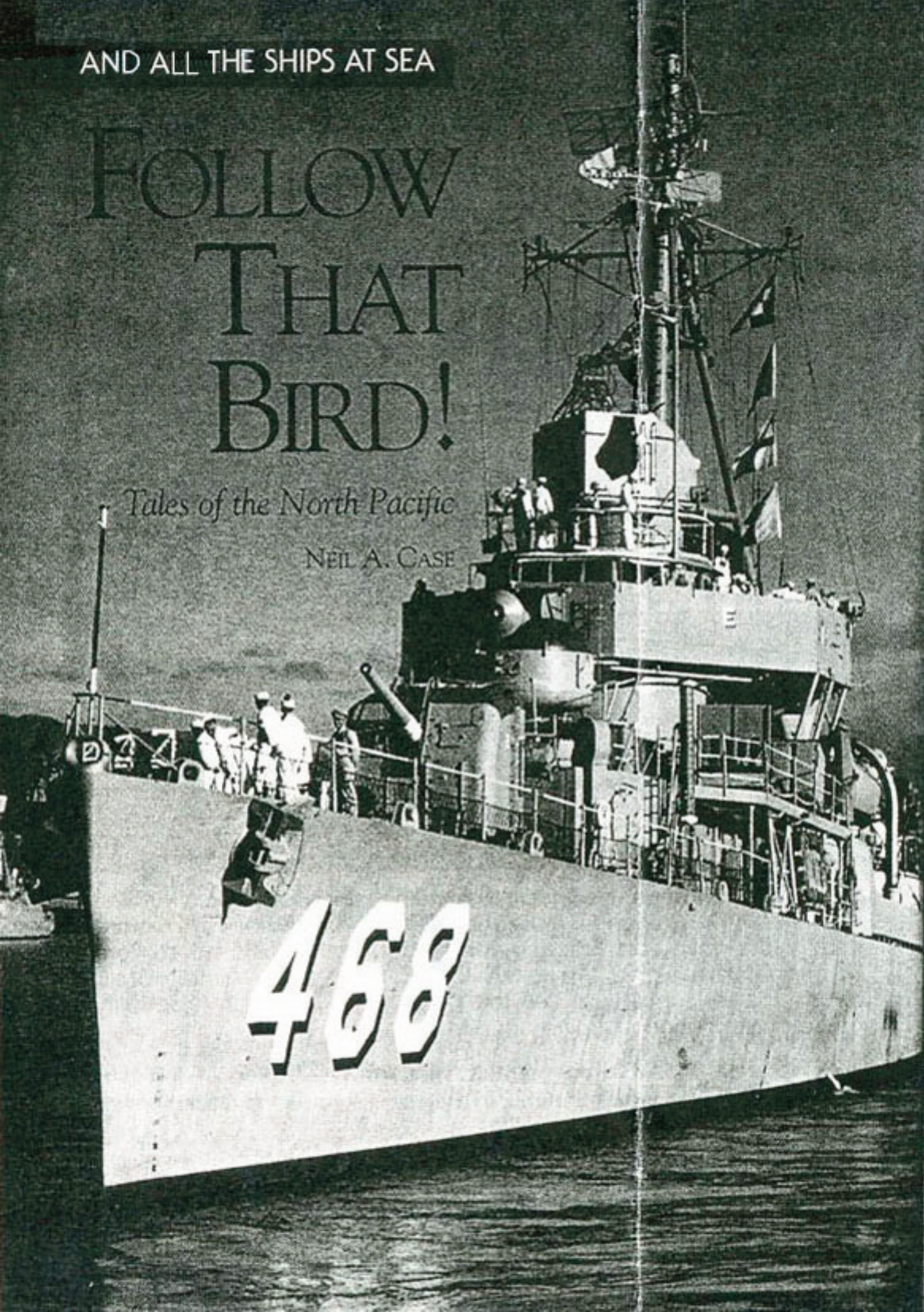
AND ALL THE SHIPS AT SEA

FOLLOW THAT BIRD!

