

1945 July 9-15

Marc Mitscher Slept Here



Admiral Marc Mitscher
(Britannica.com)

You may have heard the apocryphal stories about some establishment in the northeast that has tried to claim fame by advertising that "George Washington slept here." Everyone knows who George Washington was, so any association with him is bound to capture attention and business.

La Crosse had a real "someone famous slept here" story in the middle of July 1945. As "Vee" wrote in her weekly "A Letter From Home:"

Midweek excitement was aroused by the sudden appearance of Vice-Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, leader of the marauding task force 58, in La Crosse on Wednesday to spend the night, while in the city of his birth, Hillsboro, 59 miles away, reporters and photographers from a large area cooled their heels and speculated whether they should take turns keeping a night watch in case the admiral made a tactical entrance. The admiral made a splendid impression on everyone by his unassuming manner.¹

The visit happened because Mitscher and his wife were on their way from the west coast to Washington, D.C., so they made a detour to western Wisconsin to visit his mother. His mother had come back to Hillsboro in 1944 to be with her sister, Mrs. Helen Pinch.²

On their way to Hillsboro, Mitscher and his wife stopped in La Crosse to spend the night in the premier hotel of the city at the time. If the Hotel Stoddard were still standing, and there was a sign stating that

"Marc Mitscher slept here," today it would be greeted with quizzical expressions or disinterest borne of ignorance.

Who was Marc Mitscher?

Marc Andrew Mitscher was born in January 1887 at Hillsboro to Oscar and Myrta (Shear) Mitscher.³ His paternal grandparents had come to Hillsboro just before the Civil War and established a furniture store. His maternal grandparents were among the earliest settlers of Hillsboro, and that grandfather owned a general store and served in the Wisconsin state assembly.⁴ Marc Mitscher lived his first two years in Hillsboro before the family moved to Oklahoma.⁵ Oscar Mitscher was the first mayor of Oklahoma City, and he was later appointed federal agent for the Osage Indian reservation.⁶ After attending schools in Washington, D. C., Marc Mitscher graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1910. His sea duty as a young naval officer included service on three battleships before World War I.⁷

During World War I, Mitscher earned his pilot's wings, and this was the start of his extensive involvement in the development of naval aviation. He commanded naval air stations in New York and Florida until the end of the war. Later he was one of the pilots in three seaplanes attempting the first transatlantic flight. The rest of the interwar years saw Mitscher posted to aircraft carriers or in other naval aviation units.⁸

In October 1941, Mitscher was made captain of the newly-commissioned aircraft carrier *Hornet*. Shortly after that, he was promoted to Rear Admiral after 35 years of service in the Navy.⁹



Admiral Marc Mitscher
(ibiblio.org)

Mitscher was a key figure in many of the significant naval actions of World War II in the Pacific. Jimmy Doolittle's famous bombing raid on Japan was launched from the *U.S.S. Hornet* in April 1942. Mitscher commanded naval forces in the Battle of Midway and the Solomon Islands later that year and into 1943.¹⁰ In January 1944, Mitscher assumed command of a carrier task force in the Central Pacific that attacked the Marshall Islands, Truk, Tinian, and Saipan. His aircraft shot down 400 Japanese aircraft in a three-day battle in the Philippine Sea, at the loss of just sixteen American airplanes, which became known as the "Marianas Turkey-shoot."¹¹

During one action in June 1944, Mitscher ordered all ship lights to be turned on at night so that pilots returning from missions low on fuel could land safely, despite the danger to his ships from Japanese submarines.¹² Standing orders specified absolute light discipline at night to prevent giving away your location to the enemy. Mitscher, a naval aviator himself, knew that ditching at night in the Pacific Ocean would be a death warrant for many of his aviators. The needless sacrifice of men was what the Japanese were doing at this point in the war, and Mitscher's conscience would not allow him to do the

same. So, the ships' lights came on to provide a homing beacon for aircrews struggling through inky blackness over a vast ocean. Many of those pilots owed their lives to his risky decision.

