



Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrestal and the Heroes Who Fought It

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In the tradition of *New York Times* bestsellers *In Harm's Way* and *The Terrible Hours* comes a mesmerizing, high-adrenaline account of the heroic sailors who survived one of the worst accidents in U.S. naval history.

Sailors to the End tells the dramatic and until now forgotten story of the 1967 fire on board the USS *Forrestal* during its time at Yankee Station off the coast of Vietnam. The aircraft carrier, the mightiest of the U.S. fleet, was preparing to launch attacks into North Vietnam when one of its jets accidentally fired a rocket across the flight deck and into an aircraft occupied by pilot John McCain. A huge fire ensued, and McCain barely escaped before a 1,000-pound bomb on his plane exploded, causing a chain reaction with other bombs on surrounding planes. The crew struggled for days to extinguish the fires, the five thousand men on board experiencing different kinds of hell -- some trapped in damaged compartments waiting to die, some battling rivers of flaming jet fuel in order to rescue their buddies. Almost all of them were innocent eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, but in an instant they were thrust into a tragedy that nearly destroyed the ship and took the lives of 134 men.

Written with the intensity and excitement of a thriller, and based on never-before-disclosed information and extensive interviews with the fire's survivors, here is the first full, minute-by-minute account of the disaster. Told through the stories of a dozen sailors, including John Beling, the carrier's beloved captain who was made a scapegoat for the disaster, *Sailors to the End* follows the *Forrestal* from its home in Norfolk, Virginia, through its mission in Vietnam. Focusing on the fateful fire and its aftermath, this book provides a gripping tale of heartache and heroism as young men find themselves trapped on a burning ship with bombs exploding all around them.

Sailors to the End also corrects the official view of the fire, providing evidence that the U.S. government compromised the ship's safety by insisting on increased bombing despite the shortage of reliable weapons. For thirty-five years, the terrible loss of life has been blamed on the sailors themselves, but this meticulously documented history shows that they were truly the victims and heroes, deserving recognition for their efforts during a sweeping tragedy that until now has been only a footnote in history. Gregory A. Freeman dramatically brings this story to life, creating a work that is both riveting and moving.

Sailors to the End: The Deadly Fire on the USS Forrestal and the Heroes Who Fought It Details

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Billy says

An easy read, but hampered by the author's abject ignorance on naval matters. The book is a somewhat tepid oral history of both the infamous fire and military service during the Vietnam era, but fails utterly at any meaningful analysis of the incident.

Mike says

Having spent the better part of a 23 year Navy career, mostly working flight deck operations. We often used the incident scenario from the USS Forrestal to stage our own drills. I found the book to be true to events prior to and after the unfortunate incident that day. I could have plugged my own experiences into portions of that book. I had trouble putting the book down until completion.

I think everyone should read this book and gain true respect for the brave men and the events they endured that day.

At sea there is no choice when an incident like this occurs. In the middle of the ocean you just do what needs to be done and deal with it.

Erin Miller says

Gregory Freeman shows once again why he's the best at this style of writing. He tells an incredible story of tragedy and heroism. It's not one that should be ignored and, after reading it, I doubt I'll forget it anytime soon. Great book.

Rick Wahler says

A fascinating and true analysis of one of the greatest tragedies in US NAVY history

Having served on an aircraft carrier and working with ordnance on the flight deck I have a unique understanding of what happened on the USS Oriskany and Forrestal. In fact my training included lessons from both incidents.

I'm angered that a proximate cause of the severe loss of lives on Forrestal tracks back to Washington, DC in the White House and the Pentagon where politics and bureaucracy provided highly dangerous, out-of-date bombs to the ship's crew, so that "progress" and "success" could be claimed. Official reports never acknowledged this matter as it would have involved too many special people. I'm sure that still goes on.

Emory says

I first got this book when I did a paper on the USS Forrestal. Not only did it provide a great deal of information for the paper, but it pointed me in the direction of the survivors who had been willing to work with Mr. Freeman. Based on the information I got from my own direct interviews, I can say that *Sailors to the End* is well-written and accurate, painting a good picture of the events surrounding the fire and the overall situation before and after the fire within the Navy as a whole.

This is not just a book for those who are curious about the Forrestal disaster, however. It is well worth reading just as an example of the bravery of people in situations that don't involve enemy action. The heroes in war are not just those who engage the enemy; these men fought to save their shipmates and their ship, with just as much courage as anyone else. They deserve to be remembered.

Michael Plas says

This is a fitting tribute to the men who suffered and died upon the USS Forrestal. Mr. Freeman manages to introduce the reader to the minutiae of carrier combat, as well as to the various characters, without boring the knowledgeable reader. He makes the episode an engrossing story, worthy of cinema. As he concludes the book, he tries to assign blame fairly and does not have an animus towards the Navy or an individuals.

