Book Review: â€œNo Higher Honorâ€•

Description

No Higher Honor Cover

I received my copy of â€œNo Hgher Honorâ€• by Bradley Peniston last week.

I read it in two evenings, and would have liked to have stayed up the first night and make it all the way through. It is easy to read, well laid out, and with plenty, but not to much detail to chase off the non-Navy reader.

The basic â€œone linerâ€• to describe the book is â€œthe mining of the USS ROBERTS (FFG-58),â€• but that doesnâ€™t do justice to the scope of the writing. The book is a multi-faceted discussion of many topical areas, all relating directly to the events of the day, when the bow lookout, Seaman Bobby Gibson, steadied his binoculars on some objects ahead of the ship in the Persian Gulf on April 14th, 1988.

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Over the years, I have read two other books that have followed a similar format, for similar topics:

â€œTyphoon, The Other Enemyâ€• by C. Raymond Calhoon. This book discusses the typhoon that the Third Fleet sailed through during the later part of WWII. Capt Calhoun was the skipper of one of the MAHAN Class DDs that survived the massive waves and winds. I discussed some lessons learned from that book here. As with â€œNo Higher Honor,â€• it is engaging writing.

and:

â€œSailors to the Endâ€• by George Freeman. This book is about the raging fires aboard the USS FORRESTAL (CV-59) in the summer of 1967.

All three of these books cover the genesis of the problems, from an engineering and leadership standpoint, gripping descriptions of the actual incidents from many first person accounts, and also the follow up inquiries and fallout that resulted. In this regard, â€œNo Higher Honorâ€• brings you to the mine strike with an extensive knowledge of the ship design, the mission requirements, and the command structure and philosphy. Once the mine was hit, the story details the timeline of events, and the desperate, but pre-planned responses carried out. In the aftermath of the event, Brad gives you the upper level geo-political response, which resulted in Operation Praying Mantis. He also provides the tactical details of that operation, followed by the subsequent return of the ship to the States and how the Bath Iron Works expertise put this ship back in operation.

I hope that is enough for you to want to get your hands on the book.

I also enjoyed this book because it was, in addition to the story described above, an excellent report on leadership, command priorities, and the value of training, training, and, yes, more training. For three years, I rode the ships of the Atlantic Fleet as the Type Commanderâ€™s Combat Systems Assessment Officer. I had the almost twice weekly opportunity to observe (mostly) and train

(sometimes) â€œupper deckâ€• crews. I believe I saw just about every way you could run a command in this area of ship readiness. I also was Engineer Officer with an operational deployment, a 10 month ROH (in Bath Iron Works) with the Light Off Exam (LOE) and the following trip to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for refresher training and an Operational Propulsion Plant (OPPE) equivalent.

Bradâ€™s writing takes you inside the very foundations of the crew of the ROBERTS. Commander Paul Rinn set out a philosophy of excellence, with a center piece of damage control training. It paid off. The reading on this topic is useful for anyone bound for a pre-comm crew, specifically anyone in any leadership/supervisory position. Itâ€™s valuable reading for other leaders, for the context of re-establishing a functioning crew, prepared to take the fight on when it comes, because they trained for it in advance.

For those interested in ship design and engineering, the book is a great read about not only initial design decisions, but also how equipment issues can be dealt with under severe damage conditions.

For historians, there are points describing the role of the US Navy in the Persian Gulf region in the late 80â€™s, and also details on the tactical and strategic decisions and actions of the conflict between the US and Iran.

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For anyone who wonders what life aboard a small surface combatant is like, during crew training operations, as well as on deployment, this is a book that open that window.

For people interested in the psychology of training and people under stress, there are bits and pieces here that will provide insight into the human condition.

For those whoâ€™s professional work deals in leadership, mostly for the military, but also for other large organizations with significant structure, I believe you wonâ€™t be disappointed with the material provided by â€œNo Higher Honor.â€•

In closing, Bradâ€™s book is written with enough, but not too much detail. As I read the book I could easily visualize the places, equipment, or situations he described, and know the technical detail is exacting.

