

CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS PROFESSIONAL READING PROGRAM

A MESSAGE TO THE FLEET FROM THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS



Shipmates,

The United States Navy is and must remain, the most formidable maritime fighting force the world has ever known. Our ability to deter, fight, and win depends not just on ships and aircraft, but on the sharpness of our minds, the strength of our character, and the resilience of our bodies.

Reading is a force multiplier. It equips us with the knowledge, perspective, and critical thinking necessary to lead, to innovate, and to prevail in the unforgiving crucible of combat. This list is not political, not trendy, and not designed to check a box. It is chosen deliberately to sharpen everyone in the Navy, from the halls of the Pentagon to the forward deployed deckplates.

These are books I've found useful in my development as a Sailor and a Leader to encourage critical thinking, professional development, and discussion. The views expressed in the recommended books are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Navy, Department of War, or the U.S. Government.

I have organized the books into categories aligned with my priorities: Foundry, Fleet, Fight-and added Total Sailor, which encompasses character, competence, decision-making, nutrition, and the whole person. Each category links to who we are, how we prepare, and how we fight.

This is a professional reading list-but it is also a call to reflection, discussion, and growth. Use these books in your wardrooms, your Chiefs' Messes, and with your civilian teams. Ask tough questions. Challenge assumptions. Expand your thinking as a life-long learner.

Discussion Questions:

Foundry

- How do industrial breakthroughs change the character of naval warfare?
- What lessons from WWII's industrial surge apply to today's defense industrial base?

Fleet

- What role does history play in shaping the modern fleet's doctrine?
- How should we balance global presence with combat readiness?

Fight

- How do we prepare tactically for a fight we cannot fully predict?
- What enduring truths of naval warfare remain constant despite new technologies?

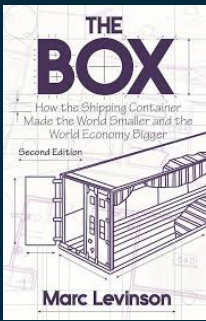
Character: How do leaders balance humility and authority in command?

Competence: What role does technical mastery play in building confidence?

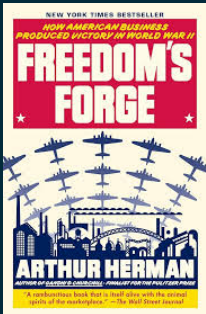
Decision-Making: How do leaders make high-risk decisions with incomplete information?

Nutrition & Fitness: What parallels exist between elite athletic performance and sailor readiness?

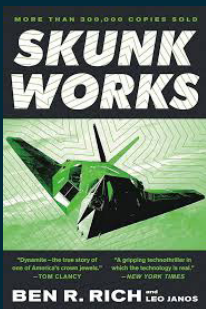
Whole Person (Resilience & Grit): How does personal resilience influence unit cohesion in combat?



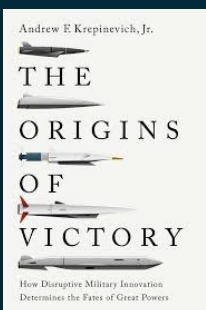
1) **The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger (Marc Levinson):** The story of the shipping container reveals how industrial breakthroughs reshape commerce, logistics, and naval warfare. By standardizing trade, containers transformed the global economy and the strategic calculus of sea power. For the Navy, it underscores how small innovations can alter global force projection and why maritime readiness depends on anticipating economic and industrial shifts.



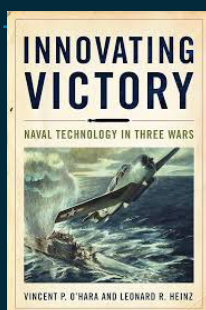
2) **Freedom's Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II (Arthur Herman):** Arthur Herman chronicles how U.S. industry mobilized for World War II, showing how entrepreneurial leaders, engineers, and workers turned peacetime factories into the "arsenal of democracy." For Sailors, it highlights the enduring link between industrial capacity and naval victory, sparking discussion about what today's defense base must do to sustain readiness in long competition.



