

# ADVANCE PRAISE FOR BEYOND THE SEA

“This is a book everyone should read. A true behind-the-scenes story about leadership, humility, and duty in the navy and in life. Robert ‘Navy Bob’ Roncska is a real-life American hero and role model.”

**Daniel Silva**

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

“An inspiring foundation for radical success within complex high-stakes organizations, *Beyond the Sea* speaks directly from a fascinating life of hard-won experience. With genuine humility, Bob Roncska writes from the heart, drawing on success and failure alike. We join him across a unique and fascinating sweep of decades as he personally discovers, implements, and unleashes the power of leading with love. Bob is the single most caring and invested leader with whom I have ever served. He has so much to teach us all about how to build the very best winning cultures.”

**Rear Admiral Jim Waters, USN**

(provided in my personal capacity and not  
an endorsement by the DoD or the US Navy)

“From the first time I met ‘Navy Bob,’ it was evident he was a special breed of leader living out of his heart. In *Beyond the Sea*, he has moved well beyond the typical lists of leadership traits and how-tos to invoke the most powerful force in humanity—love. Reminding us of the essential needs of the people we lead and enriching his guidance with compelling and relatable real-life stories, Bob shows the power of love in building a rich culture, getting results, and changing lives. He shows that love shapes our own motivations and awakens the commitment of others. It is what we need in our leaders today.”

**Steven C. Preston**

President and CEO, Goodwill Industries International

“Our country is blessed by patriots and people of integrity like ‘Navy Bob’ Roncska. Molded by examples of leadership, sacrifice, and love throughout

his personal life and career, Bob Roncska is a man of character and compassion and the epitome of a servant leader. His heartfelt and beautifully written book reminds us that a good life is about service and caring for the well-being of others. I am delighted he has shared his lessons learned about different styles of leadership. His experiences will surely encourage readers to approach personal and professional decisions the way he did—with humility and courage and love.”

**Anita McBride**

Former Chief of Staff to Mrs. Laura Bush, Executive in Residence,  
School of Public Affairs, American University

“I remember well President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush teaching us that government can help a person out, but it can never heal a person’s heart. They led with love and principles, and our favorite Navy Bob has captured their approach well in his must-read book on the best way to lead.”

**Dana Perino**

Former White House Press Secretary for President George W. Bush

“Bob gave the American people the gift of an exemplary career of public service, and now with this book, he gives us the gift of some extraordinary lessons on leadership, decision-making, and compassion. *Beyond the Sea* is a warm, engaging, and fun journey through Bob’s life, where he distills what he experienced and learned in ways that leave the reader with a how-to manual on becoming a successful leader.”

**Faryar Shirzad**

Tech Executive and Former Deputy National  
Security Advisor for International Economics

“Navy Bob’ Roncska has the rare and powerful combination of leadership in the crucible of naval operations and business. There’s nothing more intense and critical than commanding a nuclear sub to understand what true leadership requires. He has flawlessly captured these lessons, perfectly offering his experiences for application by leaders in any industry.”

**Alden Philbrick**

Chairman, CEO and President, Oxford Finance

“As military aide to President Bush, Navy Bob carried immense responsibility, serving with humility and compassion. It was a privilege to work alongside Bob, and it’s an honor to recommend his book—it sets the tone for the kind of leaders we need most.”

**Jared Weinstein**

Former Special Assistant to President George W. Bush  
and Founding Partner, Thrive Capital

“When I think of Navy Bob, one word immediately comes to mind: trust. This is a man who was entrusted with the entire fate of the free world at his fingertips. As you read *Beyond the Sea*, you’ll learn that the secret to earning unqualified trust—from the president on down—is leading through love and compassion. His story is as gripping as it is inspiring. Bob burned the boats for his country. This is a must-read!”

**Matthew Higgins**

Author, *Burn the Boats*

“An inspiring tale of purpose, principles, and excellence, *Beyond the Sea* will help readers live a good life full of meaning and impetus. Navy Bob’s sea stories are entertaining, informative, and prophetic. Your professional and personal journey will reap benefits from experiencing his courageous impatience and uncommon insight into the dimensions and applications of leadership.”

**Jeffrey Kuhlman, MD, MPH**

White House Physician 2000 – 2013, Physician to the Forty-Fourth  
President and Chief Quality and Safety Officer, AdventHealth

“I was honored to serve alongside Navy Bob during his time as the presidential military aide for the forty-third president. I came to know him as a remarkably dedicated leader during our many travels together. I found his personal story both insightful and compelling. I wholeheartedly endorse his focus on the central roles love and trust play in leadership and feel his refreshing perspectives make his book a must-read!”