Leo says

Incredible story of loss and survival. Well written and well balanced, it dispels a few of the myths surrounding this tragedy.

Jeannie Walker says

An excellent read!

The USS Forrestal was stationed in the Tonkin Gulf to deliver napalm, high explosives and other dangerous payloads. Learning about the tragic fire from chain reaction explosions aboard the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal and the loss of so many lives was heartbreaking. It is true the US Navy can take teenagers and turn them into a fine team who will risk their lives to fight a horrendous fire that threatens to sink one of America's most powerful aircraft carrier. The sufferings and death of these fine young sailors was wrenching and the fact that it all happened made it even more poignant.

I highly recommend this excellent novel for all readers who want to learn about courageous actions of the brave men who risk their lives to secure freedom for all of us.

Jeannie Walker- Award Winning Author of "Fighting the Devil" - A True Story of Consuming Passion, Deadly Poison, and Murder

Matthew says

An excellent historical account of the devastating fire onboard USS FORRESTAL during the Vietnam war. This fire had major implications for our Navy and damage control procedures. A very personal account as the author interviewed numerous former crew members and detailed the experience from their perspective.

Diana Long says

A descriptive and detailed account of the July 29, 1967 disaster of the carrier USS "Forrestal" as told to the author by those sailors who survived the fire and additional documents to support his findings of this tragic event. Freeman wrote an outstanding chronology of events as they transpired pre-fire, fire and aftermath. The very vivid scenes as they are accounted are heart wrenching to say the least. Sailors who sacrificed their own safety to save others, every boy that day became a man and in deed the title of this work "Sailors to the End" is rightly fitting. This was without a doubt my most difficult read. When I purchased this book I had every intention of reading it immediately yet could not do so as it being very personal to me, I wanted to know why, my cousin Charles E Long, a 20 year-old from Wauchula, Florida perished in what should have been a fairly safe place to be. Safer by far than the jungles of Vietnam, where so many of my classmates were headed or there already. Yet, fate is everything, whether man made or natural, a disaster can occur at any time, any where and where you happen to be in a crisis means life or death. Now I have some closure knowing Charlie's life was brief but not in vain.

Christopher says

One of my best friends from growing up went to the Navy after high school while I went to the Army. After Desert Storm we ended up back home at the same time and I remember him telling me about his flight deck job in the arresting crew. The area of the carrier where this book takes place. So, when I came across this book I knew I had to read it if to just a greater sense of what life was like on a carrier. The whole time I was reading it I could help but think of him. I also thought back to my own narrowly avoided demise when riding on the roof of a HMMWV that rolled over in a drainage ditch.

Freeman does not only an excellent job of creating a harrowing picture of that day but always connecting the reader to the sailors. This book is not just a mechanical resotation of what occurred but brings life to the people involved building up the moment that things started going horribly wrong. Like a good suspense novel, I found myself reading on to the next page to find out what happens to everyone, who lived, who died making this all the more tragic to read because its not a suspsence novel.

Early in my military career I had a first sergeant put it very simply, this equipment was meant to kill and it did not care who so you had to treat it accordingly. This book drives that lesson home so sucessfully. A couple of shortcuts in procedures brought together other elements that created this momentarily hell on this ship.

I would highly recommend this book for anyone who wants a better understanding of members of the military do especially for those who have never served. This should help people to understand that truly there is no amount of pay or benefits that can be given to people that when life-threatening danger roared to life they ran not to safety but into the inferno.

My only letdown of the book is that Freeman didn't add more at the end on what happened to many of those involved. There were a few examples but I felt there should have been a more in depth wrap of how this incident affected so many lives.

Eric_W says

The story of John McCain and the tragic fire on board the *Forrestal*. The author provides lots of interesting detail on the hazards of working on a carrier. Falling overboard was one of the most feared and could happen easily. One had to be always on the alert and totally aware of the surroundings. Fatigue and heat made this difficult. Sailors working in unbearably hot conditions for 12 hours at a stretch could be blown overboard by an errant jet blast, or run down by a tractor that got away when the deck shifted before it could be chocked down properly.

I did not realize there was a severe shortage of bombs for the crews flying over Vietnam. Despite assurances of McNamara and the President, crews were leaving with the wrong ordnance and ? the normal bomb loads because there were not enough ordnance. There was so much bombing going on, the supply line could not keep up. Officers were told to lie about the situation and about their bombing success or lack thereof.

The shortage of ordnance meant that the Services were scrounging everywhere for bombs and the load that was delivered to the *Forrestal* just before the accident had their ordnance officer very upset. They were old 1000 lb. Comp B bombs dating from 1935 which had been stored in the jungles of the Philippines. Unlike the newer , more stable bombs, these became much more unstable and even more explosive over time as the ingredients began to deteriorate. Not to mention they had to be “banded” in order to hang beneath the newer planes. He was worried that any vibration, even one from the catapult as the plane was shot off the deck, might set one of them off unleashing a terrible series of explosions. The officer refused to store them with the other bombs and insisted they be moved on the flight deck where they could be loaded quickly on to the planes scheduled for a big mission the next day. The captain was informed of the danger but refused to let the ordnance officer chuck them overboard since they had no replacements.

