



PROJECT MUSE®

Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy,
1900-1945 (review)

Christopher Dandeker

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003, pp.
255-257 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0023>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40449>

riography of the Philippine War, but the stories Feuer has selected are interesting (even if not always reliable), and some of them cannot easily be found elsewhere.

Richard Meixsel

James Madison University
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900–1945. By Christopher McKee. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-674-00736-0. Photographs. Appendixes. Notes. Index. Pp. 285. \$29.95.

An important perspective on the armed services is that provided by the experience of service personnel themselves. For those who value this point of view, the past two years have seen the welcome appearance of two first class works on the British armed services, drawing on the voices of servicemen who served during war and peace over the course of the twentieth century. The poignant and justly well-received *Soldiers* by Philip Ziegler (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001) on the soldiers of the British Army is now joined by Christopher McKee's portrait of Royal Navy sailors in *Sober Men and True*.

Both writers use the techniques of oral history—McKee's sample of eighty or so sailors is much larger than Ziegler's focus on nine biographies—while McKee is interested in the period from 1900 to 1945 compared with Ziegler's coverage of more recent events. Ziegler relies on his own interviews, while McKee draws, for the most part, on material collected by others and available, for example, in the Imperial War Museum. In the case of McKee, to match his incisive analysis of the problems as well as promise of what might be achieved by oral history, there is the hope that the picture he draws of the Royal Navy might be used in further comparative work on enlisted servicemen of navies that have developed from the British tradition.

The authors aim to convey to the reader the experience of service life as it was lived by the armed services' "working class," as McKee puts it; and by allowing the story to be told very much in their own words one finds a vivid and moving portrait of the lives of servicemen. In addition, there is much food for thought for other researchers on such important questions as: why they joined the armed services, how they adjusted to the privations that are a necessary feature of the military experience, how they faced the demands of combat, how the texture of their everyday social lives was formed, and how they managed the transition from military to civilian life. Furthermore, one is led to ask: to what extent are the answers that servicemen give to these questions similar to those given by their forebears in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as those currently serving?

McKee shows how the lower deck was recruited largely from the semi-skilled and skilled working class: indeed, the Royal Navy could afford to be selective—more so than the Army—with recruits requiring a letter of refer-

ence from a member of the clergy or police. While prospective sailors were often pushed to considering the Royal Navy as a career by poor pay and employment prospects in civilian life, there were also more positive features attracting recruits, such as travel, adventure, job security, and the prospects of a pension after long (twenty-two years) service.

McKee draws a convincing picture of the gulf between commissioned officers and the lower deck, which was as much rooted in wider class relations as it was in the technical division of labour within naval organization. He also conveys the subtle gradations of rank within the lower deck, not least vertical distinctions between petty officers and the hands as well as status distinctions between seamen, stokers, and those who worked more closely with commissioned officers and, perforce, had a higher education for such jobs as telegraphy, writers, and the like (and who, by reason of their literacy, tend to be over-represented in the oral history records). Despite the gulf between officers and the lower deck, they were bonded by relations of deference as well as, in the case of the better kind of officer, an attitude of care and paternalism. As was the case in earlier centuries, the lower deck had a clear image of what made a good and a bad officer, with the latter tending to abuse alcohol as well as his position of rank, adopting a tyrannical, pettifogging style of man-management. McKee also reminds us that the quality of the sailor's experience varied a good deal depending on the class of ship he served in as well as the period: generally speaking smaller ships had a more informal, egalitarian atmosphere (and did without the formal bureaucracy of the ship's police characteristic of larger ships) while the later period witnessed a more caring attitude on the part of officers towards the men, especially during the Second World War.

One of the more striking features of McKee's work is the vivid account he provides of the sailor's capacity to tolerate privation whether in war or peace. The drama and terror of combat is also accompanied by telling details of how sailors organised themselves to relieve the monotony and boredom of life at sea, including the development of an informal business economy to supplement their pay. Indeed, as was the case in earlier times, a good deal of the social order of the Royal Navy was driven less by the formal managerial structure than by the autonomous self-governance of the ships messes. McKee reminds us of the physical and mental toughness of sailors of this period, their good humour, and their spirit of adventure, which, while it could cause disciplinary problems, was a necessary price to pay for having the lively risk-taking men that made the Royal Navy such an effective fighting force. Sailors of that period, holding traditional concepts of masculinity, suffered privation in silence rather more so than today. They were more tolerant on some social issues than some contemporary observers might think: for example, of homosexuality between consenting adults (but not those activities that involved the exploitation of age and rank, as with the suborning of junior sailors under seventeen). Finally, when leaving the service, many sailors realised that with the many years of comradeship and the development of a worldly, even cosmopolitan attitude towards the world,

they stood apart from their civilian peers. As with some veterans today, they found that it is possible to physically leave the service yet, psychologically, remain attached to the comradeship that can never be replaced in civilian society.

Christopher Dandeker

King's College, London
London, England

Command and Cohesion: The Citizen Soldier and Minor Tactics in the British Army, 1870–1918. By M. A. Ramsay. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. ISBN 0-275-96326-8. Tables. Figures. Notes. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii, 246. \$54.95.

In *Command and Cohesion*, M. A. Ramsay attempts to synthesize military and intellectual history to provide a better understanding of British military thinking and practice in the years leading up to and during World War I. Liberally adapting the Kuhnian model of scientific development, Ramsay explores the paradigmatic shift which took place in the British military establishment, specifically the infantry, as it was forced to leave behind the era of “small wars” and find a new purpose on the continental battlefields of the Great War.

In the first half of the book, Ramsay presents a broad survey of British and, more generally, European military cultural and tactical change in the nineteenth century. Starting with Napoleon Bonaparte and G. W. F. Hegel and ending with Garnet Wolseley and John Ruskin, the author presents an interesting, although at times chaotic, analysis of the interactions of psychological, technological, and cultural factors which shaped military thought. Ramsay tells us that, ultimately, a study of this sort “must rest on the values of the British military community.” Yet just what these values are remains unclear in these chapters. There is little or no discussion of the interplay of muscular Christianity and volunteerism, the cult of athleticism, Social Darwinism, and the growth of militarism—all profound trends of the late nineteenth century which shaped the values of the military community. And perhaps more surprisingly for a work of this kind, a discussion of the impact, or lack thereof (as Ramsay informs us), of Sandhurst and especially the Staff College on both the military community and on military thought is missing. Although Ramsay recognizes the importance of military theorists like J. F. Maurice and G. F. R. Henderson, he fails to draw on the impact that they and others had as Staff College professors on such future World War I notables as Ian Hamilton, Douglas Haig, Julian Byng, and Henry Wilson.

As the focus of the book narrows in its last two chapters, *Command and Cohesion* becomes a more valuable source of analysis. Ramsay's exploration of changing British infantry tactics and training is thoughtful and engaging. Numerous tables and diagrams clearly illustrate an often difficult subject for even a specialist. But the general reader as well should have little difficulty