

BUREAUCRACY BASHING

FROM BATTLE AND BRAVERY TO BASHING THE BUREAUCRATS —
JUST BECAUSE A WAR WAS GOING ON, DIDN'T MEAN THAT THE OFFICERS OF
USS JOHN D. EDWARDS COULD NOT HAVE A BIT OF FUN

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The hell that men called the Battle of the Java Sea. Mid-afternoon on 27 February 1942 saw the USS *Alden* (DD-211) following in the wake of USS *John D. Edwards* (DD-216). The destroyers were about to enter the protective minefield in the Suabaya Channel when Adm. Doorman's flagship *De Ruyter* suddenly reversed course and signaled, "AM PROCEEDING TO INTERCEPT ENEMY UNIT. FOLLOW ME." This would begin the engagement between ABDA forces and the Japanese. Lieutenant Commander William P. Mack was the gunnery officer aboard the *John D. Edwards*, the lead ship, and from his elevated gun director he recalled what he observed in one of the earliest accounts of the battle: "I could see the changing dispositions of both forces and the positions of our ships and the enemy's ships in formation. I was reminded vaguely of my classroom days at Annapolis where the fleets of Germany and England had battled on our blackboards. The scene in the Java Sea was similar but there were sinister differences. Here was no chalk dust, but powder smoke and flying spray. Salvos of eight to 15 shots were rising about our ships. In the distance I could see the tops of similar splashes temporarily blotting out the enemy. The formation of these flashes was impressive. They slowly rose, remained suspended for seconds, and then collapsed." The fighting lapsed into total confusion and Doorman appeared to signal for a withdrawal. However, Cmdr. Thomas Binford chose to ignore and took his destroyers into battle with *Edwards* in the lead and the four-piper charged ahead as fast as she could while the *Evans* labored to keep up. A sailor, clinging to a binnacle on the *Alden's* bridge, drew a nervous laugh from his shipmates when he said, "I always knew these old four-pipers would have to go in to save the day."



The four-pipers provided a valuable boost to American presence in the Far East. *Edwards* is seen at Shanghai during 1921. The oppressive heat and humidity took a toll on the sailors. The canvas sun screens provided a modicum of relief.

Thirty years ago, I came upon a copy of an official letter between the Commanding Officer of a World War Two surface combatant and the Commander of the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts. It's a fun case of "bureaucracy bashing" through the use of historical overtones. Written during the early days of WWII, this letter, for many reasons, struck a particularly strong chord with me, and it's one that I think will strike a hale smile from *Sea Classics* readership. But first, some

background to set the stage...

The term, "bureaucracy" literally means "rule by desks or offices." Its very definition strikes an impersonal tone, but it's actually intended as a means by which a large group of people are administratively organized so that they can effectively work together. Recognized as a hallmark of ancient Roman civilization, the practice of bureaucracy has subsequently risen to an artform within the US Naval institution, and especially between the

Navy's Line and Staff Corps officer communities.

For those readers that are unfamiliar, all US Navy officers fall into four basic communities: Line, Staff Corps, Limited Duty, and Warrant. Each officer community is then further subdivided into sub-groups that are identified by a designator code based on their occupation. For purposes of this article, we will focus on the interaction between two of these basic officer communities, the Line

and the Staff Corps.

There are two types of Line officers, Unrestricted and Restricted. An Unrestricted Line officer is one who exercises general operational command authority. One must be an Unrestricted Line officer in order to assume operational command of a surface combatant, submarine, squadron, or warfare group. Examples of today's Unrestricted Line officers include: Surface Warfare Officers, Pilots, Navy Flight Officers, Aviation

Support Officers, Submarine Officers, SEALs, Divers, and Explosive Ordnance Disposal Officers.

Unlike an Unrestricted Line officer, a Staff Corps officer represents a specialist in a professional career field that primarily serves in a support role to the Line community. Even if an assigned Staff Corps officer was senior to all others, they could not assume operational command of an operational warfare platform. Today, there are eight such Staff Corps communities,

including Physicians, Nurses, Dentists, Medical Service, Lawyers, Civil Engineers, Chaplains, and Supply (logistics) officers. The latter of these, the Supply officer (*aka* Purser), has historically served side-by-side with Navy Line officers on almost every ship, submarine, and air squadron for the past 100 years.

The interaction between the Navy Supply Corps and the Unrestricted community is a singularly unique and complex dance. A ship, submarine, or