**John I. Pray, Jr.**, Brigadier General, USAF (Ret.)

President and CEO, Operation Homefront

“Dr. Bob Roncska’s book, *Beyond the Sea: Leading with Love*, is an enthralling study of practical leadership. I have read countless leadership books, most of which are formulaic, mechanistic, or simply experiential. This is a significant paradigm shift, rightly premised on the importance of ‘love first.’ If your heart is right, inspirational leadership and organizational success will follow. Although Navy Bob credits many leaders for their influence on his leadership style, I believe the attributes he highlights in this book have been a deep-rooted part of his DNA his entire life. This book is a must-read for those who are serious about improving their leadership skills.”

**Bruce Grooms**, VADM (Ret.), USN

“This book is captivating from beginning to end. Bob’s personal story, his leadership, and the lessons he shares chart a course for anyone tasked with leading others. We all face challenges, and Bob’s message reminds us to stay the course by leading with love—cultivating compassion, building trust, and ensuring every member of the team understands their purpose.”

**Chris Webb**

Captain, U.S. Merchant Marines

“This book is a masterful tapestry of life-changing lessons from a multi-faceted career with the consistent result of success. Jesus’s command to love your neighbor as yourself is not a suggestion. Navy Bob gets it. He is a compassionate and enlightened leader who motivates with love. His book is a must-read.”

**David Sona**, Captain (Ret.), USN

“*Beyond the Sea* is outstanding—a must-read for anyone in a leadership role. Captain ‘Navy Bob’ Roncska illustrates love is foundational for successful leadership. His experiences can be utilized at the highest levels from championship athletic teams to Fortune 500 companies to healthcare organizations. This book is applicable for everyone seeking to strengthen their personal relationships and build high-functioning teams during chaotic and rapidly changing times.”

**Kevin D. Accola**, MD

Executive Director, Cardiothoracic Surgery, AdventHealth

“In his new book, *Beyond the Sea*, Captain ‘Navy Bob’ Roncska offers a riveting account of leadership built on trust and psychological safety to create highly reliable teams capable of transformational change. This book is a must-read for new and seasoned healthcare leaders alike.”

**Eric M. Deshaies, MD, MBA, FAANS, FAC**  
Neurosurgeon and Chief Physician Executive,  
AdventHealth Medical Group

“Dr. Navy Bob, my favorite heaven-sent apostle of leader-member exchange (LMX) leadership theory, paints a boldly colored story of his adventures as a hero with the heart of a *Top Gun* Maverick toward loyal companions who are loved much like Goose. Bob’s adventures illustrate our theory of following the second law of innovative leadership by collaboration.”

**Dr. George Bernard Graen**  
Chief Scientist, LMX project



# BEYOND THE SEA

**LEADING WITH LOVE**  
FROM THE  
**NUCLEAR NAVY**  
TO THE  
**WHITE HOUSE AND**  
**HEALTHCARE**

**ROBERT “NAVY BOB”  
RONCSKA, DBA**



Ballast Books, LLC  
[www.ballastbooks.com](http://www.ballastbooks.com)

Copyright © 2024 by Robert Roncska

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

The author has tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from his memories of them. To maintain their anonymity in some instances, the author has changed the names of individuals and places.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government. The public release clearance of this publication by the Department of Defense does not imply Department of Defense endorsement or factual accuracy of the material.

ISBN: 978-1-955026-20-8

Printed in Hong Kong

Published by Ballast Books  
[www.ballastbooks.com](http://www.ballastbooks.com)

For more information, bulk orders, appearances, or speaking requests, please  
email: [info@ballastbooks.com](mailto:info@ballastbooks.com)



To my wife, Stephanie;  
my father, Raymond Roncska;  
Vice Admiral Bruce E. Grooms;  
and the great men and women I served with  
throughout my career.



