



The Sailor's Homer: The Life and Times of Richard McKenna, Author of The Sand Pebbles

Dennis L. Noble

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There are virtually no biographies of naval enlisted personnel, making Dennis L. Noble's book wholly unique. Richard McKenna was an enlisted sailor for twenty-two years, from the late 1930s to the end of the Korean War. Like most of his shipmates, he was one of many "faceless" enlisted sailors. McKenna, who eventually became a writer, did not hide the fact that, like the proverbial sailor, he enjoyed going ashore to such colorful-sounding establishments in China as "Nagasaki Joe's." Nor did he hide his interest in Japanese and Chinese women.

While all of this would seem to indicate McKenna had become the stereotypical enlisted sailor, he did not fit neatly into this niche. Two important qualities made McKenna stand out among the many enlisted sailors. The first was his indomitable will, his desire to rise up against seemingly great odds and continue onward even when events seemed to conspire against him. The average person might have given up and moved on without trying to overcome the many adversities placed in their path. The second distinguishing quality was his desire to be educated and to write.

McKenna set out to record his experiences in a novel. His love of machinery, his acceptance by the sailors he served with, his experiences ashore with crews at their normal haunts, his interest in other cultures, and his natural intelligence all influenced his writing. For the first time readers could understand the typical life of a sailor. His book, *The Sand Pebbles*, became a classic in naval literature and a major motion picture starring Steve McQueen in 1966.

While McKenna focused largely on the enlisted force, his work applies to anyone in the military, especially those in the sea services. *The Sailor's Homer*, in addition to giving context to McKenna's writings, includes his short story "Hour of Panic," which is difficult to find in its entirety. This biography offers more than just a frame for McKenna's work. It provides a fuller perspective on the life of all enlisted sailors of his era, showcasing the oft-forgotten good alongside the bad. Cdr. Thomas Cutler, USN (Ret.), author of *A Sailor's History of the U.S. Navy*, best sums up Richard McKenna's life and work: they are "a virtual training ground for those who must encounter other cultures in their travels and a study in human character with a particular relevance to those who wear uniforms."

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