In late 1944 and early 1945, his task force conducted operations in the Philippines, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, air raids against Japan, and the sinking of the Japanese super battleship *Yamato*.¹³

In July 1945, Mitscher and his wife were on their way to Washington, D.C. because he was going to become deputy chief of operations in the Navy Department.¹⁴

Mitscher had not seen his mother in 11 years. Although his mother lived in Oak Mountain, Oklahoma, she had been visiting her sister, Helen Pinch, in Hillsboro, for a year. A citizen's committee in Hillsboro was in charge of a low-key celebration of their town's most famous native son.¹⁵ It was Mitscher's mother who requested that there be no public fanfare.¹⁶

Mitscher's birthplace and early home, built by his father, was still standing on Main Street in Hillsboro.¹⁷

Flags, bunting, and welcome signs went up in the days before his visit. The welcome committee made it clear that streets would be blocked and that no "outsiders" would be allowed to approach the Pinch home and disturb the 58-year-old war hero's visit with his mother and aunt.¹⁸

In advance of his visit, the editors of the *La Crosse Tribune* played up the "apple pie" universality of the event.

We Call It America

ONE of those "typically American" episodes will be re-enacted in the Hamlet of Hillsboro this week when its most famous native son comes home.

He is, of course, Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher of Navy Task Force 58, whose carrier plane strike at Tokyo last February 16 and 17 currently is being re-enacted.

The La Crosse Tribune's reporter and photographer, dispatched to Hillsboro to gather up threads of preparation for the signal event, tell the typical story we were sure was there.

There is always a homely and wholesome touch about affairs of this kind, and Hillsboro is making it no exception. Mitscher's return, as a son born there, is tribute to the community quite as much as the admiral's decision to pay a visit — to his mother and the hamlet from which he sprang.

Who knows but that Marc Mitscher, in a moment of fancy on the bridge of his battleship, directing the assault upon enemy Tokyo, visioned in some far-off day the very experience it will be his to enjoy in Hillsboro this week?

It's a long way from Hillsboro to the waters off Tokyo, but Marc Mitscher has been there — and back. And it's been a long way for millions of American boys from every hamlet and village and city of America, these past few years, for some of whom it has meant and will mean, grievously, a one way passage.

So the thing that's happening in Hillsboro this week is a symbol of the national panorama — the goings and the comings, the joyous welcomes and the painful heartaches endured by an America at war. For such is war.

The remarkable thing about it, the thing which is rooted in the very foundation of America, is that an admiral or a general, a sailor or a private, emerges from the cross-roads to fame as easily as from the metropolitan center.

We have no distinctions in America, thank God, except the distinction that a Marc Mitscher can emerge from a proud valley hamlet in the heart of Wisconsin, or that some private in the rear rank from the Bronx can help raise the flag on Iwo Jima.

We call it, simply, America!

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 July 11, page 6)

Admiral Mitscher and his wife arrived in La Crosse about 8:00 p.m. on Tuesday, July 10, 1945. Mary Ferris, a *La Crosse Tribune* reporter; managing editor of the Tribune, R. L. Bangsberg; local attorney Mark Esch; Dr. Paul Gatterdam; and Pacific veteran Lt. Col. Donald R. Moore of Wilmette, Illinois, visited with Mitscher and his wife in their room at the Hotel Stoddard. Mitscher was described as a small man with a friendly and enthusiastic handshake. He explained that his trademark long-billed baseball cap was to keep the tropical sun off of his face because it burned and chapped quickly. Mitscher said the greatest achievement of his ships and aircraft was in supporting ground troops in taking an objective. The admiral strongly believed that the Japanese would not be beaten without an invasion of their home islands. The humble admiral remarked that hard-charging Admiral Bull Halsey would probably ride Emperor Hirohito's white horse through the streets of Tokyo in a victory parade. Mitscher said he planned to be there but would be riding a mule.¹⁹

While in La Crosse, city fireman John Gautsch, 1117 State Street, was the first person to recognize Admiral Mitscher on the street. Gautsch was rewarded with an autograph.²⁰