Tales of the North Pacific

NEIL A. CASE



I followed a bird with a ship. I was an ensign in the Navy then, serving aboard a destroyer. One afternoon when "my" ship was operating with other ships in WestPac (the Western Pacific Theater of Operations) and I was conning officer (giving orders for turning and course and speed), I gave orders for "my" ship, a U.S. Navy destroyer, to follow a bird.

My interest in birds was well known aboard ship, even before I chased the bird. It became known the day after I reported for duty, the day of my first interview with the executive officer.

The exec invited me into his office that day, told me to have a seat, then told me the ship had openings for an officer in engineering and in gunnery. "Do you have a preference?"

"No sir."

"Well, what are your interests?"

"Outdoors, nature, bird watching, sir."

He paused and looked at me. Then he asked, "What's your degree in?"

"General zoology, sir."

"Che-rist!" hitting a knee with his right fist. "What are we going to do with you?"

I made no suggestion.

The exec paused again, then said, "I'll discuss it with the captain. Dismissed."

He must have discussed it with more than the captain, for soon after I heard a sailor talking about the new officer, "who watches birds." My reputation was established.

I was assigned to the engineering department. Perhaps the captain thought having me below decks when on duty would keep me from looking for birds. But when the ship was at sea and I was on watch on the bridge, I looked for birds. I used binoculars more than the lookouts. When the captain asked why I looked through binoculars so much, I admitted I was looking for birds.

Off duty at sea, too, I often stood on a wing of the bridge, using my own binoculars, staring out over the water. After dinner I frequently took my camera and a long lens to the ship's stern. That's when the day's garbage was thrown overboard, and in the North Pacific, west of Hawaii, this often attracted black-footed albatrosses. As I stood on the fantail watching and photographing birds sweeping in and snatching up bits of garbage, members of the crew stood on the 0-1 level, one deck higher, watching me.

The author served (and birded) aboard the destroyer escort USS Taylor (far left) from 1954 until 1957. He is shown here leaving the ship in Hawaii.

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Then came the bird-chasing incident.

We were one ship in a fleet, eight destroyers and an escort carrier, with two submarines acting as the enemy. The submarines were ordered to attempt to get past the screening destroyers and attack the carrier. The destroyers, of course, were ordered to intercept the submarines and prevent an attack on the carrier.

Early in my watch that afternoon there was a radio message from a destroyer on the other side of the formation: "Sonar contact, bearing one-seven-six, range 1200." Sonar contact, submarine! Three destroyers were ordered to search and attack. The carrier turned away from the submarine contact and the other destroyers formed a new screen before it.

Then another sonar contact. Three more destroyers ordered to search and attack. Two destroyers left with the carrier, one my ship. The other destroyer with the carrier was ordered to plane guard station, a position astern of the carrier. My ship was ordered to conduct a single ship sonar screen, a broad weave back and forth in front of the carrier.

A broad weave is an erratic course. It's supposed to be so erratic that any submarine ahead could not anticipate the turning of the destroyer and slip past to attack any ship following.

There were black-footed albatrosses sweeping back and forth in front of the formation that afternoon. What could be more erratic, I thought, than the course of an albatross? Picking one, taking a bearing on it, I ordered, "Left full rudder, come to course two-eight-three," the bearing of the albatross. When the albatross turned, I turned, "Right full rudder, come to course zero-two-seven. Left full rudder. . ."

As I called out rudder and steering signals the captain came out on the open bridge, stood beside me for a few minutes, then asked, "Mr. Case, how are you deciding when to turn."

I hesitated. What would he say if I told him I was following a bird? But what choice did I have? Pointing ahead I said, "See that bird, Captain? I'm following it."

The skipper was obviously surprised. He opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head. Then he turned and walked back into the pilot house.

A few days later, in Yokosuka, Japan, friends and I went to the Navy Officers' Club. We were led to a table next to one where the skipper sat with the commanding officers of three other destroyers of the fleet we had been operating with. The skipper's back was to us. He didn't see us. He was talking, and as we sat down I heard him say, "Fellows, you won't believe this, but I have an officer who chased a bird with my ship."

The story must have made the rounds of all the ships of the Pacific Fleet. Months later, in the Officers' Club in Pearl Harbor, I heard one officer ask another, "Did you hear about the officer who chased a bird with his ship?" □

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