For you readers in the Norfolk, VA area, Brad will be at Borders in Newport News July 29th, 2006.

The full calendar of book events is here.

Here is a link to more history on the USS SAMUEL B ROBERTS (DE-413) of WWII fame, the namesake of the modern day ROBERTS. The book that chronicled the Battle off Samar, â€œLast Stand of the Tin Can Sailorsâ€• by James Hornfischer, is another fine read.

Update 07/10/2006:

Neptunus Lex has a link to this post and has some comments on Operation Praying Mantis from his experiences.

Eagle1 has a link, and comments on a similar case of the USS WARRINGTON (DD-824) during the Vietnam War, except the outcome was not the same.

Cdr Salamander also linked here with this post.

For those of you who get here via other links, or random reading, all three of those blogs are worth your time to check out.

Also, Brad left me a note and reminded me the entire first chapter of the book is posted at this link.

Hopefully, the trackback to Mudville Gazetteâ€™s Open Post for 7/12/06 will workâ€¦

Click â€œmoreâ€• to read about my FFG-7 background

Not on a PERRY, but I did experience pre-Commissioning of a surface combatant at Ingalls Shipbuilding and Drydock in Pascagoula, MS. With that background I could relate to the discussions in the book of the building of a new crew from scratch.

My professional experience with the FFG-7 class provides me with a background to assure you that the stories told are researched in meticulous detail, and provide details you just wonâ€™t get in other readings. For two years, as a junior LT, I trained Flight I and II OLIVER HAZARD PERRY (FFG-7) Class combat systems crews. I joined the staff at FCTCL as the assistant OIC, and later was the CSOTT Officer. My shop trained FFG-7 crews from (when I arrived) CLIFTON SPRAUGE (FFG-16) to AUBREY FITCH (FFG-34), and one Australian crew (I learned not to go drinking with more Aussies than rounds of drinks you could handle then). The later hulls, in the Flight III FFG types (FFG-36 to -61) were trained at FCTCP.

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In addition to the combat systems team training for four weeks, we also trained the prospective Combat Systems Officers in one course, and the PCOs/PXOs in another course. My staff of professionals included STGCS(SW) Dave Frey and FTCS(SW) Dave Magnus, with OSC(SW) Mahaffey running the OS portions of the course. Not only did they train crews well, they taught me quite a bit.

The P-CSOs, PCO/PXOs each spent two weeks in the classroom, with trips to the FFG-7 mockup to observe other crews in training, while the shipâ€™s teams came as a consolidated group of OSs, FCs, STGs, and the CO, plus officers from the OPS and CS departments. Two weeks were spent teaching each crew member about the operational functions they would perform, and two weeks were port and starboard tactical scenarios or classroom lectures on tactical issues, mostly consisting of Soviet threat data.

I was frimly convinced I would be sent to a PERRY as Combat Systems Officer (CSO) out of Department Head School, since I had taught all of the pipeline courses for that job. I was wrong, and BUPERS Placement had other ideas. I ended up on USS CONOLLY (DD-979)as the Engineer, which became the first SPRUANCE Class DD overhauled by Bath Iron Works, and, is also the ship Brad mentions as being in the drydock that BIW purchased in 1983, that broke loose from her moorings in the winter of 1984, with a ship in it. That was my ship.

While I was in overhaul, the BIW Shipâ€™s Superintendent, Bobby, would regularly come and get me to take me to some obscure portion of the ship, in a tank or a void, and point out construction glitches. His crews took pride in their work, and I came to understand the hallmark of excellence in ship repair and construction that BIW has earned over the many years of service to the Navy.

I was Executive Officer for 18 months aboard USS CARR (FFG-52), and took her on a deployment to the Persian Gulf, performing the same duties ROBERTS had been assigned. My cruise was Oct 89 to Mar 90. Capt Paul Rinn was the Chief Staff Officer at COMDESRON SIX during my XO tour, and I spoke with him several times.

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