

1983

Battleship Sailor.

Hugh Nott

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

Recommended Citation

Nott, Hugh (1983) "Battleship Sailor," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 36 : No. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol36/iss1/11>

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.

PROFESSIONAL READING

They “sensed that they had an unwritten contract with the Navy and their officers.”

by
Hugh Nott*

Mason, Theodore. *Battleship Sailor*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982. 271pp.
\$14.95

More than forty years ago, on 7 December 1941, high above the explosions and flames convulsing Battleship Row in Pearl Harbor, 19-year-old Radioman Third Class Ted Mason had a ringside seat for the stunning event that would commit himself and his entire generation of Americans to four years of savage war. From his battle station in the maintop of the USS *California*, helplessly exposed to the strafing runs of attacking Japanese aircraft, the young sailor watched the tragic debacle he had not known would, or could, happen. The boyish Mason was luckier than many of his *California* shipmates who were sealed in the main radio spaces below armored hatches, deliberately designed to be inoperable from below when Condition Zed was set. Several of his closest friends and his admired chief radioman supervisor, awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor, did not survive.

This vividly recalled account, four decades later, mixes recrimination with anguish and serves to remind us that the young Navy enlisted men who lived and died that momentous Sunday morning may have felt as much outrage against their leaders, who had not planned, as against the Japanese, who had. In a somewhat vague but personal and collective way, Mason and his battleship colleagues had sensed that they had an unwritten contract with the Navy and their officers. In exchange for their obedience, loyalty, and second-class shipboard citizenship, subject to stern regulations and sometimes harsh discipline, they believed their more privileged

Captain Nott died on 2 January. This review is the last of the many contributions he made to the Naval War College.

seniors would take care of them. They considered themselves well-trained which, to certain standards, they were. They thought their ponderous battlewagons to be invincible and they assumed their Navy leadership was wise and ready. Abruptly, in two terrible hours, the carefree younger sailors discovered what their older, more experienced petty officers must have known. Their combat readiness was a sham—masked by spit and polish. Many ready-service ammunition boxes were locked, thick paint burned like giant torches, air defense capabilities were nonexistent in port, and there was no early warning system or prudent offshore reconnaissance. Pearl Harbor had been regarded as safe and secure when it was neither.

Amid the towering columns of oily smoke and the spectacular fireworks of exploding magazines, the young radioman felt shattered and betrayed. Obviously more articulate and perhaps more perceptive than his fellow sailors, he clearly understood that the “old Navy” he had known only briefly was disappearing forever.

This is not a bitter, vindictive, or even particularly introspective book, however. The author, now a successful California journalist and writer, has opted for a nostalgic approach and, oddly, *Battleship Sailor* thereby becomes an important book.

It is important precisely because of the view through a young sailor’s eyes, a view rarely contemplated by the endless historians and analysts who have recounted the events leading up to 7 December 1941. Unabashedly frank and delightfully fresh, Mason re-creates the world of the youthful pre-war sailors, swaggering along the waterfront streets of Pacific Fleet liberty ports. Everything is here—the gaudy bars and fleshpots, the sailors’ girls, the amusement parks that once served as pick-up spots. The laughing white-hats, with their “look after your huddy” camaraderie, recognized they were different from civilians and they savored the difference.

The photographs from 1940 and 1941, highlighting the text, are delicious and so are the captions. One picture, for example, is of the notorious Shanghai Red Cafe in San Pedro, labelled as a famous trouble spot. That, of course, was a principal attraction. The sailors who craved trouble after weeks of shipboard regimentation knew where they could find it. In San Francisco, Seattle, and Long Beach, “The Fleet’s In” were words to conjure with, and author Mason recalls this magic with verve, taste, and compassion.

Battleship Sailor is that rarity—the personal but thoughtful reminiscences of a young and reasonably typical sailor, evoking the color and flavor of that pre-war era. Inevitably, despite its different autohographical genre, the book will be compared to *From Here to Eternity*, if only because of the similar enlisted slants and 1941 Hawaii scenes. Actually, the two books have far more in common than Hotel Street bars, flower-scented evenings, brawling servicemen, and officer-enlisted caste systems.

James Jones’ soldiers *thought* and so do Ted Mason’s sailors. More pointedly, so do today’s enlisted men and their judgments are profound.

Without any question, Theodore Mason has gotten behind the carefully shaped white hats cuffed back on sailors’ heads to expose the first artful wave of hair.

Battleship Sailor is recommended professional reading for every naval officer who wants to understand the men who put their lives in his hands.