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Reflections on Reading

John E. Jackson

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

HISTORY THROUGH SYMONDS'S EYES

Professor John E. Jackson of the Naval War College is the Program Manager for the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program.

When readers undertake a search for books in the specialized areas of naval and military history, they often find a number of authors who merit special attention owing to their level of scholarly research and prolific publishing history. One such author is Dr. Craig L. Symonds. He now serves as the Ernest J. King Distinguished Professor of Maritime History at the U.S. Naval War College, as well as Professor of History Emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy, where he taught for thirty years and served as department chair.

Symonds is the author or editor of more than twenty books, including *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History* (2005), which won the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Prize, and *Lincoln and His Admirals: Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. Navy, and the Civil War* (2008), which won the Lincoln Prize, the Barondess Award, the Laney Prize, the Lyman Award, and the Abraham Lincoln Institute Book Award. His most recent books are on the Second World War, notably *The Battle of Midway* (2011) and *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-day Landings* (2014), which won the Barry Prize and the Samuel Eliot Morison Prize.

Of particular note for professional mariners are the following:

- *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History*, which offers readers some “exceptionally well written and fascinating accounts” of five highly significant naval battles, according to a book review by William Lloyd Stearman in the Winter 2007 issue of the *Naval War College Review*. The battles analyzed are Perry’s defeat of the British on Lake Erie in 1813; the Battle of Hampton Roads in 1862, which pitted the first ironclad ships in the United States against each other; the Battle of Manila Bay, in 1898; the Battle

of Midway, in the Pacific in 1942; and Operation PRAYING MANTIS in the Persian Gulf in 1988.

- *The Civil War at Sea*, in which Symonds examines the naval and riverine elements of the war. He relates the Union naval strategies that led to victory, including the naval blockades that thwarted the South's economy and how control of its rivers effectively divided the South's territory, limiting commerce and mobility. He also examines how the industrial era then beginning, particularly the use of steel and steam, transformed the nature and function of warships.
- *The Battle of Midway*, a detailed examination of the battle that was a turning point in the war in the Pacific. At the outset, the Japanese possessed significant advantages, while the U.S. Navy was vulnerable in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attacks; after one day of battle, however, the tide had turned, and the U.S. Navy gained the upper hand, putting the Japanese on the defensive thereafter and limiting their foothold to the region's perimeter. Symonds argues that individual decision-making was the primary factor in this comeback story, and he offers portraits of the key persons involved, including Japanese naval commander in chief Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto; U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King; and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.
- *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-day Landings*, in which Symonds turns his eye to D-day and the Allied forces, addressing the strategies and naval operations that made the D-day landings a success. Getting troops onto the beaches of Normandy was the first, and most pivotal, D-day offensive, and plans to accomplish these landings were known as Operation NEPTUNE. Symonds offers a comprehensive overview of the plans and preparations involved in the operation. The naval invasion itself was preceded by myriad special training sessions and the development of amphibious landing craft created specifically for D-day.

Symonds's newest book is *World War II at Sea: A Global History*; it was released in May 2018. About it, Amazon.com writes as follows:

Symonds has established himself as one of the finest naval historians at work today. *World War II at Sea* represents his crowning achievement: a complete narrative of the naval war and all of its belligerents, on all of the world's oceans and seas, between 1939 and 1945.

Opening with the 1930 London Conference, Symonds shows how any limitations on naval warfare would become irrelevant before the decade was up, as Europe erupted into conflict once more and its navies were brought to bear against each other. *World*

War II at Sea offers a global perspective, focusing on the major engagements and personalities and revealing both their scale and their interconnection: the U-boat attack on Scapa Flow and the Battle of the Atlantic; the “miracle” evacuation from Dunkirk and the pitched battles for control of Norway’s fjords; Mussolini’s Regia Marina—at the start of the war the fourth-largest navy in the world—and the dominance of the Kidō Butai and Japanese naval power in the Pacific; Pearl Harbor, then Midway; the struggles of the Russian Navy and the scuttling of the French Fleet in Toulon in 1942; the landings in North Africa and then Normandy. Many have argued that World War II was dominated by naval operations; few have shown how and why this was the case. Symonds combines precision with story-telling verve, expertly illuminating not only the mechanics of large-scale warfare on (and below) the sea but offering wisdom into the nature of the war itself.

Library shelves around the world are filled with books; some are good, some are better—and some are great. Since life is short, it can be helpful to narrow the search to find the books that best enrich our professional and personal lives. A great place to start is with the books highlighted above.

JOHN E. JACKSON