The fire on the *Oriskany* had pointed up serious deficiencies in training and the way emergencies were handled. In that case safety procedures had been short-circuited in order to move planes faster off the deck. Magnesium flares were stored in the wrong locker in order to make them more accessible for loading on the planes and a sailor's failure to properly handle the accident after ignition of a flare made a dangerous situation disastrous. Failure to communicate decisions and the desire to get planes into the air as fast as possible were major factors in the *Forrestal accident*. Two separate groups made adjustments to safety procedures, each assuming that their early removal of two separate devices designed to prevent the accidental firing of a missile, would be prevented by the other's safety mechanism. Independent of each other, both devices were disarmed making an accident almost inevitable.

The author does a very good job of conveying the horror faced by the sailors as the old bombs blew up, often blowing a hole through several decks down below the waterline and leaving a river of flaming fuel cascading down through passageways. It's an amazing wonder the ship was saved even if an ungodly mess. Captain Beling, falling into a state of unreality after the fires had been brought under control, the entire aft section of the ship a mess with fires reigniting on a regular basis, 134 dead sailors, the flight deck a shambles, tried to insist that with some minor repairs the ship could be back in action over Vietnam at “80%” capacity. He even thought he could launch a couple of A-6's off the forward catapult as they steamed into Norfolk for repairs. Fortunately, the Navy's Admiral conducting an investigation into the fire put the kibosh on that idea

very quickly. The author provides generally a favorable view of Beling. I was dismayed, however, as usual, by Belin's platitudinous speech to the crew after the fire "thanking God for sparing the ship, yada yada yada, right after that same God had just killed, in the most horrible fashion possible, 134 of their shipmates, and disfigured hundreds more. But I guess that's typical of lala land.

Freeman quotes extensively from Beling's testimony at the board of inquiry. He noted that the Navy had never published any kind of official training review detailing lessons learned on the *Oriskany* and Beling had to make 3,000 copies of an article for distribution to his crew from *Reader's Digest* about the fire on the *Oriskany* as part of his own training efforts. There were actually few planes carrying rockets on the *Forrestal* and he used his degree in aeronautical engineering to, in hindsight, show the flaws in the safety mechanism on the launch circuit of the Zuni rockets. The pigtails should never have been plugged in (engaging the firing mechanism) until after the plane was on internal voltage and after being checked for stray voltage on internal power. But ultimately, he insisted the fire from the rocket strike on the plane could have been put out if they had the full three minutes available before cook-off on the modern bombs. The old 1,000 lb bombs blew up in just half that time killing most of the fire-fighting crew instantly and blowing holes in the flight deck permitting rivers of burning fuel to flow into the crew berthing spaces.

Moving account of a tragedy that should never have happened. I would hope that lessons were learned from it. Freeman nicely mixes personal accounts with detailed information on the workings of the ship and crew to create a real page-turner.

There is a good Youtube video that intersperses actual footage of the missile and bomb detonation with some re-creation of events and the investigation (one discrepancy: the video says 7 bombs exploded, the book reports nine.) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iK7RGp...>

Fredrick Danysh says

In July 1967 the USS Forrestal is conducting flight operations off the coast of Vietnam when an ordnance mishap explodes causing a chain reaction of explosions and fire that claims 134 lives. Here is a close look at aircraft carrier operations and the valor of men fighting to save their ship. An excellent historical work. The only thing that could be improved would be to give the ranks of the men listed as killed as a result of the mishap.

Alisa says

This wavered between 3.5 and 4 stars. I had never even heard of this incident, but wow. I'm sure things happen in the military so often that as time passes we never hear about. This was quite an interesting, and sad, story about an aircraft carrier on board that caught fire due to rocket accidentally firing off a plane. I liked the books details of the pre-rocket and people getting into the navy, as well as the aftermath of the rocket and crew. It was especially touching about the three navy crew that passed away doing a last heroic act of changing the steering compartment. At times I did find all of the technical/military jargon hard to follow, but overall, a good read for me.

Curtis Edmonds says

This is a terrible book - terrible In the best sense, in that it tells a story that is full of terror and hardship and pain. Due to a chain of errors rooted in military stupidity, and worsened by plain bad luck, a rocket aboard a Navy fighter plane on the flight deck of USS FORRESTAL hit another plane, and a further chain reaction set the ship ablaze. Freeman is meticulous in explaining the roots of the disaster, but he is just as meticulous in detailing the heroism of the crew, from the captain on down, in fighting the fire, saving the ship, and caring for the horribly wounded. This is a first-class bit of research, told at the pace of a Tom Clancy thriller. Highly recommended.
