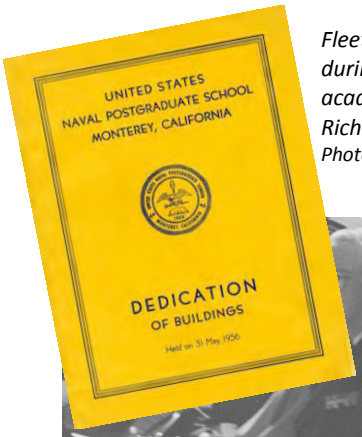
The school will have a staff of 425 instructors and a student body of about 3000 officers.

Source: ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Los Angeles Times, February 17, 1952, page 1.

Admiral Ernest Herrmann, Secretary of the Navy Dan Kimball and Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz on the doorstep of Cottage No. 9. Photo courtesy of The National Archives, No. 439957.

Nimitz and the making of a university

Fleet Admiral Nimitz saw his pre-World War II strategic vision for NPS turn into bricks and mortar, classrooms and laboratories in 1956. He was one of the keynote speakers for the Dedication of Buildings ceremony and read the dedication remarks for King Hall, named in honor of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King.



Fleet Admiral Nimitz, third from right below, during the dedication ceremonies for the NPS academic quad, May 31, 1956. Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner is on the far right. Photos courtesy of Naval Heritage & History Command

In a 1959 commencement address at NPS, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke, a 1930 alumnus whose war time exploits were legendary, captured the spirit of Fleet Admiral Nimitz as he identified timeless characteristics of the institution:

> *Rapid technological advance...did not come by accident, nor did it come overnight. It has been the result of educating carefully selected officers in each succeeding generation of officers.*
>
> *This year we mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of this splendid school. The naval leaders of 50 years ago showed great perspective and foresight in seeing the need for advanced technical and scientific knowledge among naval officers. They recognized that ships and naval weapons were becoming more complex, that their proper employment at sea would require officers who were familiar not only with the ageold profession of the sea, but who could understand and could use effectively the complex weapons of the years to come.*
>
> *We in the Navy today are the inheritors of that legacy of wisdom, and we can see clear evidence of their foresight all around us.*

DUDLEY KNOX LIBRARY

This Dudley Knox Library report was prepared by John Sanders.