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Reviving the Chiefs' Mess

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First, I am obviously not a chief petty officer, nor have I ever been one. But I have been a voracious consumer of chiefly product for 27 years. Thus, I think I am qualified to advance informed opinions regarding how well chiefs, writ large, are carrying out their responsibilities at sea. Some believe that the Chiefs' Mess - the corpus formed by all the individual chiefs assigned to a ship - is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. We see the Chiefs' Mess as a powerful engine, deeply embedded in the ship and able to move critical levers with a collective flex of its will.

But today, this is not what really happens. Rather, the typical Chiefs' Mess nowadays is by and large ineffective. Perhaps more correctly, it is not doing what it was designed to do, or what it historically did. Of course, some would emphatically disagree with this assessment. But when asked on what metric they base their glowing views of Chiefs' Mess performance, it becomes apparent that they don't have much to offer. Mostly, their disagreement reflects an admiration for individual chiefs rather than an evolved idea of how a given Chiefs' Mess produces desired effects.

This lack of introspection regarding what is commonly referred to as "the backbone of the Navy" is somewhat understandable. After all, this topic is an uncomfortable one for many. In the end it may be easier to go along with the accepted idea that the chiefs, both individually and collectively, are the foundation on which all success in ships is built. To look unblinkingly at what may be a downward trend seems an uncomfortable-even disloyal-indictment of sorts. If we are even asking these questions, are we not by extension certifying that some problem exists?

Demonstrable evidence, however, does point that way. While the recent trend of poor Inspection and Survey (INSURV) performance is merely a single example of a decline in Chiefs' Mess efficacy, it is a significant one. One would be hard-pressed to find a chief who would not firmly agree that INSURV, which is fundamentally a material inspection of a ship and her equipment, is mostly the responsibility of the Chiefs' Mess. After all, the chiefs own, maintain, and operate all the examined equipment and systems. Commanding officers are ultimately responsible, but it is naive to think that the Chiefs' Mess is not the fulcrum on which the success or failure of INSURV rests.

This is not to suggest that this overall decline in performance can be attributed only to a shortfall in chiefly effect. Other important causes can and should concern us. Still, it seems certain that one of the key reasons must be a diminution in the capability of the Chiefs' Mess to meet the prescribed standard. So, if such a decline exists, what is the cause? Is it the result of some change in the individual chief? Is it somehow connected to changes in how Chiefs' Messes are organized and led? More important, what has happened to drive these changes, and is the benefit of those changes worth the cost?

From Technician to Generalist

The truth seems to be that chiefs are now less technically expert in their respective ratings than they were in the not-too-distant past. Schooling has been drastically and regularly cut at every level for some time now. Since they know less, why would anyone presume that they can maintain complex systems as well? Why should it be a surprise or an embarrassment that the results of INSURV are not flattering?

Average electronics-based technicians now are mere shadows, technically speaking, of their predecessors from the 1980s and 1990s. In those days, technicians spent months, if not years, learning the equipment and the system, inside and out, before they even arrived in a ship. Prior to the mid 1990s, all electronics-based technicians went to Advanced Electronics Technical Core (AETC) School before they even arrived at their respective "A" Schools. AETC lasted for six months and covered fundamental electronics topics, ranging from AC and DC current to solid state, digital, and superhetrodyne circuits. Students even learned how to solder, which may sound trivial, but isn't.

AETC is now self-paced, computer-based, and typically completed quite easily within a month. It is an empty shell. Further, the content of "A" school, where the technician begins to work specifically on rating topics, has been trimmed, too. We no longer teach students fundamentals of synchro and servomechanisms or motors and generators. Rather, we teach "black box" replacement. This goes for only a discrete group of highly technical ratings, but similar changes have

taken place in virtually every rating, technical or not. In short, our chiefs, through no fault of their own, have arrived, over time, at a place where they simply know less about their equipment.

Further compounding this reduction in formal education, and for complex reasons tied to concerns like retention and new distribution paradigms, enlisted technicians are no longer rigorously detailed into rating-related billets as they transition from sea to shore duty. Sonar Technicians are just as likely to be sent to non-technical billets at a naval hospital or bachelor officers' quarters as they are to be sent to an Afloat Training Group or school house where they would train others. We also no longer send technicians to regional maintenance centers, where in the past they helped to repair equipment on ships, learning immeasurably along the way. Now, we contract that job out to civilians.

