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Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

Naval War College Professor John E. Jackson is the Program Manager for the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program.

Books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can put thought in a concentration camp forever. No man and no force can take from the world books that embody man's eternal fight against tyranny. In this war, we know, books are weapons.

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT

President Franklin Roosevelt responded to the wholesale burning of so-called offensive books in Nazi Germany by encouraging Americans to use books, and the knowledge they contained, as weapons in the war of ideas. With millions of U.S. servicemen deployed around the globe in World War II, a group of patriotic citizens and literary industry organizations came together to put books from both well-known and fledgling authors in the hands of these servicemen, who were desperate to fill the idle hours they endured from foxhole to fleet unit. The Council on Books in Wartime assembled a powerful alliance of authors, publishers, and printers to create unique paperback books, sized to fit in the pockets of military uniforms. Unlike traditional paperbacks, the Armed Services Editions (ASEs) were bound on the short side of the text block rather than the long side, with two columns of text on each page. During the period 1943–46 the Council produced and distributed over 123 million copies of 1,322 different titles! Reflecting the economics of the day, the printing cost was approximately seven cents per copy, and a one-cent-per-copy royalty was split between the authors and publishers.

Authors Joseph Conrad, F. Scott Fitzgerald, C. S. Forester, Zane Grey, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, H. G. Wells, and scores of others participated. One measure of the tremendous success of this program is found in a newspaper article written during the war: “The hunger for these books, evidenced by the way they are read to tatters, is astounding even to the Army and Navy officers and the book-trade officials who conceived of the editions.”

The impact of this remarkable program was far greater than many had expected. One soldier wrote,

You are instilling in them, whether you are aware of it or not, a taste for good reading that will surely persist come victory. I have seen many a man who never before had the patience or inclination to read a book, pick up one of the Council's and become absorbed and ask for more.

The Armed Services Editions helped create a nation of readers.

If you want more detail about this forgotten chapter of World War II history, the story of the ASEs is beautifully told in Molly Guptill Manning's book *When Books Went to War: The Stories That Helped Us Win World War II*. Her well-researched and lively text provides a comprehensive history of the ASEs, set within the context of the greater conflict.

Today, the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program has at its core the same mission as the ASEs: to get quality books into the hands of our military servicemen and -women. While smaller in scale (the modern-day program has shipped tens of thousands of books, vice millions of ASEs) the intent is the same: using words and ideas as weapons in the defense of freedom. The mission of the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program is to assist sailors on their career-long path of personal development in the naval profession. Reading professionally relevant books will help sailors develop as leaders of character who are *strategically minded critical thinkers* and *skilled naval and joint warfighters*, capable of meeting the operational and strategic challenges of the future.

JOHN E. JACKSON

(My thanks go out to Electrician's Mate, Master Chief Jack Ryan, USN [Ret.], an ardent reader of this column and a strong supporter of education for our sailors. His recent recommendation of Molly Manning's fascinating book opened my eyes to this long-forgotten chapter of military history.)