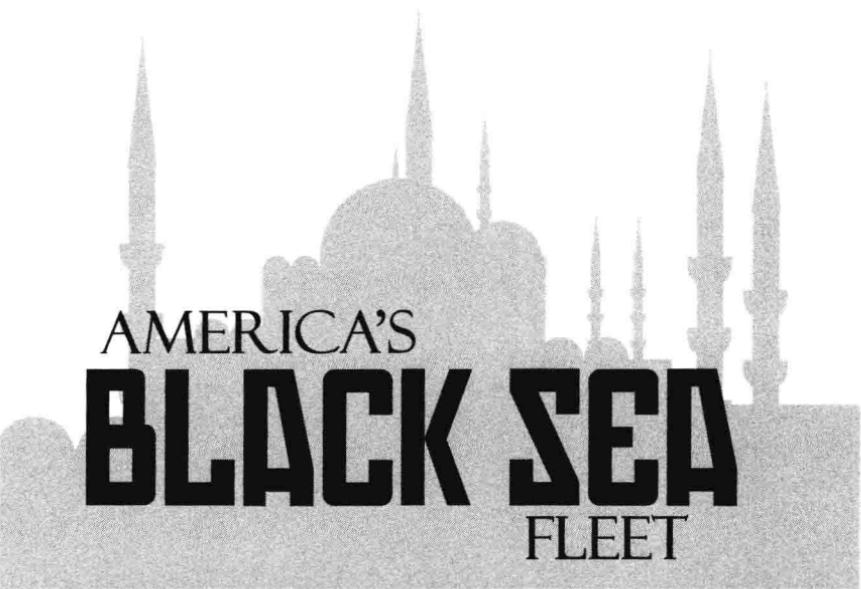


ROBERT SHENK

AMERICA'S **BLACK SEA** FLEET



THE U.S. NAVY AMIDST WAR AND REVOLUTION, 1919-1923



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FLEET

THE U.S. NAVY AMIDST WAR AND REVOLUTION, 1919-1923

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ROBERT SHENK

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AMERICA'S
BLACK SEA
FLEET

AGAIN, TO PAULA

*Not even a little chantey survives to tell of the children
carried in the arms of American sailors.*

— William Ellis

PREFACE

It was while we were writing our biography of Admiral Dan Gallery that my friend, Herb Gilliland, discovered the admiral's youthful diaries in the stacks of Special Collections at the Naval Academy. When I read those colorful accounts of Gallery's first four years of commissioned service, I became intrigued by the young officer's description of his six-month tour of duty at Constantinople in 1922–23, this while serving aboard the old armored cruiser *Pittsburgh*. Clearly, most Navy people relished the uproarious highlife of Constantinople's European quarter, despite some of them having just witnessed enormous human tragedies only a couple of hours' cruise away. Fascinated, I began looking into why America had sent that very small fleet to its four-year home in the Bosphorus Strait to begin with.

Shortly I came across Marjorie Housepian Dobkin's fine book on the burning of Smyrna, published in 1971.¹ The story of Smyrna that she narrated was a very gripping one, resulting in the deaths of many tens of thousands and miseries beyond imagination. However, a successful evacuation of nearly 200,000 ethnic Greek and Armenian refugees did result, accomplished through the able coordination of the officers and men of the American destroyers in the harbor, even if, at one crucial point, an American civilian (rather than a naval officer) had to take the lead. I discovered in Dobkin's account that an American Navy shore patrol of several dozen men along with a civilian relief team sent by the admiral had been ashore in the city before and after the fire—and that the American relief team was the only one operating ashore.

I soon visited Dobkin in New York. Not only her encouragement but also her example of successfully searching for naval accounts beyond official reports were especially important in an early stage of this project. Her example would stimulate me to similar efforts.

However, in the beginnings of my research, I soon discovered that the Smyrna catastrophe was only one among several great humanitarian crises, tragedies, and atrocities that confronted the Bosphorus-based American naval

detachment in its four short years. A final evacuation of some 150,000 White Russians from the Crimea to Constantinople, this followed by a great famine in southern Russia, were late spinoffs from the Russian Revolution, for example, to which American naval vessels and naval personnel ably responded. About the same time, events were occurring deep in Anatolian Turkey (in the region known as the Pontus) that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent Turkish minorities (chiefly ethnic Greeks). In the latter instance, two American destroyer captains recognized that they were witnessing something very terrible indeed and made fervent pleas for their admiral's intervention. Since the Navy detachment commander, Adm. Mark Bristol, was not entirely willing to entertain this viewpoint, both of these officers risked their careers by doing so.