# CONTENTS

Author's Note i

Don't Mess with *Texas* iii

## PART ONE: FORMATIVE YEARS 1

1 — A Foundation of Love 3

2 — The Power of Words 7

3 — Part of a Team 13

4 — Love and Standards 23

5 — The Problem with Fear 31

## PART TWO: INVALUABLE LESSONS OF LEADERSHIP STYLES 41

6 — Awakening 43

7 — The Erosion of Trust 57

8 — The Strength of a Brotherhood 67

9 — Finding a Purpose 73

## PART THREE: LEADING WITH LOVE AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS 81

10 — A Sense of Belonging 83

11 — The Need for Compassion 93

12 — Built on Trust 99

PART FOUR: APPLYING LEADERSHIP LESSONS 109

13 — The Effects of Apathy 111

14 — Time for an Intervention 117

15 — Where the Magic Happens 131

16 — Building Leaders 143

17 — Fairwinds and Following Seas 151

PART FIVE: LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE SEA 163

18 — Beyond the Sea 165

19 — Making a Difference 169

20 — Building Relationships 179

21 — Final Thoughts 189

Epilogue 195

Acknowledgments 197

Appendix 201

Endnotes 203

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

*“We can’t help everyone, but everyone can help someone.”*

—RONALD REAGAN

As I reflect on more than half a century of life, I am so thankful for the many individuals who helped shape and mold me. My character and mind-set directly result from the people and events that left indelible marks on my psyche. I am a product of good and bad experiences, but the kindness of others has woven the tapestry of my life and served as my fuel. I feel driven to emulate the goodness I have experienced and multiply it exponentially for others.

While writing this book, I had a minor stroke that served as a wake-up call. Fortunately, I have recovered completely. However, it reminded me that life is precious and precarious, and I want to spend my remaining days serving others and leaving a legacy of love and encouragement. In this book, which is part memoir, part leadership blueprint, I wish to share my journey in hopes that you, too, will be inspired to seek ways to uplift and serve others, making each day memorable and meaningful for those in your circle of influence.

Throughout, you will read many of my favorite quotes, which reflect my passion and support the message I wish to convey. I hope that within these stories of my life, you will see the beauty of the people who have taught me

about love and leaving a legacy. I want to honor these heroes of mine by demonstrating how they have influenced my thoughts, words, and actions. In this work, my children and other readers will come to know and feel the impact of the prominent people who have shown me what it means to love unconditionally and sacrificially. May it serve as an inspiration—after all, helping others is the core of living a good life.

# DON'T MESS WITH *TEXAS*

*“Of all the branches of men in the forces there is none which shows more devotion and faces grimmer perils than the submariners.”*

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

“This isn’t good,” I whispered to my executive officer as a sub-hunting aircraft flew directly overhead, taking up the full view of our 377-foot fast-attack nuclear submarine’s periscope.

I swallowed hard and felt my pulse quicken, but I knew I needed to project a calm and steady presence. I managed to order “DOWN SCOPE!” in a swift, loud voice.

As we waited, listening with our highly sensitive sonar for additional flyovers, I looked around the silent room at the thirty sets of eyes trained on me. I could feel my crew’s fear and apprehension as they awaited my direction.

Some of the faces that stared back were old and weathered, but many were the fresh faces of young men who had joined the navy straight out of high school. They hailed from states across the nation, including our ship’s namesake, Texas. My sailors were the best our country had to offer. I thought about their fathers and mothers who had entrusted me with their care.

Our two-billion-dollar, Virginia-class submarine was on a classified mission in unfriendly waters thousands of miles from her home port of

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Our task was to gather information about the area, collect special signals of interest, and observe our adversary conduct a certain secret event. The mission required gliding unseen beneath the surface in close proximity to numerous formidable combatants. It was a tall but achievable order for a ship with the motto “Don’t mess with *Texas!*”

During the operation, we had deviated from the standard protocol of a continuous 360-degree periscope sweep, opting instead to direct the periscope’s limited restricted field of vision toward our adversary’s activities in anticipation of the imminent event. I had based this decision on the examples set by previous commanding officers during similar high-stakes missions, and I considered the departure from normal procedure an acceptable risk.

But when I detected a subtle, audible shift in the radar noises emanating from the speaker in the control room, I ordered my officer of the deck to do a 360-rotational view with the periscope, then focused on the dozens of electronic boards surrounding me. That was when the enemy aircraft filled our screen.

If we were spotted, our adversary would likely box us in and force an emergency surface, spelling the end of our critical mission and causing public scrutiny and embarrassment of our fleet and, more broadly, our government. Counter-detection could even jeopardize the safety of our ship and, worst of all, my crew.

As we waited below the murky waters, listening for sounds of the plane’s return, my mind raced and my pulse boomed in my ears. Timing was critical to our mission. In fact, I wondered if we’d already missed the event we were there to observe. With our periscope down, it was impossible to know.

It felt like an eternity, but after a few minutes ticked by with no indication that the aircraft had circled back, I ordered the scope to be raised again.

Tension filled the air as my operations officer studied his surveillance equipment in the adjacent room. His deep voice suddenly broke the silence as he broadcast a pre-rehearsed counter-detection alert: “Control, this is the operations officer. FIRECRACKER! FIRECRACKER! FIRECRACKER!”

