

NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION

COMMODORE HOWARD H. J. BENSON, UNITED STATES NAVY, RETIRED

Howard Hartwell James Benson was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 8, 1888, son of Admiral William Shepherd Benson, USN and Mrs. (Mary A. Wyse) Benson, both now deceased. He entered the U. S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, on appointment from the Sixth Georgia District in 1905, was graduated in 1909 and performed the two years sea duty, then required by law before commissioning, in the USS VERMONT. Commissioned Ensign on June 5, 1911, he advanced progressively in rank, attaining that of Commodore, to date from November 27, 1944. On November 1, 1946 he was transferred to the Retired List of the U. S. Navy.

In April 1912 he was detached from the USS VERMONT with orders to the USS CASTINE, American Submarine Flotilla, for instruction in submarines. After qualifying in submarines in July 1913, he fitted out and commanded the USS H-2. Between January and March 1916 he had brief duty at the Navy Yard, Washington, D. C, then served until July 1917 in the Bureau of Steam Engineering, Navy Department, Washington, D. C. Ordered to the Navy Yard, Boston, Massachusetts he had duty in connection with fitting out certain steam fishing vessels for distant patrol duty. Reporting to Commander U. S. Patrol Squadrons based on France, he was assigned successive duty as Aide to the Commander Patrol Forces THREE and FOUR; command of the USS GUINEVERE, the USS CORONA, the USS NOMA and the USS ROE, and had duty in the USS SIGOURNEY.

He was awarded the Navy Cross for World War I service and was cited as follows: "For distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of the USS CORONA and later the USS ROE engaged in the important, exacting and hazardous duty of patrolling the waters infested with enemy submarines and mines, in escorting troops and supplies through these waters, and in offensive and defensive action, vigorously and unremittingly prosecuted, against all forms of enemy activity."

After his return to the United States, he had fitting out duty in the USS BUCHANAN at the Bath Iron Works, Bath, Maine, during January 1919 and assumed command of the vessel when she was placed in commission that month. Transferred in February 1920 to command of the USS YARNELL, he served as such until March of that year when he became Commanding Officer of the USS HOWARD. He was an Instructor in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Physics at the Naval Academy from September 1920 until June 1922, when he was assigned to Destroyer Squadrons, Pacific Fleet, with command of the USS S. P. LEE. In October 1922 he was assigned to the battleship TENNESSE, also operating in the Pacific, and served consecutively as First Lieutenant and Navigator in that battleship until March 1925.

Following two years duty in the Hydrographic Office, Bureau of Navigation, Navy Department, he assumed command in May 1927 of the USS SLOAT. Detached from command of that vessel, he next attended the Senior Course at the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, June 1929 to May 1930,

when he reported as an Instructor in the Department of Navigation at the Naval Academy. He headed that department from February 6, 1932 to July 25, 1932. While in the latter capacity, the curriculum and organization of the Academy was studied and planned by the Academic Board of which he was a member. The changes recommended included the combination of the Navigation and Seamanship Departments into one department, which was executed the next year. The revision of the navigation text book, Dutton's "Navigation and Piloting" was completed by the officers of the Department.

He returned to duty afloat in July 1932 as Commanding Officer of the USS SAPELO, and a month later was detached with orders to duty as Executive Officer of the USS TENNESSEE. On May 4, 1934, the Commanding Officer of the TENNESSEE, anchored in Colon Harbor with the United States Fleet, was taken ill and was transferred to a hospital ship. Commodore Benson assumed command of that battleship and under his command got underway with the U. S. Fleet to an anchorage near Culebra. Maneuvers and Fleet exercises were conducted en route. Further drills, exercises and maneuvers were carried out near Culebra and en route North. On arrival at New York the Fleet was reviewed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

He had instruction at the Army War College, Washington, D. C., for a year, June 1934-June 1935, then was assigned to the Shore Establishments Division, Navy Department. In June 1936 he returned to sea duty as Commanding Officer of the USS HOLLAND and in July 1938 assumed command of the USS REINA MERCEDES, station ship at the Naval Academy, continuing that duty until March 1941.

On April 1, 1941 he reported for fitting out duty in the USS WASHINGTON at the Navy Yard, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and assumed command of that vessel when she was commissioned on May 15 that year. Under his command, the WASHINGTON operated with the Atlantic Fleet and later was a unit of the U. S. Naval Forces in Europe, operating out of Scapa Flow. At sea as a unit of the British Home Fleet guarding convoys between Iceland and Russia against probable attack by the German Battle Force, which included TIRPITZ, LUTZOW, HIPPER and SCHEER, which were in northern Norwegian ports. These operations were in the Greenland and Norwegian Seas and the Arctic Ocean. The convoy routes were limited on the north by the ice barrier. On one of the sorties the WASHINGTON reached latitude 76-20 North and Longitude 10-20 East.

Detached from command of the WASHINGTON in July 1942, he reported the next month as Chief of Staff to the Commandant of the Seventh Naval District, (his title was changed in September 1944 to Chief of Staff to the Commandant Seventh Naval District and the Commander Gulf Sea Frontier) with headquarters in Miami, Florida. While in that assignment he served from February 3, 1943 to April 1, 1943 and from March 25, 1944 to July 17, 1944 as Acting Commandant of that District and Acting Commander Gulf Sea Frontier. "For exceptionally meritorious conduct...as Chief of Staff, Seventh Naval District, from August 14, 1942 to September 12, 1944; and as Chief of Staff, Gulf Sea Frontier and Seventh Naval District, from September 12, 1944 until the cessation of hostilities..." he was awarded the Legion of Merit. The citation further states in part:

"Charged with the direction of the newly formed headquarters of the Seventh Naval District, Commodore Benson was personally responsible for procuring suitable personnel, establishing essential activities and advance bases, organizing an efficient staff and promoting liaison with Army and Coast Guard units. Serving as Acting Commander Gulf Sea Frontier and Commandant Seventh Naval District from February to April 1943, and again from March to July 1944, he maintained aggressive operations against enemy submarines within the waters of the Gulf Sea Frontier and applied himself diligently to difficult housing and discipline problems, thereby creating an effective and unified command..."

On November 1, 1946 he was transferred to the Retired List of the U. S. Navy.

In addition to the Navy Cross and the Legion of Merit, Commodore Benson has the Victory Medal, Patrol Clasp (World War I); Second Nicaraguan Campaign Medal; American Defense Service Medal, Fleet Clasp; American Campaign Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; and the World War II Victory Medal. He has also been awarded the Order of the Southern Cross and Diploma from the Government of Brazil. For distinguished service the Certificate of "Mention in a Despatch" with Oak Leaf Emblem was conferred on him by the British Government on October 7, 1946.