

# Chapter 1

## Admiral McCain

**O**n September 5, 1945, during a peaceful and beautiful evening in the San Diego area, Vice Admiral John Sidney McCain settled into his home in Coronado, California. His wiry frame had become dangerously slim—he weighed just over 100 pounds—and his face was weather-beaten from his years at sea. Nicknamed “Slew” by his fellow officers and “Popeye” by the sailors he commanded, McCain was exhausted. Dragged down by a cold, he may have also suffered an undetected heart attack within the previous few months. The summer, which had finally brought an end to World War II, had been especially hard on him. He had commanded the Second Carrier Task Force, Pacific Fleet, since August 1944. In the final year of the war, operating in conjunction with the Third Fleet under the command of Admiral William F. Halsey, McCain’s Task Force 38 “spearheaded the drive in the Philippines,” to quote from his official naval biography, “supported the capture of Okinawa,

and rode rampant through the Western Pacific from the Indo-China Coast to the Japanese home island. The force knew only one word—"Attack!"

Task Force 38's motto fit its commander. Slew McCain was gruff, hard-edged, quick-tempered, frequently profane, sometimes suspicious, always hardworking, and prone to sullenness. He liked to slam down bourbon, play the horses, shoot craps, and roll his own Bull Durham cigarettes. He was unwaveringly patriotic, stubbornly ambitious, and brilliant. Most important, he was a leader. In the last six months of the war in the Pacific, McCain's Task Force 38 was cited for damaging or destroying 6,000 Japanese airplanes and either sinking or damaging an estimated 2,000,000 tons of Japanese warships. The task force's airplanes once sank 49 Japanese ships in a single day.

Indeed, Slew McCain, with his trademark ill-fitting sailor cap (hence the Popeye reference), had established a reputation that would become mythic in naval lore. Regarding the Japanese, he once proposed "killing them all—painfully." At the signing of the peace accords on the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945—a ceremony Halsey insisted McCain had to attend, even though he was sick and anxious to go home—McCain glared at the deck, unable to bring himself to look at his just-defeated enemy. "The Jap warlords are not half licked yet," he said after the ceremony, a comment that made headlines. That same day, he made his point with authentic "McCain" humor. "He went from group to group [on the *Missouri*]," one newspaper reported, "greeting old acquaintances, and announced he was at work on the concoction of three new drinks, the 'Judy,' the 'Grill,' and the 'Zeke,' each named after a Japanese plane. 'Each time you drink one you can say, "Splash one Judy" or "Splash one Zeke,"' he explained."

The last year of the war had not been without tragedy for McCain. Besides fighting the Japanese, McCain and Halsey had to contend with the horrendous forces of nature. On December 17, 1944, Halsey and McCain's fleet of ships was hit by a typhoon. In the lead ship, Halsey—tired, and focused on fighting the Japanese, not the weather—had failed to anticipate the approaching storm. He was also given insufficient warning about meteorological conditions by the central command in Pearl Harbor. The result was catastrophic. The overwhelming waves capsized and sank three destroyers—the *Hull*, the *Spence*, and

the *Monahan*—and damaged six other ships, killing 778 men in all. In addition, 146 airplanes were destroyed when they were swept overboard.

Later in December, at a board of inquiry held in Hawaii, Halsey defended his decisions. Admiral Chester Nimitz, one of the navy's power brokers, personally lobbied Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal to keep him from relieving Halsey of his command. It is believed that it took no less than Chief of Naval Operations Ernest King to prevent the board from making McCain the fall guy. With the war in the Pacific going so well, it made no sense, it was argued, to remove either Halsey or McCain.

Recommendations Halsey made were obvious enough. The navy, he said, should take steps to improve its weather-tracking methods; it should also beef up its communications links to Pearl Harbor. The navy failed to act on either recommendation. Six months later, on June 2, 1945, when Halsey and McCain again found themselves in severe weather conditions, they were unprepared for the second typhoon that hit their fleet. The storm damaged 33 ships, destroyed 76 airplanes, and killed six men. It was decided McCain should come in from the sea and take a job in Washington—he was to become an assistant to General Omar Bradley in the Bureau of Veterans' Affairs—but the war ended before his orders were activated. McCain witnessed the historic surrender ceremony on the *Missouri*. Then he began a leave at his home in California.