Increasingly, it seemed to me that someone ought to consider America's Black Sea navy at book length. After all, the experience of the Black Sea Express (as Admiral Bristol's small group of destroyers were sometimes called, in imitation of the famous trans-European train Orient Express) was in several ways similar to that of the Yangtze Patrol that America had maintained in China for decades, this in roughly the same period, though on the other side of the globe. I had studied the Yangtze Patrol in my work with the papers of Richard McKenna, author of the fine novel *The Sand Pebbles*. Moreover, as the great majority of the ships that served then in Admiral Bristol's small fleet were destroyers (specifically, the type of destroyer called "four-pipers" or "flushdeckers"), it was perhaps not unimportant that I had once been a destroyer sailor myself. So, while I knew I certainly was not a novelist, and although I was a literature specialist rather than a historian (no doubt I write with more appetite for the sea story and colorful detail than some historians would appreciate), eventually I considered that I might be able to portray well the various events that took place in that long-forgotten age.

Having decided to write a book with this specific focus, I knew that it would have to include historical and political background and other discussion that reached beyond a narrow operational treatment.

One reason for a wider viewpoint than one might find in other naval histories is that early on in his assignment to Turkey, Admiral Bristol became America's chief diplomat as well as the senior naval officer in the very large region under his cognizance (virtually all of what was then known as the Near East—or what we now call the Middle East—and southern Russia, too). Therefore, not only did Bristol head up a small diplomatic team in Constantinople in addition to his naval staff, but his ship captains also were rightly regarded as the admiral's and America's representatives in most of the Turkish, Russian, and other foreign ports they visited.

As for the admiral's work at the embassy, virtually every prominent American visitor sooner or later called on Bristol, who frequently helped them in one way or another, although at the same time he did his best to "correct" their points of view. Beyond that, Bristol was always interacting both with Europeans and Turks in important ways (both Turks in the sultan's pay, and, increasingly, those with Nationalist sympathies). Bristol also met with American and other journalists (including soon-to-be famous American novelists John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway) whenever he could and fed them suggested storylines that might promote his agenda. I have not hesitated to listen to these correspondents and report their opinions and descriptions when it seemed particularly helpful to do so. To a lesser extent, I also often cite the opinions and writings of American relief workers, educators, businessmen, and missionaries, for the Navy people were always interacting with the other Americans in the region, and it is in some ways artificial to separate them.

A second reason that I must present a wider than usual viewpoint in this book and sometimes must delve into the general historical background in considerable depth is that, during this period, several historic events had very forcefully gripped the attention of the United States. As mentioned above, on the north coast of the Black Sea, aftershocks from the great human earthquake that was the Russian Revolution were continuing to be felt, to which Americans back home (such as Herbert Hoover, for one) felt obliged to respond. Further south, the Armenian genocide that had taken place in Turkey during World War I had awakened great compassion mixed with anger back in America, and Americans everywhere were contributing money on a massive scale to help the survivors. American relief teams were also scurrying to help.

This Armenian issue, I soon learned, was a very complex one, and discovering exactly what had happened in Turkey during the Great War itself and what was taking place in the immediate postwar period was not easy. Indeed, these issues are hotly contested today in some circles, as anyone knows who has attended (as I have) addresses by such diverse scholars on the period as Richard Hovannisian (a prominent American historian of the Armenians), Justin McCarthy (an outspoken American scholar who usually supports the Turkish point of view), and Taner Akçam (a Turkish scholar who explores Turkish sources of the Armenian genocide) and who has heard diverse modern audiences' very passionate reactions to these presentations. Furthermore, then and now, Adm. Mark Bristol's support for ethnic Turks, as opposed to the ethnic Armenians and Greeks of Turkey, has come in for considerable criticism.

For these reasons, I have done my best first to search out and then to present as clearly as I can important perspectival material, much of it not being specifically naval in subject. The long second chapter (in which many pages go

by without reference to specifically naval topics) is absolutely vital for understanding the situation confronting Bristol's small naval forces, as well as the wide context into which the admiral began to exert himself almost immediately upon his arrival in Constantinople. Beyond that, in the chapter about the deaths that were occurring in the Pontus region, I purposely stray a bit from naval activities or naval reports to clarify what was going on not only right along the Black Sea coast of Turkey, at the two ports the destroyers regularly visited, but also deep in the country's interior. I am convinced that to illuminate the nature of Admiral Bristol's decisions regarding these matters (and naval officers' decisions when they attempted to influence their boss), it is necessary to describe the *via dolorosa* of the Black Sea Greeks in some detail.

One final reason that I go beyond naval operational accounts is to trace the varied nonnaval interests of the servicemen I write about. It only makes sense that, if the naval officers and enlisted men were both enthralled by the city of Constantinople, yet horrified by what was going on in some of the other places they visited, I should make clear why, and that this would require wide quotation of both official and unofficial accounts. To find such material (I was searching at the same time for witnesses of major historical events, of course, such as American naval activities during the Smyrna fire), beyond looking into all published and archival sources I could find, I also sought privately held materials. I did this by making wide use both of the Internet and the archives that are available to researchers at the Naval Academy's Archives and Special Collections.

