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## Reflections on Reading

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## REFLECTIONS ON READING

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*Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked. . . .*

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

**T**his December will mark the seventieth anniversary of the attacks on American forces at Pearl Harbor and elsewhere on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, attacks that suddenly thrust the United States into the Second World War. President Roosevelt was correct when he stated that the date would “live in infamy”; few dates in American history evoke such memories and such passion. U.S. veterans of World War II, once numbering over sixteen million men and women, are dying at a rate of more than a thousand a day and now number only about 2.5 million. Accordingly, it is becoming more difficult to hear at first hand about their triumphs and tragedies, but thankfully, many outstanding books document how the nation was saved by the selfless efforts of what is often called “the greatest generation.” A number of titles in the Navy Professional Reading Program discuss World War II in general and the Pacific War in particular.

The *New York Times* calls Ronald H. Spector's *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* “the best one-volume history of that complex conflict. . . . No other presents as balanced a view or provides such terse and searching analyses not only of the great battles but of half-forgotten aspects, such as the impact of blacks and female participants on the services.” Spector skillfully relates the major events of the forty-four-month-long war, from the surprise attack that shattered the quiet of a Sunday morning on a peaceful tropical island to the searing flash of the atomic bombs that provided the necessary shock to move the Japanese militarists to surrender. He writes at some length about the contributions of intelligence analysts and code breakers to many operational successes. He also details the remarkable achievements of American submarines against enemy shipping—achievements that came at a tremendous cost in the lives of American

submariners, nearly 22 percent of whom, he reports, never returned from patrol, the highest casualty rate of any U.S. service in the war.

James D. Hornfischer's *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors* is an acclaimed best seller that recounts what has been called one of the most lopsided victories in the history of naval warfare. The American Library Association notes,

This piece of World War II naval history reads like a particularly good novel. It is an account of the October 1944 battle off Samar, in which a force of American destroyers and escort carriers drove off a Japanese fleet at least 10 times its strength. Hornfischer focuses on the men of the escort carrier unit (call sign) Taffy 3, who fought, flew, and fired to nearly the last shell in a battle that at least one commander commenced by saying, "Survival cannot be expected." Readable from beginning to end, this popular history magnificently brings to life men and times that may seem almost as remote as Trafalgar to many in the early twenty-first century. Of special interest are its account of the process that turned civilians into sailors, and its carrying forward of those sailors' stories to the handful of aging survivors still gathering in commemoration today.

While emeritus professor George Baer recently retired from the Naval War College faculty after thirty years of distinguished service, the fruits of his scholarship continue to enrich the readers of his award-winning book *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990*. He addresses the factors leading up to Pearl Harbor, the conduct of the war, and the ways in which the lessons of World War II influenced the U.S. Navy into the last decade of the twentieth century. Rutgers University faculty member Edward Rhodes writes,

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.

Taken individually or as a "literary trifecta," these books provide enlightening insights into the state of America's navy before Pearl Harbor, how the service expanded exponentially to meet the demands of a two-ocean war, and how the courage and heroism of individual sailors carried the day in the most trying of circumstances. These are great lessons to recall as we approach the anniversary of Pearl Harbor and as we consider the future role of the U.S. Navy.

JOHN E. JACKSON