**H**e was born on August 9, 1884—not quite two full decades after the end of the Civil War—in Teoc, Mississippi, a tiny town in rural Carroll County. The son of John Sidney and Elizabeth-Ann Young McCain, he grew up on a plantation. The McCains of this era even owned slaves, as reporters would later reveal. McCain attended high school in Carrollton, then matriculated at the University of Mississippi. After his freshman year, he entered the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, on September 25, 1902. When he graduated on February 12, 1906, *The Lucky Bag*, the academy's yearbook, described McCain this way: "The skeleton in the family closet of 1906. A living example of the beneficial course of physical training in the N.A. having gained 1 $\frac{3}{8}$  ounces since he entered. A man of exemplary habits which make him very popular."

Social, fun-loving, and often mischievous, he was as big of spirit as he was slight of build. In 1909, Ensign McCain served on the battleship *Pennsylvania* and the cruiser *Washington*. On August 9 of that year, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, he married Katherine Daisy Vaulx, a beautiful and personable woman from Arkansas and a daughter of an Episcopalian minister. The couple had three children—Catherine Vaulx McCain, James Gordon McCain, and John Sidney McCain Jr., born on January 17, 1911, in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Slew McCain's son—nicknamed “Junior” and “Mac” but most often called “Jack”—was born in Council Bluffs because his father, during an extended tour of duty on the *San Diego*, was sailing around the southern tip of South America, and Katherine had traveled to Iowa to stay with a sister who had moved there.

In 1918, the year World War I ended, McCain was still stationed on the *San Diego*, which was performing escort duty in the Atlantic Ocean. Between 1918 and 1927, he served in various capacities on a number of ships—among them, the *Maryland* and the *New Mexico*. He traveled constantly, but when he was stateside, he usually worked in Washington at the Department of the Navy. His family, for the most part, was raised in Washington, not far from the Capitol. “My mother was the real parental control,” Jack McCain would say later, “because my father was gone part of the time that I was growing up.”

Describing his father, Jack was unequivocal. “My father,” he would say, “was a great leader, first, and people loved him, and he knew how to lead. He also knew when the time came to be a strict disciplinarian, versus the time to be a more easy-going commanding officer. And he had an intense and keen sense of humor. My mother used to say about him that the blood of life flowed through his veins. . . . [H]e was also . . . extraordinarily well read. So this gave him an outstanding command of the English language. He was a man of great moral and physical courage. The fact that he had the first carrier task force under Halsey bears witness to that.”

In September 1927, as his father had before him, Jack McCain entered the Naval Academy, which was his goal “from the time that I was old enough to begin to realize there was such [a place].” He had attended, first, Central High School in Washington and, finally, Columbia Preparatory School. When he got to his father's alma mater, Jack, having

just turned sixteen, discovered he was among the youngest students in his class—and one of the few to enter with a presidential appointment. “I went in there at the age of sixteen, and I weighed one hundred and five pounds,” he would say, referring to another trait he shared with his father—a decidedly puny build. “I could hardly carry a Springfield rifle. Getting out there and holding an oar was another unique experience in my life.” Perhaps because he was so much smaller than his classmates, Jack seemed to go out of his way to break academy rules. He routinely got into scuffles and amassed a daunting number of demerits.

When he graduated on May 1, 1931, his yearbook citation avoided the behavior issue: “Mac was born with one weakness which he strives in vain to conquer: his liking for the fair sex. . . . ‘An officer and a gentleman’ is the title to which he pays absolute allegiance. Sooner could Gibraltar be loosed from its base than could Mac be loosed from the principles which he has adopted to govern his actions.”

Upon graduation, Jack sought advice from his father, who told him simply, “The only thing I say to you is to make a good job of it”—whatever he chose to do. Jack decided to pursue a naval career that focused on submarines. Beginning in June 1931, as his first post-academy assignment, Jack served on the *Oklahoma*. At its home port—Long Beach, California—he met Roberta Wright, the daughter of Archibald Wright, a rich and strong-willed oil wildcatter. Originally from Mississippi, Wright had retired from his business in Oklahoma and Texas and moved his family to Los Angeles for a better life.