It was what I had been dreading. I knew that to avoid catastrophe, it was time to take evasive measures, though I was reluctant to fail at our critical mission with its large price tag. For a moment, I considered that my operations officer might be wrong and that our adversary had detected something other than our ship. But the chances of such a coincidence seemed near zero.

My gut told me they had us and we needed to act. I knew exactly what to say. I had played this scenario out in my head many times and rehearsed the order: “Make your depth four hundred feet. All ahead standard. Left full rudder. This is the captain. I have the conn.”



But before I articulated the words, my XO, Gary Montalvo, anticipated my intention and stopped me. Stepping in front of me, he held up his hand and said in a voice loud enough for all to hear, “Captain, Captain, wait! We’re already screwed; let’s see if we are pregnant.”

Gary knew that my decision to deviate from standard procedure made me anxious to ensure the safety of the crew. While he thought there was a good chance that we had been counter-detected, he also saw what the guilt of my recent decision caused me to miss—the extended time it took for the aircraft to circle back was odd and gave us reason to hope that we had *not* been seen. We might not be “pregnant” after all.

Gary didn’t want to flinch without just cause. He knew the decision I was about to make would be irreversible and mean mission failure. My actions would be critiqued by high-ranking officials, and if subsequent analysis showed that we had not been counter-detected, my decision would be used as a textbook example of what not to do on a mission.

In order to protect me, Gary put his own credibility on the line and openly challenged my authority. Since we had a long-established relationship of trust and respect, there was no part of me that doubted he spoke out of love, loyalty, and concern for me and the crew. So, I listened while Gary explained his thoughts.

Still, I was uneasy with the idea of delaying, and the weight of the seemingly no-win situation pressed down upon me.

Then, another sailor spoke up. “Maybe it wasn’t us the aircraft detected. Something doesn’t make sense.”

Several others began to chime in.

As they spoke, I became convinced; my original assessment of the situation didn’t feel right. I finally agreed: “Let’s see if we are pregnant.”

We stayed put—which was far more stressful than running. We felt conspicuous and vulnerable in our steel capsule, all the time expecting our adversary to react. But they continued their operation as if unaware of our presence. It seemed my XO had been right.

At the conclusion of the event, we returned to our home port, riding high on the accomplishment of a successfully completed mission vital to national security.

But what had given Gary the courage to risk speaking up? In short, mutual trust and understanding. He knew that I would listen to what he had to say rather than punish him because I knew he would only speak out of the best of intentions. We had each other’s backs. We shared a sense of purpose, foundational principles, and a relentless drive for excellence. Gary and the other members of my crew protected each other like family. We’d

built a high-functioning culture that allowed us to achieve success even in great moments of crisis. Our culture was legendary.

In this book, I will provide tools you can implement with your own teams. Research shows that leadership *can* be taught.<sup>1</sup> If you use the basic principle of familial love as the core of your mission, you can build a legendary culture. I will offer many examples of how caring for my team members led to success and extraordinary results.

Of course, love alone isn't enough. I will also explain how trust, standards, purpose, and accountability all play a role. Individually, these foundational principles cannot yield success; they need each other to flourish. Building a culture with all of them is in itself an act of love.

Though I focus on stories of success, I believe it's important to reflect on times of failure and poor examples of leadership as well. I have come to realize my failures happened when I lost sight of the necessary foundation of love. In those moments, I focused on the mission, myself, or avoiding unpleasant consequences. The Bible's well-known chapter on love says, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth."<sup>2</sup> I've found that when I act on what love *is*, instead of what love is *not*, my results are more significant.

I cannot emphasize enough that the story I've just shared with you would not have been possible without a culture rooted in love. If Gary hadn't believed I cared for him, he would have hung me out to dry and allowed me to make a decision he believed could be wrong. If the sailor who supported the XO hadn't felt safe speaking up and hadn't known his CO cared for him, he never would have risked the possible backlash.

Prior to me taking command, the USS *Texas* was the worst-performing ship in the squadron, but in just a year and a half, my team and I turned that record around, making the *Texas* the top ranked of the squadron's ten submarines. We also had the highest retention in the Pacific Fleet for two consecutive years and scored the best possible grade on a rigorous nuclear engineering exam. It wasn't due to my intelligence, tactical prowess, or charisma that USS *Texas* succeeded; instead, it was my ability to nurture strong connections based on familial love. I'll give concrete examples of how we accomplished this transformation. I'll also share how leaders from the Navy SEALs to the White House inspired their teams with unconditional love. Lastly, I will show you how this formula helped me, as executive director of quality and safety for one of the largest healthcare systems in the US, to transform cultures in healthcare.

