

2002

Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrestal and the Heroes Who Fought It

James E. Hickey

Gregory A. Freeman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Hickey, James E. and Freeman, Gregory A. (2002) "Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrestal and the Heroes Who Fought It," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 55 : No. 4 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss4/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.



Freeman, Gregory A. *Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrestal and the Heroes Who Fought It*. New York: William Morrow, 2002. 293pp. \$25.95

Since its release in 1973, the training film *Trial by Fire* has been seen by hundreds of thousands of officers and sailors during mandatory shipboard firefighting training—training improved in no small part by the lessons learned from the *Forrestal* tragedy. Undoubtedly many (this reviewer among them) have wondered what it must have been like to have been on the *Forrestal* that hot July day in 1967 when the crew fought to save their ship. Through interviews with survivors, relatives of victims, and the meticulous mining of official U.S. Navy files, Gregory Freeman, former Associated Press reporter turned freelance journalist, seeks to capture the human emotions of the day and explore the question of why this tragedy happened. Weaving a thoroughly engaging, often riveting tale as seen through the eyes of selected *Forrestal* sailors, Freeman fully meets his remit while describing the role that chance played that day in selecting who would live and who would die. He concludes, justly, that this was a tragedy that need not have happened, and in doing so he focuses on a causal factor—World War II-era thousand-pound bombs—that has been less fully recognized until now.

The book is divided into three major sections. The first six chapters introduce the *Forrestal* crewmen who play key roles in Freeman's story. For the civilian reader, this section will serve as a primer to life in the U.S. Navy in general, and to duty onboard an aircraft carrier specifically. It is also in this section that the

few flaws in the book are found. Perhaps invisible to the layman, errors—such as calling a commander a “high-ranking enlisted man” or stating that “landing without killing anybody or causing damage usually got you an OK grade” (generations of aviators wish it were so)—will jump out at the informed reader. While small, the errors do distract from an otherwise meticulously researched book.

The next eight chapters form the heart of the book. Here Freeman accelerates the pace, using literary snapshots taken through the eyes of the crew members to build an appreciation of the tension and fear felt on board the carrier that day. At 1051 on 29 July 1967, a Zuni air-to-ground rocket fired from an F-4 Phantom near the aft end of the flight deck, knocking off a fuel tank hung beneath an A-4 Skyhawk among Air Wing 17 aircraft preparing for a major strike in Vietnam. While certainly unexpected, the initial response to the Zuni launch and the resultant fire was by the book—a situation that changed dramatically with the explosion (just ninety-four seconds later) of the first thousand-pound bomb. In stark and realistic terms Freeman describes the efforts over the next twenty hours of Captain John Beling and his well-meaning but inexperienced crew to ensure that their ship would survive. These 150 pages are exceptionally engaging and so successful in capturing the stress and emotion of the crisis that they grab readers and leave them emotionally exhausted. In particular, the description of the death of sailor James Blaskis in a remote and inaccessible part of the ship cannot leave a reader unmoved. One hundred thirty-three other *Forrestal* crew members and air wing personnel were killed; many died heroically.

The final three-chapter section deals with the aftermath. The cause of the fire must be investigated, answers found, survivors treated, the dead buried, and the ship re-find its soul. Freeman describes well the aftermath of the tragedy and the difficulty finding the truth when some of the men had become primarily concerned with themselves.

In the end the official causes were determined. Independently, two shipboard groups had each bypassed one of two in-place safety features, confident that the other would suffice. Additionally, obsolete and less fire-resistant bombs had been transferred to *Forrestal* and loaded on the attack aircraft that morning—a point not fully explored previously. While no specific personal blame was assigned, without the negative synergy created by the convergence of these three decisions this would most likely have been just another unremarkable and short-lived flight-deck fire.

JAMES E. HICKEY
Commander, U.S. Navy
Naval War College



Weir, Gary E. *An Ocean in Common: American Naval Officers, Scientists, and the Ocean Environment*. College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2001. 403pp. \$44.95

Gary Weir has scored another hit. Using the approach he fashioned in *Forged in War: The Naval-Industrial Complex and American Submarine Construction, 1940–1961*, the head of the Contemporary Branch of the Naval Historical Center has turned his keen analytical mind and sharp sense of political realism to the linked topics of the U.S. Navy and the practical science of oceanography.

The book is divided into three chronological segments: from World War I to 1940, the Second World War, and the Cold War up to the administration of President John F. Kennedy. In each of these eras the submarine exerted a transforming impact on naval strategy and operations. The revolution began in 1914, when the U-boat explosively demonstrated the magnitude of its threat to the security of transatlantic shipping and to the political survival of Great Britain. The German undersea offensive and the resultant Anglo-American antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forcibly introduced an unwelcome third dimension into combat at sea, the comprehension of which exceeded the professional and technological competence of even the best-educated American naval officers. The massive, opaque, and largely uncharted subsurface domain could be mastered as a theater for warfare only if the Navy enlisted the expertise of oceanographers, who themselves represented little more than a loosely organized multidisciplinary specialty operating on the fringe of institutional academic respectability. If the Navy needed their expertise in order to fight underwater, the oceanographers needed the Navy's funding in order to prosper in academe.

Weir begins his analysis of the submarine as the *deus ex machina* of twentieth century, oceanographically determined maritime warfare with a New York meeting on antisubmarine warfare chaired by the inventor Thomas Alva Edison in March 1917. The specialists at the gathering, Weir writes, "concluded that underwater sound and echo ranging offered the most promising avenue of exploration for ASW scientists in the war effort. Physics and physical oceanography thus immediately became vital to