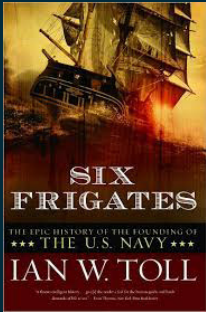
3) **Skunk Works: A Personal Memoir of My Years at Lockheed (Ben R. Rich):** Ben Rich's memoir details Lockheed's legendary advanced projects shop, where stealth aircraft were born through agility, secrecy, and rapid prototyping. For the Navy, it illustrates how unconventional management, tight-knit teams, and empowered engineers can bypass bureaucracy to deliver disruptive capability at speed—raising lessons for today's acquisition system and innovation culture.



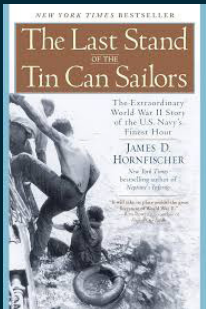
4) **The Origins of Victory: How Disruptive Military Innovation Determines the Fates of Great Powers (Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr.):** Krepinevich shows that great powers win wars when they integrate disruptive technologies with doctrine and organization. From blitzkrieg to precision warfare, innovation that changes outcomes comes from whole-system adaptation. For the Navy, it is a call to align vision, industry, and force design—because failure to adapt risks defeat. and innovation culture.



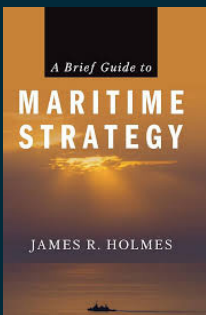
5) **Innovating Victory: Naval Technology in Three Wars (Vincent P. O'Hara and Leonard R. Heinz):** Hone examines three pivotal wars to show how navies adapt technology under pressure. By tracing the interplay of doctrine, experimentation, and operational learning, he shows that institutions that innovate faster hold the advantage. For Sailors, it prompts reflection on how to build a culture of experimentation that converts new tools into combat power. defeat.



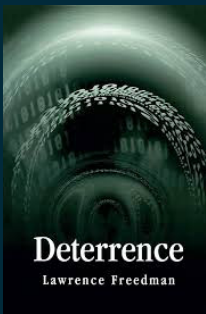
1) Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy (Ian W. Toll): Toll's sweeping narrative of the Navy's founding era highlights how fragile institutions, contested budgets, and bold leadership shaped a permanent maritime service. For today's Sailors, it sparks discussion on balancing global presence with readiness, and how early debates over fleet design mirror today's dilemmas of sustainment, posture, and long-term commitment to sea power.



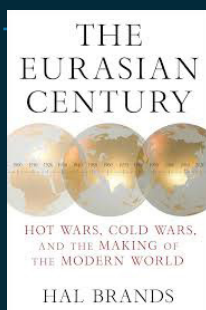
2) The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors: The Extraordinary World War II Story of the U.S. Navy's Finest Hour (James D. Hornfischer): Hornfischer captures the valor of destroyer crews at Leyte Gulf, where small ships charged against overwhelming Japanese firepower. The story highlights courage, improvisation, and doctrine under stress. For the Navy, it illustrates how ethos and tactical skill matter as much as steel, and why Sailors must be prepared to fight when outmatched.



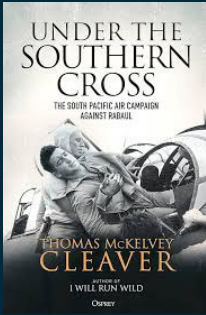
3) A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy (James R. Holmes): Holmes distills centuries of maritime thought into a concise, accessible framework for today's Navy. Linking sea control, deterrence, and presence to modern security challenges, it provides a common language for Sailors at all levels. This book ensures officers and enlisted alike grasp why navies matter and how maritime power underwrites global security.



