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Edgar F. Puryear, Jr. *American Admiralship: The Moral Imperatives of Naval Command*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005. Pp. 672. Notes. Index

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Bruce M. Petty. *Voices from the Pacific War: Bluejackets Remember*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004. Pp. 288. 27 Photographs. Chronology. Bibliography. Index.

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Historians use oral history to breath humanity into otherwise dry narratives, to drive theses in analytical work, and to entertain and enlighten readers in compilations. *American Admiralship* and *Voices from the Pacific War* are based almost exclusively on oral history, the former providing a perspective on the U.S. Navy from the top down, the latter from the bottom up. *American Admiralship* is a treatise on leadership based largely on interviews with senior flag officers who served in the Navy between World War II and the end of the twentieth century. *Voices from the Pacific War* is a collection of the recollections of some two-dozen enlisted men and one enlisted woman who served in the Navy during World War II.

Edgar Puryear is a professor emeritus at Georgetown University with degrees in international relations and law. He has lectured extensively about military leadership and has written three previous books on the subject. His lectures and books are based on interviews conducted with more than 1,100 flag officers, including some 125 four-star admirals and generals.

American Admiralship is organized topically into twelve chapters. Each chapter opens with a brief general discussion of a particular leadership characteristic. The bulk of

each chapter consists of anecdotes to illustrate that trait. Most of the anecdotes appear as long block quotations excerpted from the author's interviews with four-star admirals. Puryear also excerpts material from biographies, memoirs, correspondence, and interviews done by others. Many of the anecdotes contain a "tip" on leadership related to the principle at hand. Rather than a big story, *American Admiralship* tells hundreds of little stories, each with a moral relating to one of Puryear's main themes.

Puryear argues that successful naval leaders embody a common set of characteristics, including "the selfless desire to serve," "the ability to accept responsibility for decision-making," a "sixth sense" in judgment that enabled them to make correct decisions, an aversion to "yes men," "maturity in perception and judgment attained through lifelong professional reading," the willingness to be mentored and to mentor others, the ability to delegate authority, consideration for their people, and "true character," illustrated by the desire to "fix the problem, not the blame." (x, 372-73) The book makes clear that mastering leadership skills requires officers to work extraordinarily hard and to subordinate their lives to their naval careers.

Bruce Petty served in the Navy during the Vietnam War as an aviation ordnanceman. After his service he earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and later became a nuclear medicine technologist. In 1995 he moved to Saipan, where he researched and wrote his first book, *Saipan: Oral Histories of the Pacific War*.

Voices from the Pacific War is Petty's second book. It consists of twenty-three chapters, each one featuring the oral history of one or two individuals. Petty provides a two- or three-paragraph introduction for each person, most of whom served on board aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers.

Petty's oral histories touch upon a variety of themes, including what motivated sailors to join the Navy, relationships between officers and enlisted men, relationships between sailors and civilians, the experiences of black sailors in a segregated Navy, and post-traumatic stress.

Mostly, however, the oral histories deal with combat experiences. The overall message of *Voices from the Pacific War* is that World War II naval combat was hell. Many of the stories relate in grisly detail the damage that accidents, exploding ordnance,

kamikaze attacks, and sinking ships inflicted upon human bodies, and the impact that such horrors made on the lives of those who witnessed or experienced them.

Puryear and Petty present an interesting contrast in their approaches to using oral history. Both authors let their interview subjects do the talking. Puryear, however, sprinkles portions of individual interviews throughout his book, while Petty's interviews run from beginning to end in one place. Puryear interviewed flag officers while they were at or near the pinnacle of their naval careers, and the freshness and detail of their recollections lend support to the notion that their "lessons" on leadership have universal appeal. Petty interviewed his subjects about events that had taken place some fifty years earlier, but their recollections indicate that their World War II experiences scarred them heavily.

Both Puryear and Petty take their subjects' recollections at face value. In *Voices from the Pacific War*, the stories are assumed to have intrinsic value and are presented without analytical adornment or criticism. Petty includes an interesting account by Charles Link, a sailor who served on board a yard patrol craft:

I don't remember when it was, but sometime during this campaign Eleanor Roosevelt paid a visit to the front lines. She came to Tulagi to give a talk to the troops. In order for everybody to see her, a large tower was built, and she had to climb up it. I was there, and the first thing she said was something like, "I hope you boys appreciate the fact that you are here to sacrifice your lives so that the American people back home can live the lives they have become used to." Now, a lot of these guys had lost friends, and they started booing her. They didn't want to hear that from her. The marines especially didn't like this at all, so they started shooting at the tower, right by her feet. Splinters were flying everywhere, and she screamed. She disappeared after that. I mean, she thought we should be proud to die. (p. 179)

To test the veracity of this account, I contacted Virginia Lewick, an archivist at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, and Dr. Allida Black, Research Professor of History & International Affairs at George Washington University and Director and Editor of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers. Neither Lewick nor Black had ever

heard this story, and neither one could find documentation to confirm it. Link's spurious recollection illustrates the perils of presenting recollections uncritically. Readers should apply to oral history the same rules of evidence they apply to documents, for an oral history compilation such as Petty's is analogous to a published collection of documents.

In *American Admirals*, analysis is implicit in the organization of the recollections around explicit themes. No doubt Puryear's research on generations of flag officers would have enabled him to examine how naval leadership styles changed during the half century between the Chief of Naval Operations tours of Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz and Admiral Jay Johnson. Puryear, however, is not interested in change, but in attempting to identify universal and immutable leadership principals. Accordingly, his book does not set flag officers' recollections within their historical context.

At bottom, both books are about sacrifice. *American Admirals* describes the sacrifices those who lead must make in order to persuade others to do things they wouldn't normally do. *Voices of the Pacific War* describes the sacrifices those who are led must make in order to get the job done.



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