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Article Summary: A letter from Theodore W Metcalfe explains how he came to create the Great Nebraska Navy in the 1930s. Thousands of people have since been named admirals in the dry-land Navy.

#### Cataloging Information:

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# THE GREAT NEBRASKA NAVY: ITS ORIGIN AND GROWTH

BY HAROLD COOPER

THE Great Navy of the State of Nebraska is dignified, yet Nebraskans do not take it too seriously, says its founder and Chief Admiral, Theodore W. Metcalfe. The following relates the story of the origin and growth of this organization which has become a source of pride and a public relations instrument for Nebraska. Since its origin every gubernatorial secretary has received numerous inquiries about the beginnings of this land-locked navy. When Ken R. Keller, secretary to Governor Dwight Griswold, was pressed for information, he contacted Chief Admiral Theodore W. Metcalfe on January 23, 1946. Admiral Metcalfe responded promptly with the letter preserved in the papers of the late Dwight P. Griswold.

Omaha, Nebraska  
February 6, 1946

Dear Mr. Keller:

In 1930 I was elected Lieutenant Governor on the Republican ticket, while Charles W. Bryan was elected Governor on the Democratic ticket, and while there was a close

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personal friendship between the Bryan and Metcalfe families, dating back to the time when my own father was editor of Bryan's Commoner, Bryan was still a Democrat and I was still a Republican. Whenever he left the state he tried to leave the affairs of state in the hands of his private secretary instead of his Republican Lieutenant Governor. One time he was gone for two or three weeks and they had to have official papers signed, so his secretary notified me that Bryan was out of the state. From that time on I made quite an issue of the situation and insisted that whenever Bryan was not in position to serve as Governor, I should be immediately notified of the fact.

Later I again became acting Governor for several weeks during Bryan's absence from the state, and many of my friends had requested that when such time did arrive I would appoint them Colonels on the Governor's staff. My answer to them was that I would go them one better and appoint them with the highest rank I could think of and that was the rank of Admiral, and so the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska was started with the press announcement that the acting Governor was appointing a list of twenty or twenty-five prominent Nebraskans as Admirals in the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska. There was immediately a demand for further appointments from other friends of mine, and requests for real certificates showing the appointments to be authentic. So, working with the United States Navy officials here in Omaha, we concocted the present certificate which was based originally on the rehash of the King Neptune certificate which is given to neophytes on crossing the equator.

The idea of a prairie state like Nebraska having a Great Navy attracted considerable national attention, and the authors of "Strange As It Seems" and "Believe It Or Not" and nationally broadcast programs started to mention it, with the further result that we had requests from all over the United States for these appointments.

While he was Governor of New York and a candidate for president in 1932, I appointed the late President Roosevelt as an Admiral during one of his visits to Omaha. He remarked that if he was elected President he would come out and fix up our rivers so we could really float the navy. In that connection it is interesting to know that Nebraska has more shore line than any other state in the union, due to the fact that we have more rambling rivers and creeks than any other state.

Many national figures of stage and screen have their appointments as Admirals, among them Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, and many others.

The real backbone of the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska, however, is the common ordinary folk of Nebraska, with Admirals in every village and hamlet in the state, all representative of good fellows and loyal Nebraskans. My guess would be that we have at least twenty thousand Admirals scattered throughout the United States, with more than seventeen thousand of them right in the state of Nebraska.

I was defeated for re-election in the Roosevelt landslide of 1932, and the new Governor and new Lieutenant Governor were both Democrats and so I just continued the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska as my own personal organization and continued to issue certificates to those who I felt might appreciate and deserve them. This went along until Dwight Griswold was elected Governor. He began getting requests for certificates and so we revamped the certificates with the Governor and Chief Admiral both to sign, and so they have been sending them out from the Governor's office from that time.

I have in my files some pictures of Jack Benny and others with Admiral's uniforms and get-up of different types. These could be made available to the Scripps-Howard people if they desired same.

Very truly yours,  
T. W. Metcalfe

TWM:hd

There is no count, official or otherwise, of the number of admirals in the Nebraska Navy. The Chief Admiral estimated that in 1946 there were about twenty thousand with more than seventeen thousand of these being Nebraskans. Until the present time no administration kept a record of the number of admiral commissions issued. However, the current administration began to record the number of commissions issued by the Governor the second or third week after Governor Norbert Tiemann took office. At the end of September, 1967, the office of Governor Tiemann had commissioned approximately 1,761. The Gover-

nor's office estimates that it has commissioned, on the average, about 200 admirals per month.

The dry-land Navy has quasi-official status, but there are no set qualifications for membership and no duties to perform. Commissions are often awarded to celebrities who make public appearances in the state. For the record, the Commission proclaims:

## THE GREAT NAVY

### OF THE

### STATE OF NEBRASKA

### TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS

### GREETINGS

Know Ye, that reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism valor, fidelity and abilities of

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and knowing him to be a good fellow and a loyal friend and counselor I have nominated and do appoint him an Admiral in the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska. He is therefore called to diligently discharge the duties of Admiral by doing and performing all manner of things there-to belonging. And I do strictly charge and require all officers, seamen, tadpoles and goldfish under his command to be obedient to his orders as Admiral—and he is to observe and follow, from time to time, such directions as he shall receive, according to the rules and discipline of the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska. This commission to continue in force during the period of his good behavior, and the pleasure of the Chief Admiral of the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska. Given under my hand in the City of Lincoln, State of Nebraska, this..... day of..... in the year of our Lord.



*Val Peterson*  
GOVERNOR

# THE GREAT NAVY OF THE STATE OF NEBRASKA

*Theodore W. Metcalfe*  
CHIEF ADMIRAL

*To All Who Shall See These Presents*  
**GREETINGS**

Know ye, that reposing special trust and confidence in the Patriotism  
valor, fidelity, and abilities of

*Fiffie Reese Scott*

and knowing him to be a good fellow and a loyal friend and counselor  
I have nominated and do appoint him an Admiral in the Great  
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discharge the duties of Admiral by doing and performing all  
manner of things thereto belonging. And I do strictly charge and  
require all officers, seamen, tadpoles and goldfish under his com-  
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serve and follow, from time to time, such directions as he shall  
receive, according to the rules and discipline of the Great Navy  
of the State of Nebraska. This commission to continue in force  
during the period of his good behavior, and the pleasure of the  
Chief Admiral of the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska.

Given under my hand in the City of Lincoln, State of Nebraska  
this 23<sup>rd</sup> day of Sept. 1948 in the year of our Lord.

ATTEST  
*Theodore W. Metcalfe*  
Chief Admiral

*Val Peterson*  
Governor



Admiral's Commission issued in 1948.