

SEMAPHORE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SEA POWER CENTRE - AUSTRALIA

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READING OUR WAY TO VICTORY?

A Principal cracking down on students arriving late was standing at the school gate, when he saw Jason running down the street pushing his bike. 'Why are you late?' asked the Principal. 'I didn't have time to get on my bike', replied Jason.

The Chief of Navy recently approved the 2006 edition of the *Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Reading List*, encouraging the pursuit of individual knowledge and professional understanding by all members of the Navy.¹ The *Reading List* is also intended for use by others involved or interested in maritime strategy, doctrine, history, and/or navies in general.

The RAN has traditionally encouraged professional and general reading among its officers and non-commissioned officers in the belief that the knowledge base for naval activities needs to be both broad and deep. This is especially important as members of the Australian Navy undertake diplomatic, constabulary and military tasks on a daily basis. All members of modern navies need to have good cultural, political and economic skills. They require a general knowledge in the humanities and liberal arts, in addition to their specialist skills and professional knowledge. This knowledge base has served the Australian Navy well in the past. Navies undertake wide ranging tasks that often involve collecting and analysing complex information, and thinking about the problem, before making informed decisions. Officers and non-commissioned officers at sea often make decisions that impact on the fighting ability of their ship. Such decisions are critical because every person onboard a ship engaged in combat shares the risks that follow a tactical decision.

In the 21st century, however, we are increasingly confronted by situations where complex and rapid decisions need to be taken by all ranks, sailors as well as officers. Indeed, we are in the midst of a *revolution in human affairs*, where the Navy now has *strategic sailors* in rigid hulled inflatable boats making judgements of potential national significance. The potential for conflict in the littorals and the terrorist threat places individual sailors in positions where their responses may have strategic impact. In such situations, step by step detailed instructions often mean less than the breadth and depth of the decision-maker's professional knowledge of doctrine, history and strategy.

The *RAN Reading List* was first published in 1996 and has now been expanded to include both professional and general readings, while the range of subject areas has also expanded.² The new subjects include films, journals and electronic resources. The introduction on 'why we have the *RAN Reading List*?' provides grounding to what would otherwise be just another list of books, and has been written for the widest possible audience. The selection of books and the preparation of reviews for the new *RAN Reading List* was very much a collaborative

project, including both experienced officers and civilians, who recognised the importance of liberal education for the current and future Australian Navy.

At first glance, some of the books selected for the *RAN Reading List* may appear incongruous or somewhat odd. Be assured, however, that each selection was intentional. Whereas many books will be familiar to some readers of maritime strategy and naval history, a number of books offering alternative perspectives were added to challenge the Navy reader. Not all views presented by the listed authors are endorsed by the Australian Navy, nevertheless such views are offered to encourage critical review of what we read, and to help us understand alternative viewpoints. In such a manner we gain insight through knowledge, and we are in a better position to become our own advocates.



'Strategic sailors' from HMAS Melbourne during operations in the Persian Gulf (Department of Defence)

Although a number of fundamental works on maritime strategy and naval history remain on the list, the March 2006 edition of the *RAN Reading List* does reflect a number of significant changes that have impacted on the Australian Navy over the last ten or so years. Maritime strategists such as Alfred Mahan and Julian Corbett have retained their prominent positions on the list while new works by Geoffrey Till and Norman Friedman, amongst others, have been added to reflect recent developments in maritime strategy. David Stevens' history of the RAN is now considered by many to be the best introduction to the subject. It was felt that as modern naval tasks increasingly involve joint and/or combined expeditionary forces and operations in the littorals, greater awareness of the military, political and social aspects of conflict is also required. Thus, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has bumped Clausewitz's *On War* in the new General Reading List, which also has been expanded to contain much more military, political and social material.

Anyone who may be thinking that recent technological changes have affected the world to such an extent that



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history or the humanities are no longer relevant, should read the ancient Greek histories of Herodotus or Thucydides. While technologies may change, the social, political and cultural constructs in which people live, act and fight, essentially remain the same. If a further example is required, one could read the classic novel *Mr Midshipman Easy* (published in 1836), to understand the difficulties that individuals have always faced while being transformed into disciplined crew members of Navy vessels during times of rapid social change.