Mitscher and his wife left La Crosse early Thursday morning, July 12, bound for Hillsboro.²¹ They arrived at 8:00 a.m. on Highway 33 and went directly to the home of his aunt, Helen Pinch. Residents of Hillsboro had expected them to arrive in the afternoon, so Admiral Mitscher achieved tactical surprise with his early arrival. Except for about 25 minutes with photographers and reporters, they spent the morning with 12 family members in the Pinch residence. Four Navy men from Madison provided security around the home. The women of Hillsboro had supplied the family with cakes, fruit, and preserves for their noon meal. The *Tribune* reporter went so far as to list the other food served at the noon meal.²²

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Mitscher In Hillsboro



—Times Photo by Harry Larson

A Proud Mother is Mrs. Myrtis Mitscher (left), who admits she is more than 80 years old, who is shown with her famous son, Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, and his wife at Hillsboro Thursday morning.

Bombs, Rockets Lash Southern Japanese Cities

British Carrier Craft Hit Sabang Island In Indian Ocean Off Tip Of Sumatra

GUAM, July 12, Friday.—(AP)—An air fleet of from 500 to 850 Superfortresses poured more than 3,000 tons of flaming and explosive bombs before dawn today on four Japanese cities and oil centers spread over 400 miles of the home islands of Honshu and Shikoku.

The giant air raiders struck from Urawama, on the west central coast of Shikoku, to as far east as Utsunomiya, a city of 80,000 lying 60 miles north of Tokyo on the north Tokyo plain.

Criticism Of Jap Cabinet On Increase

(By the Associated Press)

As the constant blasting of Allied bombs tore at Japan's home soil today, a leading Nipponese journalist accused the Suzuki cabinet of doing nothing "while the empire is confronted by its most serious crisis," radio Tokyo reported.

Eighty-two-year-old Ichiro (Soho) Tokutomi, dean of the Japanese press, endorsed the cabinet to do better than hold routine meetings in the premier's residence, said the enemy broadcast heard by the FCC.

Earlier Tokutomi severely criticized the government for not telling the people the truth about the seriousness of military setbacks in the Pacific.

Tokyo radio's broadcasts today brimmed over with fear for the future. They included:

Okay Charter, Solons Urged; Decision Near

Congressmen Hear Representatives Of Organizations Who Support Program

WASHINGTON (AP)—Representatives of a score of organizations today urged senate ratification of the United Nations charter without change as the foreign relations committee brought its hearing toward a close.

Dr. Helen Dwight Reid spoke for a dozen major groups in behalf of the charter but she declared that its usefulness "depends on the quality of our participation."

Dr. Reid was listed as spokesman for the American Association

Admiral, Wife Spend Night In La Crosse

By MARY FERRIS (Times Staff Writer)

I talked with Marc A. Mitscher last night. And I went away thinking of him, not as an admiral but just as a man with a sense of humor, twinkling blue eyes which become more blue when he says, "You can't print that," and laughter lines in his forehead and face.

Vice-Admiral Mitscher arrived in La Crosse about 8 p. m. Tuesday enroute to Hillsboro to visit his mother for the first time in 11 years. He left for Hillsboro early Thursday morning.

With R. L. Bangsberg, managing editor of the Tribune; Mark Esch, local attorney; Dr. Paul Gatterdam and Lieut. Col. Donald R. Moore, Wilmette, Ill., who recently returned from the Pacific, I visited with the Mitchers in their hotel

City Decorated In Greeting To Its Famed Son

Admiral Sees Mother For First Time In 11 Years; Plan Parade, Presentation

By VERA MacDONALD (Times Staff Writer)

HILLSBORO, Wis. — Flag-decked streets and general excitement gripped Hillsboro Thursday as it paid homage to its most famous son, Vice Admiral Marc A. Mitscher.