That is, knowing that virtually all the line officers in the Navy of that time were Naval Academy graduates, and thinking that their relatives might have retained some of their letters, diaries, or scrapbooks, I searched out the names of most of the officers who had served in Admiral Bristol's small navy and wrote their relatives whenever I could locate recent addresses. This was quite a successful enterprise; thanks to all who assisted me (I note some of their names below). The material I received allowed me to portray much more fully than I could have otherwise both the operational and the routine sides of America's Bosphorus-based navy. The letters, diaries, scrapbooks, photographs, informal oral histories, and family traditions that were shared with me have also helped me very much to picture the nightlife and other recreational activities in which Navy enlisted men and officers—especially junior officers—so ardently participated. Such holistic treatment of the experiences of naval people both while on duty and off is intentional on my part, for I think that after-hours activity and interests are too often left for fiction by naval historians. For example, in this duty assignment, enlisted men, junior officers, and even the white-haired commodore of a destroyer squadron decided to marry the young Russian or

Greek women they met ashore, and some of these men's decisions were forcefully opposed by the admiral himself. Hence, the unusual circumstances that so affected his men need to be explained.

Incidentally, the two collections of destroyer war diaries in private hands to which I was led or that I was sent have proved quite valuable in other ways, providing some additional evidence about the continuation of the genocide in the Pontus during the 1921–22 period, evidence that, so far as I know, had not been unearthed before.

Naturally, much of my research was more ordinarily academic, requiring me to visit various libraries and archives, for instance. Over a few years, I spent many weeks with the Bristol Collection in the Library of Congress and more weeks reading widely in the National Archives—typically taking advantage of the wonderful hospitality of Herb and Carol Gilliland near Annapolis to do so. Many thanks to you, Herb and Carol.

Besides all those who aided me at the Library of Congress and National Archives, I should say that the archivists at Nimitz Library at the Naval Academy proved very helpful, as did the people who work at the Naval Historical Division at the Navy Yard.

I also searched into a variety of university collections (sometimes in person, but often by ordering materials online or by mail), assisted by a score of expert archivists. Then, aided by the interlibrary loan people at the University of New Orleans, I read very widely in published materials. Finally, at one point my wife, Paula, and I traveled to Istanbul so I could get the lay of the land and see what might be available there in terms of scholarship or scholarly expertise. Thanks to the American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) for putting us up, and to the University of New Orleans English Department for helping to fund my part of that trip. UNO's College of Liberal Arts also helped with funds at one point. And thanks to the many people who met with me in Turkey and who helped make that trip most illuminating and enjoyable at the same time.

Finally, thanks to Dan Doll and Bill Still, who read early versions of this manuscript in a somewhat different form, as did Marjorie Dobkin early on (though I'm, of course, responsible for all the mistakes that remain). The strong support of this project by John Gery, Peter Schock, and, particularly, the late John Cooke of the English Department at UNO (and Angela Brown's able assistance) are also most appreciated.

Among the relatives of Turkish-era naval veterans who responded to my inquiries, I would particularly like to thank Frank and Margaret Howell. Margaret is Captain Harry Pence's daughter, and her husband, Frank, not only told me of the valuable Harry Pence papers, then still in the process of being transferred to

Mandeville Special Collections at the University of California at San Diego, but also found an institutional way to help fund my visit to that library.

Also, the help of Peter Fitzgerald, Lawrence Olsen, and Webb Trammell Jr. has been absolutely invaluable.

But thanks, too, to the following people (and others I may not remember) for sharing family letters, journals, other materials and even “family traditions” or anecdotes (one or two of which have found their way into this book), and for encouraging me in my quest, often as interesting to them as it was for me: David Bailey, Joseph Barse, Janet Brooks, Bea Buchheister, Susan Devore Chambliss, John Chanler, James P. Clay, Grace Dillingham, Anne McIver Dunn, Eugene Farrell, Joel R. Gardner, Robert L. Ghormley Jr., Alice Grinnell, Edward H. Jones Jr., Ted Libbey, Daniel P. Mannix IV, Bob Maser, Britton Murdoch, John B. Pleasants, Franklin Saunders, George Sharp, Tony L. W. Waller, Bob Watts, Ted Wellings Jr., Judy Meiselman and Banice Webber, and Carol Winckler.

Note: In describing all the regions and cities discussed, I typically use the names that were used by Americans at the time, such as Constantinople (rather than Istanbul) and Smyrna (rather than Izmir), and similarly with a host of lesser-known names. I’m afraid some of my listings of naval ranks may be a bit off target, so that the “lieutenant” I quote may in fact have been a lieutenant junior grade; it is sometimes difficult to discover (without much extra effort) when a person was actually promoted, nor does it seem all that important in most cases. And I often silently correct mistakes in spelling or punctuation in letters or journal entries.

