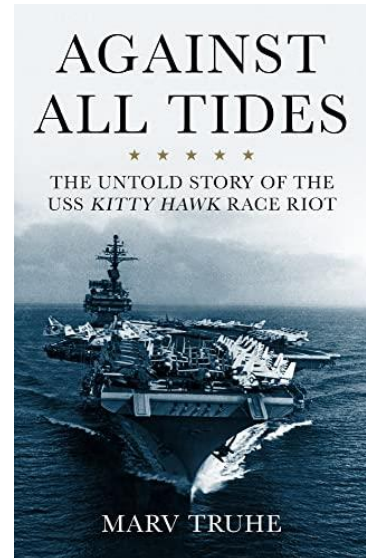


The Strategy Bridge

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Against All Tides: The Untold Story of the USS Kitty Hawk Race Riot.

Marv Truhe. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2022.



Looking forward to the calendar year 1972, Chief of Naval Operations Elmo Zumwalt saw continuing challenges facing the United States Navy. In his Z-gram No. 104, entitled “Challenge of 1972,” he looked at all that had been accomplished during his roughly eighteen months on the job as the head of the U.S. Navy.[1] He was a reformer, pushing the Navy in several directions simultaneously. He was liberalizing the living standards of sailors, adjusting liberty and grooming standards, and moving toward a more equitable fleet for the service of women and minorities. Simultaneously, the service was dealing with the “Vietnamization challenge,” as he called it in Z-gram 65, with the closing year of U.S. involvement in the conflict in Indochina approaching.[2]

Amidst the numerous issues Zumwalt said naval leaders needed to deal with were “understanding the people they lead” and the “the challenge of sociological change.” He continued, “We must continue to work within and without the Navy in seeking solutions to such problems as drug abuse, racial discrimination and bias, and the improving of our environment.”[3] Ten months later, the lack of progress on this challenge made its dramatic appearance when violence broke out on the night of 12 October 1972 aboard USS *Kitty Hawk*, a U.S. carrier on Yankee Station off the coast of Vietnam.

THE "KITTY HAWK RACE RIOT" HOLDS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN AMERICAN NAVAL HISTORY. AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE DEEP AND UNAVOIDABLE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE SAILORS AND OFFICERS OF THE NAVY AND THE SOCIETY THEY SERVED DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA, IT IS OFTEN MENTIONED IN PASSING BUT RARELY EXAMINED IN DETAIL.

The "Kitty Hawk Race Riot" holds an important place in American naval history. An illustration of the deep and unavoidable connections between the sailors and officers of the Navy and the society they served during the Civil Rights era, it is often mentioned in passing but rarely examined in detail. Marv Truhe's new book *Against All Tides: The Untold Story of the USS Kitty Hawk Race Riot* sets out to rectify that oversight and to help readers dive deeply into both the details of the history and the important questions it raises about the Navy of the 1970s as well as the Navy of the 21st century.

OVER THE YEARS, THE IMPORTANCE OF THOSE EVENTS AND THE INJUSTICES INVOLVED STAYED WITH HIM, LEADING HIM TO RETURN TO HIS CASE FILES AFTER NEARLY FIFTY YEARS TO WRITE WHAT HE DESCRIBES AS THE FIRST TELLING OF THE HISTORY FROM THE SAILOR'S POINT OF VIEW.

BUY ON AMAZON

Truhe came to the topic with a unique background. As part of his later career, he served as the Assistant Attorney General of South Dakota, running the trial division of the Attorney General's Office, before moving to a career in private practice in Rapid City, South Dakota, and eventually retiring to Colorado. However, in 1972 Truhe was a Navy Lieutenant a year and a half out of Northwestern University Law School and the Naval Justice School, serving in his first duty station as a Judge Advocate General (JAG) at the U.S. Naval Station Law Center in San Diego. Working as trial counsel at the Law Center, Lieutenant Truhe was assigned as defense counsel to five of the twenty-five African American sailors who were charged with several crimes, including rioting, following the incidents of 12 October 1972. Over the years, the importance of those events and the injustices involved stayed with him, leading him to return to his case files after nearly fifty years to write what he describes as the first telling of the history from the sailor's point of view.

