Reflections on Reading

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Sailor’s History of the U.S. Navy, by Lieutenant Commander Thomas J. Cutler, USN (Ret.), has been a popular book in the Chief of Naval Operations’ Professional Reading Program (CNO-PRP) since the program was established in 2006. In the book’s preface, Cutler, a former U.S. Navy gunner’s mate, writes eloquently about the value of studying the past to illuminate the future and about the importance of understanding the heritage of one’s chosen profession:

More than half a century ago, Theodore Roscoe wrote a book called This Is Your Navy, an informal history written specifically for Sailors. On the first page he asked: “What’s the good of going back to the old days, or even yesterday, when you’ve got your hands full with affairs of the present?” . . . Roscoe’s answer to his own question was, “What you do today depends largely on what was done yesterday”; that “the things you’re doing now result from, and are a continuation of, things done in the past.” He quoted American patriot Patrick Henry . . . as saying: “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know no way of judging the future but by the past.”

Later in the preface, Cutler reflects back on his years in uniform: “I knew I was part of something special. The uniform I wore with such pride—that made me instantly identifiable as someone special—meant little without the knowledge that other people wore that same uniform, or some form of it when they fought the Barbary States of North Africa, charged into hostile Confederate fire at Mobile Bay, and destroyed Nazi submarines and Japanese aircraft carriers when evil men were hell-bent on dominating the world. The face I saw each morning in the mirror was not unusual in any particular way. Yet is was special because it had felt the sting of salt spray and had seen the wonders of a starry night at sea just as Sailors had done for many centuries before.” He went on, “No doubt, I would have been proud of my service even if I had never known any of the history that had preceded me. But the more I learned about those Sailors who had gone before me, the more special I felt, and the more determined I became to measure
up to the standards they set. I could have served the Navy well without knowing its history, but I sure wouldn’t want to.”

This award-winning author provides a series of interesting and informative vignettes about the honor, courage, and commitment of our navy’s sailors. The stories include one about a very remarkable prisoner of war (POW) from the Vietnam War. In 1967, Seaman Apprentice Doug Hegdahl was blown overboard from the cruiser USS Canberra by the blast from the ship’s five-inch guns during a night firing exercise. Rescued by Vietnamese fishermen, he was transported to a POW camp in Hanoi. Amid a large group of captured aviators, Doug was the most junior sailor. He convinced his North Vietnamese captors that he was an “uneducated peasant” who could neither read nor write, and his guard’s subsequent lax supervision enabled him to destroy enemy trucks and equipment routinely. He memorized the names and ranks of 250 fellow prisoners and was able to provide this information and other intelligence when he was released after two years of captivity. His detailed reports of the horrendous conditions in the camps provided some of the first evidence of the torture and mistreatment being experienced by American POWs.

In the preface to A Sailor’s History, Tom Cutler indirectly illustrates several of the reasons why the Navy Professional Reading Program exists. He argues that regardless of how busy sailors may be in dealing with the pressing issues of the day, they would be well served to find time to consider the path that led them to their current situations and that a knowledge of history often shows that solutions to today’s problems may have roots in the past. Cutler’s preface, as does his entire book, recalls the proud history and significant accomplishments of the sailors of centuries gone by and celebrates the important work that the entire U.S. Navy team does for our nation every day.

If you too are an American sailor, read A Sailor’s History of the U.S. Navy, or another book in the CNO-PRP, to help you remember that you are part of something much greater than yourself!

JOHN E. JACKSON