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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.

One of the primary goals of the Navy Professional Reading Program (NPRP) is to provide sailors with opportunities for professional development that will enable them to do better jobs as twenty-first-century warriors. Each book is a window into a world readers may have never encountered, and each conveys concepts relevant to their professional and personal lives. A topic may best be learned about by reading a number of books within the NPRP library. For example, American forces are increasingly focusing on military operations in Afghanistan. Three books in the primary library and one in the “supplemental reading” list are particularly relevant to an understanding of this ancient part of the world.

From the Junior Enlisted Collection. *The Kite Runner*, by Afghan novelist Khaled Hosseini, paints a sometimes painful and sometimes poetic picture of life in Afghanistan from the fall of the monarchy in the 1970s through the Soviet invasion and into the era of the rise of the Taliban. The story includes the protagonist's escape to Pakistan, immigration to the United States, and return to a land permanently changed by war and tribal struggles. This book will help readers understand many of the factors that continue to influence conflict in a part of the world that has seen little peace in the past three hundred years.

From the Department/Command Leaders Collection. *Imperial Grunts*, by Robert D. Kaplan, focuses on the day-to-day life and military missions of America's fighting men and women who serve on the ground in some of the world's hot spots. Kaplan spent time with the troops on battlefields around the globe, and he paints a vivid picture of life on the “tip of the spear.” His book is divided into chapters covering operations in various military areas of responsibility, and his chapter on Central Command and Special Operations Command provides an in-depth look at the work done by the “grunts” in Afghanistan in the autumn of 2003. He describes the frustration of troops over how the war was being waged

by “rear echelon” forces at Bagram Air Force Base and how the headquarters organization was consuming resources (like helicopters) badly needed elsewhere in-country. He quotes one observer’s description of Afghanistan as “a road-less, broken and under-developed country; an absence of any strategic points; a well-armed enemy with great mobility and modern rifles, who adopts guerrilla tactics. The results . . . are that the troops can march anywhere, and do anything, except catch the enemy.” What makes this quote particularly interesting is that it was written by a young Winston Churchill about conditions in 1897!

From the Junior Enlisted Collection. Lone Survivor, by Marcus Luttrell, tells the story of the sole survivor of Operation REDWING, an ill-fated Navy SEAL mission to capture or kill a notorious al-Qa’ida leader in the Afghan mountains along the Pakistani border. Readers will learn about the mission itself, how a decision to adhere to the law of armed conflict led to the deaths of three of the four team members, and how another eight SEALs and eight Army Rangers were killed in a rescue mission to reach their fallen comrades. They will also meet the Afghan villagers who took in the badly wounded sailor and hid him from the Taliban killers who were looking to finish the bloody work they had started on the mountaintop.

From the Supplemental Reading List. Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace, One School at a Time, by Greg Mortensen and David Oliver Relin, portrays a much more peaceful and more hopeful vision of the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This book is a favorite of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, who personally visited the school built by Mortensen in the remote Afghan village of Pushgahar, one of nearly two hundred built in Central Asia exclusively with donated funds. It is also required reading for special operations forces who deal at the most personal level with local inhabitants in the region.

NPRP books, including three of the four titles mentioned above, have been provided to every major command and activity in the Navy, and they are available for sale at the Navy Exchange and from commercial booksellers. There is no better way to learn about the world around you than through the eyes of such authors.

JOHN E. JACKSON