The admiral, accompanied by his wife, surprised the populace by arriving at 8 p. m. entering the city from the north over highway No. 33 from La Crosse and going down a side street to the residence

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 July 12, page 1)



Admiral Marc Mitscher, his mother Myrta, and his wife Frances in Hillsboro; 1945 July 12
(Wisconsin Historical Society)

About 200 people gathered around the Pinch home at 3:00 p.m. for the welcome ceremony. Dr. R. S. MacKechnie spoke on behalf of the Hillsboro community. Brigadier General Scott A. Cairy, representing Governor Walter S. Goodland, read the governor's citation and presented Admiral Mitscher with a state of Wisconsin flag. The state commander of the American Legion, William R. Kenney, presented greetings from that veterans' organization and mentioned that more than 300,000 Wisconsin men serving in the armed forces. Dr. MacKechnie presented the admiral with an engraved wristwatch, his wife a white gold compact, and his mother a cameo brooch. Admiral Mitscher then made some remarks, including his prediction that the war in the Pacific would go on another year.²³

A parade down Hillsboro's main street followed at 4:00 p.m. Ivan Wright and Stanley Mattison of the La Crosse County highway police had been called in to help control traffic. The color guard of the Hillsboro American Legion post led the way. They were followed by the Hillsboro High School Band, which was augmented with volunteers from Wonewoc because many local band members were working or out of town. Admiral Mitscher saluted and smiled at the cheering crowd. The parade ended after passing two factories that had not taken the day off to participate in the festivities.²⁴

After staying the night in Hillsboro, Admiral Mitscher and his wife left at 9:30 a.m. the following morning, July 13. They were accompanied by a group of relatives as far as Baraboo, where they had lunch. After the lunch, Mitscher's mother and the others returned to Hillsboro as the admiral and his wife continued their journey to Washington, D.C.²⁵

Marc Mitscher served as deputy chief of operations for the Navy until March 1946, when he then became a four-star admiral and commander of the Eighth Fleet based at Norfolk, Virginia. In September 1946, he became commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet.²⁶

But his last command was short-lived. Mitscher suffered a heart attack on his 60th birthday, January 26, 1947. He entered the naval hospital at Norfolk, where he died in his sleep early on the morning of February 3, 1947.²⁷



Marc & Frances Mitscher headstone in Arlington National Cemetery
(Arlington National Cemetery)

At his interview in La Crosse on July 10, 1945, Mitscher had commented that he had "fulfilled all of his ambitions except one and that is to 'die happy.'"²⁸

Whether he died happy or not is not known, but what is known is the importance of his legacy. One writer described Marc Mitscher as "a pivotal figure in the annals of U.S. naval history . . . associated with naval aviation in its infancy and guided its tactics and technology for nearly four decades . . . instrumental in elevating the aircraft carrier from an experimental novelty to the centerpiece of American naval doctrine. Every facet of naval aviation, from dive-bombing and combat air patrols to deckhandling, fell within his purview."²⁹

And he really did sleep here.

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Sources & Notes:

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- ² "Hillsboro To Greet Mitscher On Thursday," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 8, page 1.
- ³ John C. Fredriksen, "Mitscher, Marc Andrew," *American National Biography*, February 2000, <https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.0700208>. A photograph of the house Mitscher was born in is on page 4 of the 1945 July 22 edition of the *La Crosse Tribune*.
- ⁴ "Hillsboro To Respect Wishes Of Famed Admiral's Mother," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 10, page 1.
- ⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 8.
- ⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 10.
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- ⁹ Louis L. Snyder, *Louis L. Snyder's Historical Guide to World War II* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 450.
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- ¹⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 10.
- ¹⁷ *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 July 11, page 1.
- ¹⁸ Vera MacDonald, "Believe Mitscher Will Reach Hillsboro Today," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 11, page 1.
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- ²¹ Ferris.
- ²² Vera MacDonald, "City Decorated In Greeting To Its Famed Son," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 12, page 1.
- ²³ Vera MacDonald, "Crowds Cheer Admiral Mitscher At Hillsboro; Community Presents Famous Son With Watch," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 13, page 1.
- ²⁴ MacDonald, 1945 July 13. Two photographs of the parade are on page 3 of the 1945 July 13 edition of the *La Crosse Tribune*.
- ²⁵ "Leaves Hillsboro," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 7, page 3.
- ²⁶ Fredriksen.
- ²⁷ "Admiral Marc A. Mitscher Dies in Sleep: Played Havoc With Japs In Pacific," *The Evening Independent*, Massillon, Ohio, 1947, page 1.
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