Roberta and her twin sister Rowena, born on February 7, 1912, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, were their father’s darlings. Each summer, the family escaped the Oklahoma heat by traveling to the West Coast. Los Angeles became their permanent home in 1924, the year Archie had retired so he could spend all of his time with his daughters. Roberta’s mother, Myrtle, was horrified that one of her daughters would take up with a sailor, so when Jack and Roberta decided to marry, over the objections of Roberta’s parents, the couple eloped to Tijuana, Mexico, where they were married on January 21, 1933, at Caesar’s Bar. “Not exactly in the bar,” Roberta would later say. “It was really sort of upstairs.” Naturally, her mother “had a cat fit,” as Rowena would put it. But there was little she could do. Jack and Roberta went about their lives—they survived the Long Beach earthquake that occurred not

long after their return from Mexico—and Jack tried to find humor in their lives whenever he could. “Asked once how he could tell his beautiful wife from her identical twin,” the *Washington Post* would one day write, “[Jack McCain] replied . . . : ‘That’s their problem.’”

In July 1933, Jack reported to the Naval Submarine Base in Groton, Connecticut, to follow his interests and study submarines. At about the same time, Rowena married John Luther Maddox—who later founded an airline that eventually became part of TWA—and settled down in Los Angeles. In December, Jack graduated and took up his first of numerous submarine assignments.

In June 1935, Slew McCain, now age 51, decided to return to school and reported to the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, to study flight training and aviation. On August 19, 1936, having been designated a naval aviator, Slew was appointed Commander of Aircraft Squadrons and Attending Craft at the Coco Solo Air Base in the Panama Canal Zone. Jack happened to be stationed there; he and Roberta were awaiting their first child. Ten days into Slew’s new command, Roberta entered a navy hospital. On August 29, she gave birth to a son. In keeping with the McCain family tradition, he was named John Sidney McCain III. Jack’s son, too, would be given a nickname, just as Jack and Slew had been before him. This John Sidney McCain would be known as “Johnny.”

Slew McCain remained at Coco Solo until May 1937. Next, he commanded the *Ranger*, before he was named commander of the Naval Air Station in San Diego, California, a post he held from July 1939 until January 1941. (In 1939, Rowena’s husband, John Maddox, died; years later, she married an investment counselor.) When Slew assumed the command of Aircraft Scouting Training on January 23, 1941, he was promoted to rear admiral. During these years, Jack was advancing in his assignments as well. He taught in the Department of Electrical Engineering at the Naval Academy from June 1938 to May 1940. Then he served on the submarine *Shipjack* until, in April 1941, he was made commanding officer of the *USS O-8*, which was being recommissioned in the Philadelphia Navy Yard. While he held this post, Jack’s family—which now included another son, Joseph, and a daughter, Jean—lived in New London, Connecticut. Johnny was five years

old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He rarely saw his father for the next four years.

During World War II, Jack McCain tried his best to live up to his father's reputation. He commanded the submarine *Gunnel*, which was part of the naval armada involved in D-Day, and the submarine *Dentuda*, which was on patrol in the Pacific when the cease fire was announced on August 14, 1945.

As a submarine commander during the war—McCain was in charge of three subs altogether—he sank, according to one published report, “twenty thousand tons of Japanese shipping” and “once spent 72 hours on the ocean bottom, riding out a depth charge attack. ‘It gives you a new outlook on life,’ [McCain] said of the experience.” For his service during the war, Jack McCain received the Silver Star Medal (for “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity,” the citation said), the Bronze Star Medal with Combat “V” (for “sinking an enemy vessel of 4,000 tons and damaging two small crafts totaling 350 tons”), and two Letters of Commendation.

As for Slew, he served, at the beginning of World War II, as Commander of Air Forces for the Western Sea Frontier and the South Pacific Force. He was named Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics in October 1942, and, in August 1943, became a vice admiral in his capacity of Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air). McCain much preferred sea duty to the Washington bureaucracy, so, in 1944, he returned to the Pacific Theater to command Task Force 38, which became infamous by the war's end. As Task Force 38's leader, he received the Navy Cross and Gold Stars in lieu of the Second and Third Distinguished Service Medals. The citation that accompanied the award reflected Slew McCain's lust for fighting: “[H]e devised techniques and procedures to locate and destroy grounded enemy planes, accounting for 3,000 planes smashed throughout his sustained attacks against Japan's home islands with only one of our destroyers damaged during the intensive operations between July 10 and August 15 [1945].”