On the night of 12 October 1972, as Kitty Hawk secured from operations and prepared to rest before the next day's flight operations, violence broke out below decks. It was the culmination of a perfect storm of events. The exhaustion of a crew working hard at the mission after a record 155 days on Yankee Station played a role. Inconsistent adjudication by the Captain during

nonjudicial punishment proceedings—or “Captain’s Mast”—that seemed to punish African Americans more harshly than White sailors played a role. Aggressive and inconsistent action by the Marine detachment on board the ship played a role. And a confused night of orders and countermanding orders by leaders aboard the ship played a role. These are just a handful of the causes for the violence that seemed to break out in individual cases and in small groups in numerous parts of the ship.

*TRUHE OFFERS A NEW AND DIFFERENT VIEW,
CONSTRUCTED FROM CONTEMPORARY RECORDS AND
THE MEMORIES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SAILORS.*

From his case records and interaction with the sailors involved in the incidents, Truhe reconstructs events from the deck plate level. We learn the official statistics of the incident, showing that only White sailors were injured and that no White sailors committed violent acts, are likely the result of poor record keeping. Later testimony showed that in the ship’s medical office records were not created for all of the sailors treated and choices made by the all-white master-at-arms shop (the ship’s police force) in recording accusations and incidents. We learn that White sailors also joined in on the violence and sought out Black sailors to assault. We learn of the racial epithets that were commonplace and which the Captain himself heard used repeatedly and did nothing to correct. We learn that much of the crew, perhaps even a majority, had no idea that these small and isolated brawls were happening and that the events had no operational impact: missions were launched on time the next day.

Prior authors have relied on the misleading, or at least incomplete, records and the decades-old memories of White sailors to make the “riot” label for events on Kitty Hawk stick, and some even went further to construct a narrative of an aggressive “Black Power” mutiny.[4] However, with no organization, no political goals or intent, and only a small number of the crew even aware it was happening, whether or not it was a riot at all is certainly questionable. Truhe offers a new and different view, constructed from contemporary records and the memories of African-American sailors. Readers come away from Truhe’s narrative with a more balanced and well sourced grasp of the events and contributing factors than the Navy’s official report and the congressional hearings that followed, or from other histories written by journalists with a flair for dramatic exaggeration.[5]

*AS MUCH AS IT IS A BOOK OF HISTORY, THE STRENGTH
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MEMOIR.*

As much as it is a book of history, the strength of *Against all Tides* is its form as a legal memoir. Besides the events of October 1972, Truhe also tells the story of the legal battles that would follow. It is a story backed up by his own memories, his personal involvement in key decisions and courtroom drama, and the voluminous case files. In addition to a flawed investigation and questionable charges brought against more than two dozen Black sailors, the reader sees the complexities of the military justice system, including what happens when convening authorities

make questionable decisions that tip the scales of justice toward their desired results. Throughout, we see Navy JAGs working alongside lawyers from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) retained by the defendants, leaders from Washington, D.C., with unclear understanding of the events, and documented perjury and racism from accusers.

This book gives readers a new perspective on an event described as “a big deal” by many senior leaders both in the era of the incident as well as today.[6] But it also gives a sailor’s-eye view that in many cases reveals what can only be described as injustice. This reviewer often found himself with a clenched jaw after reading portions of the story, portions that included the questionable behavior of senior officers and the structure of a system that seemed intent on letting them tip the scales. Truhe’s book raises important questions about unconscious bias, the racism of the 1960s and 1970s, and Zumwalt’s call for leaders to make an effort towards “understanding the people they lead,” not only in the 1970s but also today. And it illustrated the vagaries of the military justice system, reinforcing the wisdom of recent policy that removed much of the power of convening authorities from cases of sexual assault.

Just as the history of the U.S. Navy is more than a mere history of ships, bombs, and battles, Marvin Truhe’s *Against All Tides* is more than simply Black History or legal memoir. It is an important contribution to our understanding of American naval and maritime history. The social history of African Americans in the Navy—from the volunteer enlisted Black sailors of the age of sail, through the “contraband” heroes of the Civil War like Robert Smalls, to President Truman’s executive order to desegregate the military, and Zumwalt’s efforts at greater inclusion—is important to understanding the fleet of the 21st century. The bottom-up approach of Truhe’s book, from the deck plates as we might say in the naval service, offers important insights and a valuable addition to our understanding of the experiences of our naval past.

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