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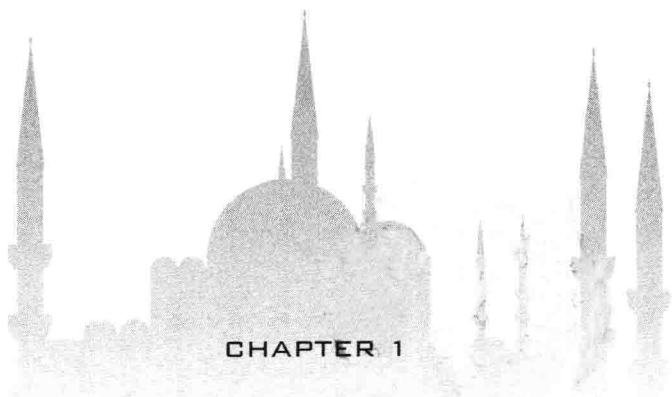
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CHAPTER 1

THE ARRIVAL

Constantinople is noisy, hot, hilly, dirty and beautiful.

—Ernest Hemingway

For three or four years just after the Great War, many American naval officers and enlisted men would be ordered to duty at the famous oriental metropolis of Constantinople. Other Americans would come too. Typically, they would all be quite excited at the prospect.

When, in April of 1917, the United States declared war on Turkey's ally, Germany, and Turkey broke diplomatic relations with the United States, all of the ranking American Navy people had to leave, along with the entire embassy staff. Most of the other three or four hundred American residents also departed Constantinople or mainland Turkey and traveled back to the States.

Noteworthy among the few Americans who remained in Constantinople were a few dozen naval enlisted men and three officers. These men were interned in the famous crowded harbor called the Golden Horn on the steam yacht USS *Scorpion*, which had been America's station ship (ambassador's yacht) in Constantinople since 1908.¹ Although Turkish wartime regulations restricted these men to their ship, it appears that all the Navy people regularly got ashore anyway, while their officers maintained very good relations with the local authorities. Also manifesting the good feelings many Turks had for Americans, although British and French schools had been closed and turned into Turkish army barracks, the two fine American colleges in the city were permitted to continue operating.²

Upon the impending armistice of the Allied powers with Germany a year later, President Caleb Frank Gates of Robert College (the leader of the remaining Americans) cautioned his staff to be respectful of their defeated hosts and not to rejoice too openly.³ Following Gates' lead, unlike other foreigners in

the city who overnight began to fly their national flags and rejoice with abandon, most Americans waited to celebrate. However, when a fleet of a hundred British, French, Italian, and Greek warships steamed into the Bosphorus Strait on November 13, 1918, Americans joined the cheering people who lined the hills on both sides, even though no American naval vessels were a part of this armada.⁴

As the Allies began dividing the city of Constantinople among them—the United States, having never declared war on Turkey, was allowed no part in the supervisory commission—some of the Americans who had fled the country came back. However, other Americans who had remained in Turkey went home, including all those interned sailors (some fifty of whom were said to have taken home wives acquired in the city during or before *Scorpion's* internment!⁵). Before long, a few additional ships and officers began to arrive. Almost all of these Navy people and diplomats as well as most of the businessmen, educators, and other Americans who, at about this time, began traveling halfway around the world to this exotic city, were quite new to the place.



They came primarily by sea. Ordered to Constantinople from Norfolk in early 1920, the American destroyer *Smith Thompson* fell in behind *Alden* and *Long*. The three destroyers took ten days to reach Gibraltar, where they stopped to fuel and provision. A very new ship, *Smith Thompson* burned oil rather than coal, but it was oil of a different kind that interested Fireman First Class Bert Berthelsen and his mates, who, once overseas, felt they could freely thumb their noses at the 1919 Prohibition amendment. Back in Philadelphia in December, the crew had found the vessel's torpedo alcohol tanks unlocked, so they drained the tanks dry and stowed bottles of firewater throughout the ship. Upon discovering the theft, the skipper ordered the crew members to stand watch over the empty tanks in the freezing weather. Once the ship sailed, he had seven marines (aboard for transportation to Turkey, probably to work at the embassy) stand guard over those same tanks, now once again filled with alcohol.

When *Smith Thompson* and its sister ships reached Gibraltar, each night the sailors tanked up with wine, whiskey, and cognac and then took their invigoration out on the "Limeys" to such a degree that the British governor-general invited the three destroyers to move on two days ahead of schedule. As the ships steamed eastward, some crew members sobered up enough to note that the Mediterranean was covered with ships' lights.

A couple of days later, after passing through the Straits of Messina, *Long* turned north for duty in the Adriatic, while *Alden* and *Smith Thompson*