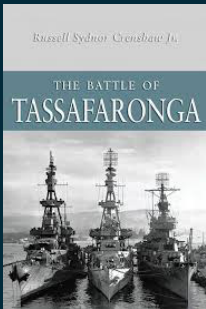
4) Deterrence (Lawrence Freedman): Freedman strips deterrence to its essentials: credibility, perception, and shared expectations. From nuclear standoffs to post-9/11 crises, he shows deterrence is not simply threats but the shaping of adversary behavior. For the Navy, it provides a clear intellectual foundation for understanding how maritime posture and presence underwrite deterrence across nuclear, conventional, and gray-zone competition.



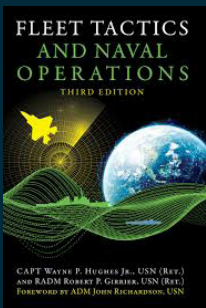
5) The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World (Hal Brands): This work traces how wars and rivalries across Eurasia shaped today's world order. It emphasizes geography, coalitions, and long cycles of competition. For the Navy, it situates maritime presence in the broader balance of power—raising questions about how U.S. sea power complements allies, counters rivals, and sustains advantage across the world's decisive land-sea frontiers.



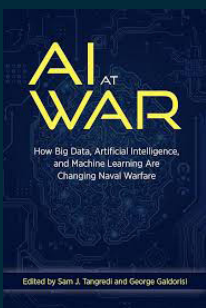
1) Under the Southern Cross: The South Pacific Air Campaign Against Rabaul (Thomas McKelvey Cleaver): Cleaver’s history of the Solomons and New Guinea campaigns shows the Navy at its breaking point, improvising under scarcity to deny Japan control of the air and sea. For Sailors, it underscores that victory requires resilience, joint action, and endurance—fighting and winning even when resources are thin and the margin for error razor sharp.



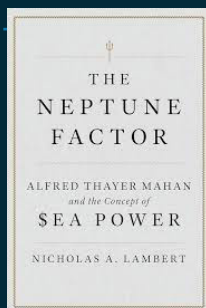
2) The Battle of Tassafaronga (Russell Crenshaw Jr.): A detailed account of a costly night battle off Guadalcanal, where U.S. cruisers suffered heavy losses to Japanese torpedoes. Crenshaw dissects failures of doctrine, weapons, and overconfidence. For today’s Navy, it is a sober lesson that training realism, technical rigor, and humility are vital to avoid repeating history in future maritime fights.



3) Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations, Third Edition (Wayne P Hughes Jr. and Robert P. Girrier): Hughes’ updated classic provides the Navy’s most practical theory of naval combat. Using models, history, and clear rules of thumb, it explains how to mass firepower, exploit scouting, and survive in missile warfare. For Sailors, it is a guide to the enduring grammar of fleet action and a foundation for thinking about tomorrow’s fights.

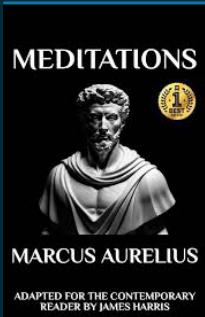


4) AI at War: How Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, and Machine Learning Are Changing Naval Warfare (Edited by Sam J. Tangredi and George Galdorisi): This edited volume explores how AI and machine learning are reshaping naval warfare—accelerating kill chains, enhancing logistics, and expanding maritime awareness. For the Navy, it challenges Sailors to envision how human–machine teams will transform operations, while grappling with the risks of automation in combat. It is a framework for thinking about adapting AI at the speed of war.

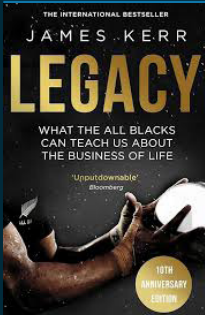


5) The Neptune Factor: Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Concept of Sea Power (Nicholas A. Lambert): Lambert reinterprets Alfred Thayer Mahan for the 21st century, distilling his insights into a more accessible synthesis. It shows how economic power, commerce, and naval force interact to shape global order. For Sailors, it replaces unreadable theory with usable lessons—connecting classic sea power thought to today’s competition with rising maritime rivals.

