Faith in Books: The U.S. Navy’s Chaplains & Assistants Serving as Librarians at Sea

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Abstract
This research interrogates the lesser-known role of military chaplains and enlisted assistants serving as librarians on Navy warships. The goal of this research is to define the history of the shipboard library, the Navy’s need for a chaplain, their emerging role as a librarian, the needs and roles of the chaplain’s assistant, organization and management of the shipboard library, and an overview of the Navy General Library Program (NGLP) which provides library services to sailors and marines. Research was conducted through reviews of military and naval correspondence, training manuals, guides, regulations, handbooks, instructions, orders, and literature dating from 1909 to the present.

Unlike civilian-staffed shore-based and military college libraries run by MLIS librarians, warship libraries are distinct as they are staffed by the ship’s chaplain and assistant, yet guided by the Navy General Library Program. While both libraries’ services are similar, warship libraries provide a broader range of materials in highly-concentrated environments. Instead of multiple libraries, warships combine technical, professional, educational, scientific, and recreational libraries, in one condensed form.

Warship libraries have existed since 1821, and thus the role of the chaplain and assistant as librarians is not as well known to those outside the military establishment. Yet the Navy’s current regulations specifically dictate when chaplains are assigned to sea duty, they shall be the designated library officer. Since the inception of the first shipboard library, chaplains have greatly benefited the Navy as library officers due to their important contributions of morale and promotion of learning through education. Nowhere else will you find chaplains in charge of libraries; without them, their importance would be undervalued and the shipboard library that provides so much for so many might have never existed.

Keywords

Comments
The research paper regarding U.S. Navy chaplains serving as librarians was conducted during the spring 2017 semester at The University of Iowa as an independent study course with approval from a tenured faculty member in the School of Library and Information Sciences. The research was conducted in order to expand further on the same subject matter presented as a poster during the same term in order to inform others about the invaluable tool the Navy uses in the form of chaplains as librarians for the education, morale, and well-being of Navy and Marine Corps personnel at sea.

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US Navy Photo. Commissioned in 1890, USS Vesuvius was the first and only U.S. ship to be outfitted with dynamite guns. Vesuvius’ three pneumatic guns could fire 550-lbs high explosive shells at a rate of 25 per minute up to a mile away and were used during the Spanish-American War in 1898 to bombard enemy emplacements in Cuba. The ship’s exploits and unusual arrangement of being commanded by a chaplain earned it the nickname “Ship of the Devil.”
An officer at sea and an Army officer in port served as the inspiration for the movie and TV series "The Wackiest ship in the Army." Echo was returned to New Zealand towards the end of the war and by the 1990s had fallen into such neglect that it was on the verge of being sold for firewood when it was bought and turned into a bar and museum.