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THOMAS B. BUELL SAILOR AND SCHOLAR

Donald Chisholm

“Command at sea is the ultimate goal of ambitious naval line officers, but only a chosen few obtain it. An officer proves worthy of command by performing well as a subordinate officer aboard a variety of ships in a variety of duties.” These words, written by Tom Buell in his renowned biography of Admiral Raymond Spruance, apply to his own naval career as well.

A graduate of the Naval Academy class of 1958, Buell began his commissioned life as first lieutenant aboard USS *Hamner* (DD 718), a World War II *Gearing*-class destroyer. He then detached for duty with the commissioning crew of USS *Ernest J. King* (DLG 10) and afterward went on to attend the weapons curriculum at the Naval Postgraduate School, which he put to good use as weapons officer aboard USS *Brooke* (DEG 1/FFG 1). After a stint at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, Buell served as executive officer in USS *John King* (DDG 3). He later wrote that a ship’s first crew “became her brains, her blood, and her spirit, for through them the ship was transformed from an inert mass of dirty, rusty steel into a living personality.”

Buell attended the Naval War College, where he was a 1971 honor graduate of the College of Naval Command and Staff, and then served as a member of the Naval War College’s faculty before reporting as commanding officer to USS *Joseph Hewes* (DE/FF/FFT 1078). The *Hewes* initially proved to be an engineering challenge, with an attendant string of inspections and surveys, but it was made sufficiently reliable to undertake a six-month Indian Ocean deployment on independent steaming; showing the flag culminated with the first U.S. Navy operational transit of the Suez Canal after it reopened in 1975. From there Buell was assigned to his twilight tour, teaching military history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Buell liked to go to sea. He was, in the great tradition of those in command, a fine ship handler, although like C. S. Forester’s Hornblower, he fell prey to seasickness. He ran a friendly, though not informal, wardroom. Buell liked a quiet, businesslike bridge. Those occasions when his temper was on the rise were presaged by the pulsing of a vein in his forehead, providing ample warning to the offending officer or sailor. Officers who proved themselves professionally competent were rewarded with

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increasing levels of trust and responsibility. For example, his combat information center officer and operations officer had the conn through most of the Suez transit. Buell understood and venerated naval tradition. Independent steaming while in command of USS *Hewes* afforded him ample opportunities to engage in diplomacy after a fashion more akin to that of the nineteenth century than the twentieth—and he was good at it.

However, command of a warship at sea was not the peak of Buell's professional contributions to the Navy. Early in his career he had shown a flair for writing, publishing his first article, "To Build a Better Ship—on Time," about his experience aboard USS *Brooke*, in the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, which also published his second article while he was serving in Norfolk. Both were good efforts, the sort one expects from a junior officer—well defined on technical or procedural problems but arousing no particular controversy—and were tolerated by Navy seniors.

While at Annapolis, Buell became aware of Admiral Raymond Spruance and his accomplishments. Researching a paper for the Naval Postgraduate School led him to an afternoon's conversation with the admiral at his Carmel, California, home, which was such a "profoundly moving experience" for young Buell that when at the Naval War College he produced a monograph on Admiral Spruance. It was the genesis for his subsequent biography, *The Quiet Warrior* (Naval Institute Press, 1974), researched and written in only fifteen months. Based on extensive primary sources, it is eminently readable and evocative of person and place, clearly informed by Buell's own professional experience with the admiral. It went into print just as Buell assumed command of USS *Hewes*. *The Quiet Warrior* serves as the model for a biography of a military leader and has been widely recognized as such. All four military services have placed the book on their professional reading lists. The Naval Institute Press reissued it in 1987 for its Classics of Naval Literature series; the Naval Order of the United States bestowed on Buell its Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison Award for Distinguished Contribution to Naval Literature; and the Navy League awarded Buell its Alfred Thayer Mahan Award for Literary Achievement. However, the most telling evidence of its enduring value is that it is still in print three decades later.

Buell went on to write two more books: *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Naval Institute Press, 1980, reissued in 1995 for the Classics of Naval Literature series), written while he was at West Point; and the iconoclastic appraisal of the Civil War Union and Confederate combat leadership *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (Crown, 1997), now coming into its own as one of the best historical works on the Civil War. Buell's last published work was the fine monograph *Naval Leadership in Korea: The First Six Months*, written for the Naval Historical Center. At the time of this

writing, there are in press two co-edited volumes that are to appear in the West Point History series on World War II. When Buell died he was at work on a sea warrior trilogy, using three pivotal naval battles—Lake Erie, Hampton Roads, and Guadalcanal—to address the issue of how naval leaders have responded to the stress of battle. Running throughout each of his works is the fundamental question of what makes a good, effective military leader, to which he provides significant and useful answers.

Buell was in great demand as a public speaker and as a panelist at conferences, where he showed that he was not only knowledgeable but also had the rare ability to distill complex subjects to their essential components, communicating them effectively to both professional and general audiences. Moreover, he could usually be counted on to offer a perspective of people and events that caused his audiences to look at a subject in a new way.

Individuals capable of and skilled at both action and reflection are rare in any profession. The Navy has not always rewarded reflection. An 1855 statement by Senator Stephen Mallory in reference to oceanographer Matthew Maury still has currency: “We think of the seaman as a mariner of the deep to whom we entrust the honor of our flag, to carry it abroad on the high seas; we never think of him as a philosopher.” Yet as John Dewey pointed out, it is the reconstruction of experience that creates the practical knowledge necessary for effective future action. Buell acted and reflected, and did both well, to his credit and to the benefit of the Navy.

Did Buell’s books change the way officers think? No definitive answer is possible for this sort of question. However, that his books are still in print and widely read suggests that value is yet found in them regarding some of the cardinal virtues of effective naval officers. They are well written, lively biographies that deliver lessons in a palatable form.

Commander Thomas B. Buell, USN (Retired), commander of destroyers and author, slipped his cable on 26 June 2002.