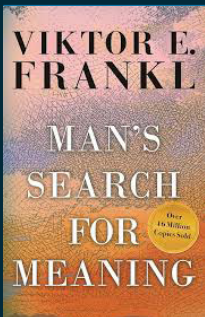
\\Total Sailor: Character



1) Marcus Aurelius - Meditations: Adapted for the Contemporary Reader (Translated by James Harris): A timeless handbook on leadership and self-discipline, *Meditations* offers Stoic wisdom adapted for modern readers. Marcus Aurelius reflects on humility, service, and resilience under pressure—reminders that true authority comes from character. For Sailors, it provides a daily guide to grounding command in integrity and composure, no matter the stress of the moment.



2) Legacy: What The All Blacks Can Teach Us About The Business Of Life (James Kerr): Drawing lessons from the legendary All Blacks rugby team, *Legacy* distills 15 principles of humility, discipline, and stewardship. Ideas like “sweep the sheds” and “plant trees you’ll never see” highlight how culture sustains world-class performance. For the Navy, it demonstrates how shared purpose and accountability make character the foundation of lasting combat effectiveness.



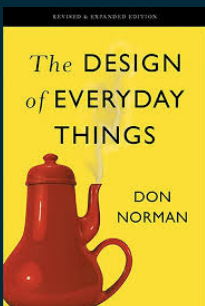
3) Man's Search for Meaning (Viktor E. Frankl): Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl chronicles his survival in Nazi concentration camps and develops “logotherapy,” the belief that purpose sustains resilience. His account is both harrowing and inspiring, showing how meaning transforms suffering into strength. For Sailors, it reinforces that character isn't just what we do under pressure—it's the deeper “why” that carries us through.



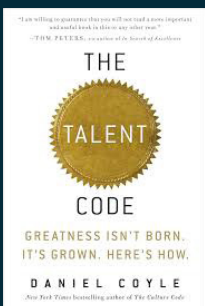
\\Total Sailor: Competence



1) **So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love (Cal Newport):** Cal Newport dismantles the “follow your passion” myth, arguing that real fulfillment comes from mastering rare and valuable skills. Through case studies across fields, he shows how competence creates confidence and opportunity. For Sailors, the lesson is clear: focus on deliberate excellence, and meaningful service will follow.



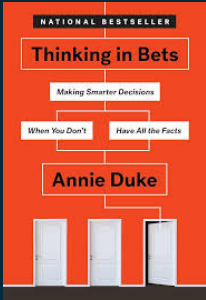
2) **The Design of Everyday Things: Revised and Expanded Edition (Don Norman):** Don Norman's classic text reveals how design influences performance—why some systems frustrate while others enable success. With practical insights into usability, feedback, and error-proofing, it sharpens awareness of how tools and processes shape human behavior. For Sailors, it's a reminder that competence includes not only mastering systems but demanding ones that work.



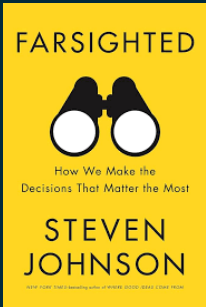
3) **The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How. (Daniel Coyle):** Daniel Coyle explores how talent is grown, not born, through focused practice, ignition of passion, and master coaching. From musicians to athletes, he uncovers the neuroscience of skill development. For Sailors, The Talent Code underscores that technical mastery is built day by day—competence is a discipline, not a gift.



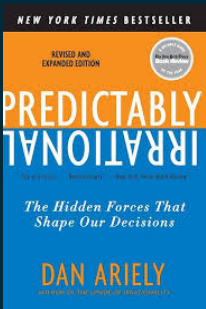
\\Total Sailor: Decision-Making



1) **Thinking in Bets: Making Smarter Decisions When You Don't Have All the Facts (Annie Duke):** Former poker champion Annie Duke shows that every choice is a bet against the future. She teaches how to weigh probabilities, embrace uncertainty, and avoid hindsight bias. For Sailors, *Thinking in Bets* provides a practical framework for making sound decisions when information is incomplete and outcomes carry real stakes.



