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Editorial

The Neglected Player?

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I cannot help but think of the Americans suffering in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. My office here at the Naval Historical Center is currently preoccupied with placing historical personnel on the Navy ships en route to provide assistance. We must immediately document and, over time, evaluate these events. Indeed, one of my historians is a naval reserve captain working with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to help in the recovery.

With both this event in mind and the very recent tsunami tragedy in south Asia, I wonder if, as naval historians, we pay sufficient attention to the role of the environment in every aspect of the naval experience? Our colleagues who explore the age of fighting sail realize, perhaps better than the rest of us, the eternal dependence of navies on the regularity and occasional randomness of nature. After all, it is very hard to define a navy without the ocean. Indeed, for much of human history we needed wind in our sails. We still consciously craft hulls with the capability to withstand the ocean.

Anyone who loves to visit the shore as I do, in all manner of weather, or has experienced a very large ship underway can appreciate the overwhelming authority of ocean and atmosphere. However, not following the lead of our colleagues in military history, who are always conscious of terrain, we only rarely choose to explore the environmental aspect of naval warfare. In addition, those historians of science who visit the IJNH for the *History of Oceanography Newsletter*, often fail take the time to understand the naval experience that played a determining role in the definition of oceanography as a science. In a great many countries, especially in the United States, naval requirements advanced oceanography and profoundly influenced ocean scientists and their search for truth about the natural world. Are we both making a serious scholarly mistake here?

Having spent a good deal of my time working in the history of undersea warfare and oceanography, I would suggest that it is time for naval historians to study the environment more regularly and deliberately as a major player in naval battles, in ship design, in the development of weapons and weapons systems, in strategy and tactics, in the training and education of officers and ratings, and in all other aspects of naval history.

Navies appreciate the importance of the environment. Very few naval aviators venture forth without the benefit of a meteorologist and very current data. Every submariner knows the importance of quiet running and the ocean's frightening tendency to transmit the smallest sound over hundreds of miles.

Have we, as historical professionals, given the environment the same attention submariners from many nations did in World War 2 and still do at this very moment? Do we pay the same attention to the atmosphere as the aviators of years ago who fly in the

pages of our books? I think not. I would suggest that at present we write, if you will, about Trafalgar, but mention only in passing the force under *Victory*'s keel. This is both a shortcoming in the corpus of naval historical literature and an amazing opportunity for new scholarship from old hands and new professionals.

The *IJNH* would like to encourage this kind of work and would certainly consider publishing and promoting any take on naval history deliberately recognizing this neglected player.



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