Clarion Review

History

American Sailors and United States Marines at War and Peace: Navy Sea Stories and Marine Corps Legacies

Donald Johnson
iUniverse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

"I like the Navy," proudly proclaims retired Admiral Harold Koenig in one of the fifty-two entries in Donald Johnson's collection of tales, quips, poems, and oral histories by and about those who served in the fleet or its corps of marines. The admiral's simple statement could have been the title for this book; his four words clearly identify the sentiment of the audience for whom it is intended.

Many of the entries in *American Sailors and United States Marines at War and Peace* are very brief (some under two pages), but together they provide a comprehensive look into what it means to be an American sailor or marine. Johnson, a Navy man who traded in his pea coat for a pastor's frock nineteen years ago, wrote or rewrote more than half of the selections that fill out the book's nine chapters. The rest were submitted by friends and relatives, all of them ex-servicemen and -women, including his sister, a combat stevedore.

Varying wildly in writing quality and focus, the stories include accounts of drunken shore leave, fearsome combat duty, anecdotal tales of the "crusty old guys" of the chief petty officer class, and heart-tugging paeans to comrades lost in battle or in accidents. There are a few litanies of service or ship histories that read as though they had been culled from a pile of high-school reports or Internet entries. However, even these few weaker sections of the book provide the reader with some information of merit, if only to prove the saying that military service often involves months of boredom punctuated by hours—or sometimes only minutes—of extreme excitement.

As might be expected, the grittiest, most enthralling, and most emotional stories are the ones that recall harrowing days and nights in combat, such as “A Submarine Sailor on Wake Island,” or those that detail the heroism of a fallen comrade, as in “Navy SEAL Hero in Iraq.”

Johnson and his contributors note, with deep emotion and heartfelt reverence, that service in the military often comes at a price. Nowhere in the book is this presented with more honest pain than in “Burial At Sea,” which includes the heartbreaking recollections of a marine colonel assigned to casualty notification duty during the Vietnam War.

Fully a third of the book, however, falls into a lighter vein. Most who have served in uniform have heard similar tales of bad food, bureaucratic snafus, stultifying regulations, and ill-fitting and uncomfortable uniforms. Veterans and anyone interested in learning what it is like to endure such hardships will find Johnson’s collection both satisfying and entertaining.

Mark G. McLaughlin