**T**he historic drama of the last months of the war in the Pacific—the relentless fighting, the around-the-clock anxiety, the never-ending presence of death—had taken a toll on Slew McCain. On September 5, 1945, his first day back home in California, he had greeted his wife

Katherine and then visited a navy doctor who had voiced concern about McCain's fragile health. But McCain didn't want to dwell on the negative. He wanted to look to the future, when he would report for duty in Washington and then submit to the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, a white paper he and a friend, Admiral John Thach, had written. The landmark McCain-Thach report argued that navy air power should be used to support troop action in the coordinated air-ground effort that would become commonplace in the future. That first day, Slew spent much time with Katherine, whom he had badly missed during his long months at sea. He especially enjoyed telling her about a lunch he had with Jack on the submarine *Proteus* in Tokyo Bay just after the peace accords were signed. Admiral Charles Lockwood gave the luncheon on the *Proteus*. "During the process of the luncheon," Jack would recall, "I got my father off to one side, and I said to him that I would like to talk to him alone in that little stateroom they used to give commanding officers. And we went back there, and we talked for a little while. . . . And my father said to me at that time, he said, 'Son, there is no greater thing than to die for the principles—for the country and the principles that you believe in.' I considered myself very fortunate to have had a chance to see him at that particular moment."

On Slew's second day home, September 6, Katherine had arranged a welcome-home party for him. As he stood in a room packed with friends and naval personnel, Slew was the picture of the vaunted warrior having returned home from victory, but he appeared tired and subdued. Everyone there was thrilled the war was over, and most people who noticed Slew's lack of energy chalked it up to the stress he had experienced during the preceding months. Then, as the party roared noisily around him, Slew approached his wife to tell her he didn't feel well. He suddenly collapsed to the floor. A doctor attending the party rushed to his side but Slew was already dead. His heart had simply stopped beating.

McCain's body was flown to Washington, D.C., with full honor guard. On September 10, following a funeral service, McCain was buried in Arlington National Cemetery with military honors. His first namesake, Jack, was a navy commander; his second namesake, Johnny, was nine years old. They stood in the grey haze of the cemetery and

watched the proceedings in silence—the 21-gun salute, the presentation of the folded flag to the widow, the last rites given by the navy chaplain. In the immediate wake of McCain's death, which was deemed significant enough that President Truman sent condolences to the family and the *New York Times* ran his obituary on the front page, the United States Congress moved to recognize McCain's considerable achievements in World War II by posthumously awarding him a fourth star, a reward the navy, no doubt, would have bestowed on him had he lived.

**I**n the years after World War II, with the example of his father urging him on, Jack McCain continued to excel in the navy his father had loved so much. In November 1945, Jack assumed the position of Director of Records for the Bureau of Naval Personnel in the Department of the Navy in Washington. "They brought me back and put me in charge of the records activity," Jack McCain would recall. "And there was something like one million enlisted men records, and I forget how many officer records, see. But there was a backlog of filing of papers into these records in the neighborhood of several million sheets. And when you get into several million of anything, you're getting into real problems of management. . . . I had a team up there of five hundred sailors, three or four hundred Waves [women sailors]. . . . I must admit it's an interesting job because you read all sorts of strange things about people that you don't ordinarily get your hands on."

McCain held that post until January 1949. In those three years, he spent a good deal of time with his family in Washington. Then he was again ordered to sea, this time to command two different submarine divisions (Seventy-One for eleven months and Fifty-One for two months). In February 1950, he was made executive officer of the heavy cruiser *St. Paul* and held that post until November, when he was sent back to Washington to become the Director of the Undersea Warfare Research and Development Branch of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. In July 1951, he was named commander of the *Monrovia*.

By the 1950s, the McCain name had become famous in the navy, and revered in Mississippi. "We were all steeped in the tradition and history of the McCain legacy," Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi recalls. "I trained as a naval reserve officer (NROTC) in McCain Hall

at the University of Mississippi. That was where we would go to classes. I knew all about the family history. It was the first Admiral McCain who the building was named for at the University of Mississippi. We would also have a McCain Field, where the army national guard would train, not too far from the McCain homestead.”

In the early 1950s, Jack’s son Johnny was poised to enter the family “business” by first attending Slew’s and Jack’s alma mater—the Naval Academy. In four years, Jack McCain would earn the rank of admiral. Before his career ended, his promotion to four-star admiral made the McCains the only family in American history to have both a father and a son reach that rank. But that distinction came much later. In the summer of 1954, as he prepared to enter the Naval Academy, Johnny McCain already felt enormous pressure to live up to the remarkable accomplishments of his father and grandfather. Even so, throughout his early years, it never occurred to Johnny McCain that he could choose *not* to go into the navy. He was, simply, born to be a sailor.