2) **Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions That Matter the Most (Steven Johnson):** Steven Johnson examines high-consequence decisions that shape organizations and societies. Drawing from psychology, strategy, and history, he offers methods for broadening perspectives and avoiding narrow thinking. For Sailors, *Farsighted* emphasizes deliberate, long-range decision-making—critical when choices about technology, posture, and design will echo for decades.



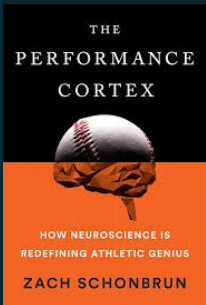
3) **Predictably Irrational, Revised and Expanded Edition: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions (Dan Ariely):** Behavioral economist Dan Ariely exposes the hidden biases that warp judgment, from anchoring and framing to social pressures. His stories are witty, but the implications are serious: humans rarely decide rationally. For Sailors, it offers tools to spot pitfalls in judgment.



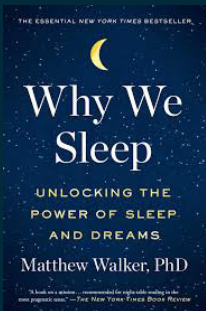
\\Total Sailor: Nutrition & Fitness



1) Peak: The New Science of Athletic Performance That Is Revolutionizing Sports (Marc Bubbs): Marc Bubbs translates cutting-edge sports science into actionable strategies for training, recovery, and performance. By focusing on consistency, sleep, and nutrition, Peak shows how athletes and operators achieve sustainable gains. For Sailors, it demonstrates that readiness starts with health—competence at sea begins with competence in body and mind.



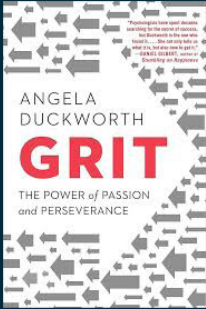
2) The Performance Cortex: How Neuroscience Is Redefining Athletic Genius (Zach Schonbrun): Zach Schonbrun explores the neuroscience of athletic genius, revealing how the brain drives movement, reaction, and performance. Blending science with storytelling, he redefines what it means to train smart. For Sailors, it underscores that fitness is not just physical but cognitive—a reminder that sharpening the mind and body together produces peak output.



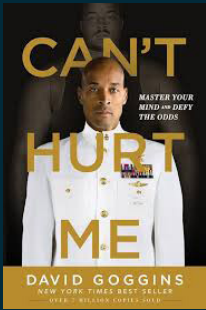
3) Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams (Matthew Walker): Neuroscientist Matthew Walker makes the case that sleep is not a luxury but a combat multiplier. He explains how it affects memory, health, and performance, and how chronic sleep debt undermines readiness. For Sailors, Why We Sleep reinforces the link between rest and resilience in sustaining operational excellence.



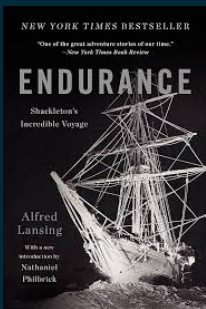
\\Total Sailor: Whole Person



1) Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance (Angela Duckworth): Angela Duckworth argues that perseverance and passion matter more than talent in achieving long-term goals. Drawing on research and case studies, she shows how grit predicts success. For Sailors, Grit offers both a personal challenge and a team ethic: resilience underpins cohesion, and steady effort builds confidence over time.



2) Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds (David Goggins): David Goggins' raw memoir shows how he transformed suffering into strength through relentless discipline. His "40% Rule" argues most people leave vast potential untapped. For Sailors, Can't Hurt Me is an unflinching call to push past limits, cultivate toughness, and embrace discomfort as a path to growth.



3) Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage (Alfred Lansing): Alfred Lansing recounts Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition, where leadership and resilience turned near-certain disaster into survival. It is a gripping story of unity under impossible odds. For Sailors, Endurance embodies the essence of grit: resourcefulness, trust, and courage that preserve teams through the harshest environments.

BUILT IN THE FOUNDRY - TEMPERED IN THE FLEET - FORGED TO FIGHT.

Daryl L. Caudle
Admiral, United States Navy
34th Chief of Naval Operations

