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Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

Professor John E. Jackson is the Naval War College's manager for the Navy Professional Reading Program.

History never looks like history when you are living through it.” This notion of American educator John W. Gardner’s certainly applies to the men and women who are serving in the armed services during these difficult times. The history of the first decade of the twenty-first century is being written daily at sea and ashore, at home and in foreign lands. The facts and feats of today’s American sailors will someday be recounted in poetry and prose and will be added to the incredible legacy of over two centuries of naval and military heritage. The Navy Professional Reading Program (NPRP) provides over a dozen titles that illustrate the contributions made to history by sailors, soldiers, airmen, and Marines since the founding of the Republic 234 years ago. Of particular note are these four.

Six Frigates, by Ian Toll, was described when it first appeared by the *New York Times* as “a fluent, intelligent history of American military policy from the early 1790s, when Congress commissioned six frigates to fight the Barbary pirates, through the War of 1812. But the book’s real value, and the pleasures it provides, lies in Toll’s grasp of the human dimension of his subject, often obscured in the dry tomes of naval historians. Toll has plumbed diaries, letters and ships’ logs to give the reader a feel for the human quirks and harsh demands of life at sea in the Age of Sail.”

A Sailor’s History of the U.S. Navy, by Tom Cutler, is what the author considers a “heritage book, not a history book.” It tells the Navy’s history from the deck-plate level, through a series of engaging vignettes. One reviewer, Tom Miller, has written, “By emphasizing the values, traditions, and customs of the Navy and using the extraordinary actions of ordinary Sailors to illustrate these topics, Cutler has succeeded admirably in his goal. This crisply-written and compellingly-told informal history is just the sort of introduction that young Sailors and others interested in learning about the Navy will enjoy.”

One Hundred Years of Sea Power: 1890–1990, by Dr. George Baer of the Naval War College faculty, is an award-winning study of a century of U.S. Navy evolution. Edward Rhodes of Rutgers University has written of it, “This is clearly one of the two or three most important works in American naval history published in the last decade; it has the potential to become a classic in the field. Well researched and carefully nuanced, it provides a distinctive perspective on the evolving historical relationship between national interest and national politics on the one hand and naval power on the other. Not only is this a significant contribution to scholarship—one that will critically influence how historians and political scientists think about American naval power—it is an enormously readable work. Baer writes beautifully, and he has organized his material effectively. The book is fully accessible to anyone interested in naval history.”

Jefferson’s War: America’s First War on Terror, by Joseph Wheelan, is an interesting and compelling story of President Thomas Jefferson’s decision to launch America’s first war on foreign soil, an expedition that resulted in a resounding victory over terrorism over two centuries ago. One online reviewer called it “really readable history. High adventure and a real eye opener as to how things were during this time. It was enlightening to learn about some of our original naval heroes as well as the first landing and heroism of the very small Marine Corps of the time. I was fascinated throughout.”

The NPRP provides other great books covering everything from the Revolutionary War (David McCullough’s *1776*) through the Civil War (Dennis Ringle’s *Life in Mr. Lincoln’s Navy*) to combat in Afghanistan (Marcus Luttrell’s *Lone Survivor*). With books like these sailors can pause a little while making history to *relive* the history made by those who came before.

JOHN E. JACKSON