The United States Army and Marine Corps recommended reading lists identify reading material for each rank, with the more complex books listed for One-star ranks or above.³ The *RAN Reading List* philosophy differs in that it anticipates members of the RAN will both enjoy reading books in areas that interest them, as well as understand the importance of reading material for their specific professional development. An individual may decide to set aside more complex books until a subsequent phase of their career. The aim of the *RAN Reading List* is to encourage members in the process of thinking for themselves and using their initiative.

Reading should be fun. If you can't get into one of the books on the list don't torture yourself, just pick up another one that is more interesting or less complex. While some people would prefer to relax in a comfortable chair with a good book and glass of wine, others may prefer to share their thoughts with friends as part of a reading group. Whatever methods you prefer, it is important to think critically about what you read. Discussion with colleagues, who have read the same book, may highlight observations or interpretations that you overlooked. Remember the two most important methods to gain understanding about cultures, places and events involve either experiencing them yourself or reading about the experiences of others. One of the things that make us human is that we can learn from the experiences of others.

Even when you have read a book once, you may gain new insight if you re-read the same book. It may seem strange, but as circumstances change over time the reading often takes on a different meaning depending upon your outlook, knowledge and experience. For instance, a junior sailor may appreciate a book for reasons that differ significantly from a retired Commodore. Both are equally valid. As your understanding of a subject grows so does your ability to absorb new ideas, and it is quite likely that when you re-read a book it takes on greater meaning. Reading helps one to generate new concepts and often inspires alternative explanations.

Some might say, 'I wish I did, but I don't have the time to read'. It is an unfortunate fact that in today's rapidly moving world it is difficult to find time to read. Buried in day to day minutiae, in administrative duties, or constantly on watch: who has the time to read? To turn the question around: how can we effectively do our jobs and make informed decisions without adequate professional and general reading? The answer is that everyone must make the time to read. If we try to determine the main characteristic common to great military leaders of the past, we see that they most were widely read in the humanities - they were serious students of history and international affairs.⁴ As modern maritime operations include diplomatic, constabulary as well as military tasks,

we also have to become serious students of the humanities. To prevail in modern conflicts we have to have good human intelligence and cultural understanding, and it follows that reading becomes a capability advantage. Reading becomes particularly important as 'Warfare draws more intensely on all human skills than any other activity.'⁵

It is envisaged that the *RAN Reading List* will be published in book form once every five years. The new *RAN Reading List* is also promulgated in electronic form on the Navy web site.⁶ The Sea Power Centre - Australia (SPC-A) aims to update the electronic version of the *Reading List* annually, in order to keep abreast of new publications and major works of importance.

Comments on the *RAN Reading List*, including suggested additions, are most welcome. In fact, the editors would prefer to include contributions from as many people as feasible, to minimise their own individual bias in the selection of reading material. Book reviews are welcome, for even if they are not selected for the reading list their potential may be closely debated within the Navy. As many more books are published each year than can feasibly be added to the list, contributors should also suggest a book that could be removed to make way for the new one. You might also suggest books on subjects that are not yet covered in this edition of the *Reading List*. Such comments should be forwarded to:

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or via email at the: seapower.centre@defence.gov.au

Don't be like Jason; find time to get on your bike.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

In addition to the *RAN Reading List*, the SPC-A has recently published two Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs:

No. 16 *Australian Maritime Issues 2005, SPC-A Annual*. Edited by Gregory P. Gilbert and Robert J. Davitt.

No. 17 *Australian Naval Personalities, Lives from the Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Selected and condensed by Gregory P. Gilbert.

These publications are available on the SPC-A web site.⁷

¹ Royal Australian Navy, *Royal Australian Navy Reading List, March 2006*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2006.

² Maritime Studies Program, *Royal Australian Navy General Reading List*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 1996; second edition 1997.

³ For United States Army <army.mil/CMH/reference/CSAList/CSAList.htm> (5 May 2006) and for the United States Marine Corps <mcu.usmc.mil/reading> (5 May 2006).

⁴ There are many examples including British leaders such as Churchill, and Montgomery, as well as Americans including MacArthur, Patton, Eisenhower, Nimitz and Halsey.

⁵ T. X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone*, Zenith Press, St Paul, Minnesota, 2004, p. 242.

⁶ <navy.gov.au/spc/readinglist/default.html> (5 May 2006).

⁷ <navy.gov.au/spc/maritimepapers/index.html> (5 May 2006).



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