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## Reflections on Reading

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## REFLECTIONS ON READING

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**W**e could try scrying with an orbuculum . . . or, in the current vernacular, we could attempt to see into the future using a crystal ball. This form of pseudoscience traces its roots back to the earliest days of recorded history, when soothsayers made a living predicting the future. The veracity of their projections was always suspect, but even so there was some value in thinking about the world to come. But perhaps there is a better way to consider possible futures.

In the Spring 2016 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, we shared some thoughts about the power of fiction to energize thinking. We also provided a link to download *War Stories from the Future* from the Atlantic Council's Art of Future Warfare project. We return to the subject in this issue to expand on the role that reading (and writing) fiction can play in a sailor's professional development, and to provide a link to more great think pieces.

In early 2016, the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL) teamed three acclaimed science fiction authors with seventeen service members to create compelling and credible narratives of what the world might look like thirty years in the future. The results of this effort can be accessed at [www.mcwl.marines.mil/Divisions/Futures-Assessment/](http://www.mcwl.marines.mil/Divisions/Futures-Assessment/). The fascinating and strikingly illustrated sixty-two-page publication is a worthy read for all maritime professionals. Brigadier General Julian Dale Alford, the MCWL Futures Directorate commanding general, noted that the Science Fiction Futures Project offers "possible tactical- and operational-level vignettes of the distant future through the medium of science fiction. We proceed with full knowledge that we will not get it perfectly right; tempered with the understanding that we cannot afford to ignore possibilities that may come sooner than anticipated." Alford continued, "Open your mind and enjoy. The future is coming, ready or not."

The preface to the publication states, "Good futuring is about projection, not prediction. It stimulates thought and debate. The best futures are the ones which prompt the reader to say, 'That will *never* happen.' It makes the reader consider

the possible (and plausible) and apply rational thought to what events may or may not enable that world to come to pass. We don't have to get it right; we just can't afford to get it too wrong." The *Science Fiction Futures: Marine Corps Security Environment Forecast 2013–2045* project developed three short stories, each dealing with conflict in a future—and troubled—world.

- The first story, "Water Is a Fightin' Word," postulates a world in which a scarcity of fresh water has resulted in massive domestic and international migration. A platoon of Marines goes ashore in North Africa to assist an international aid agency that has been attacked. Alongside "leatherneck Marines" we are introduced to "metalneck Marines"—combat robots that fight at the side of their human partners.
- In the second story, "Double Ten Day," Marines are deployed to an Asian island following a massive earthquake. They find themselves in a fight in and around megacities in which tens of thousands of people live in towering skyscrapers. Robots, drones, and high-tech communications help them deal with adversaries that include bioengineered special operations troops who are bred and trained from birth to be powerful killing machines.
- In the third story, "The Montgomery Crisis," Marines seek to destroy an enemy who caused a global crisis ("The Great Panic") by using a biological weapon to infect America's crops. As more and more food became inedible, food riots occurred in major cities. Attempts to import grains from the Balkans were hindered by the closure of the Strait of Gibraltar by a caliphate in West Africa. The Marines are put ashore to reopen the strait and help feed America.

Each of these stories provides a vivid depiction of conditions that might arise, in a visceral way that neither analytical reports nor scripted scenarios can match. A similar project with an Army focus has been launched by the Modern War Institute at West Point, and preliminary plans are being formulated to get sailors to think about possible futures that might lie somewhere between the Fleet Forces Command of today and the Starfleet Command of the future!

JOHN E. JACKSON