Can we therefore suppose that this sort of approach wouldn't interrupt the technician's professional building process? Can anyone imagine that we are not creating a situation in which those shore-based technicians, quickly becoming senior enough to soon assume positions of at-sea leadership, will be returning to ships having forgotten much and learned little?

Interpreting the Signals

All of us respond to the signals transmitted by the system. If we believe that to succeed we must go to non-technical positions or that we need to get a degree of some sort, then this is what we will do. We all want to succeed, and if we are told by word or signal that to do so we must check specific boxes, then those most competitive will make sure the boxes get checked. Who is thinking about, much less looking at, the opportunity cost? What seems to be required to become a chief today is what might be termed "broadening." What have you done, other than spend time at sea, working in your rating? Have you done a tour as a recruiter? Have you trained those recruits? Do you have a suitably varied service record? More important, where is your degree? And what, by the way, do you do to improve your local community?

If you don't have compelling answers to these questions, your chances of being selected begin to dim. Our Sailors get this. On the other hand, being a technical expert in and of itself is no longer a path to success, no matter how invaluable you may be. Since 1990, not a single Senior Chief Sonar Technician, trained as an Acoustic Intelligence (ACINT) expert (the absolute *crème de la crème* of our antisubmarine experts), has been selected for Master Chief. Expertise in one's assigned rating is not rewarded, and this observation is not wasted on our young sailors.

There are only so many hours in a day, and it makes sense that if you are pursuing that degree or coaching little league, it is probably true that you are taking that time out of learning how to be technical expert or honing your managerial and leadership skills. The truth of this gets submerged today. In our promotion deliberations, if we conclude that you have good evaluations, you must be a fine technician and an experienced leader, even if you haven't spent much time working at either. This is not to suggest that these other pursuits aren't worthy. But it does suggest that the efficient, safe, and professional operation of ships and the provision of consistent leadership to the sailors who serve is more worthy. It is, after all, why we even have Chief Petty Officers in the first place.

Is the Sum Still Greater than its Parts?

Even though individual chiefs are less expert in their respective tasks, they do bring a more broad perspective to the Chiefs' Mess when they arrive. Is this counterbalancing the loss of technical acumen? Is the synergy—which may have, in the past, meant that the sum exceeded the parts—still there? Two legitimate questions to ask in any command are: "What does the Chiefs' Mess assure in this ship? And what do they provide that requires little or no officer involvement?" The captain should be able to ask the Chiefs' Mess to take care of something important, and in an idealized world, that would be the end of it. Actually, the captain shouldn't even have to ask. The chiefs would know what needed to be done, without signal, simply through their collective breadth of knowledge and experience.

This is not what happens. The sum is no longer greater than its parts, and that collective engine of expertise and experience is faltering. Indeed, to guarantee success it has become necessary to find some new engine to bind and drive forward motion. Short of that synergistic Chiefs' Mess, the disconnected nodes and fragments and individuals of a ship are now, we hope, driven in the right direction by a few individuals who vary ship-to-ship or unit-to-unit. Certainly, some of these driving individuals may be chiefs, but the idea of the Mess being the engine that organizes and informs all activity is not generally the case.

Who Leads the Chiefs' Mess?

In the past, leadership of the Mess fell to the "alpha" chiefs of any given Mess. The strongest leaders were typically highly experienced, highly respected Senior and Master Chiefs. They drove and bound the Mess, teaching their juniors and junior officers, too, and setting the ship's agenda. That has changed. Simply being a natural leader has been deemed insufficient, and so the Command Master Chief (CMC) position was established. The idea was to professionalize and align leadership of the Chiefs' Mess. Unfortunately, it appears that the characteristics necessary for selection to the CMC program are not necessarily yielding the sort of leadership that may be required to ignite synergy. We now have leadership that may be aligned with approved Navy views, but we have also experienced a concomitant loss in the sort of charismatic leadership that was the natural order in the past.

To become a Command Master Chief - the single official leader of the Chiefs' Mess in any command - one must apply for selection. It might seem counterintuitive, but no board looks at the universe of chiefs and picks only those deemed to be best of the best. Rather, CMCs are selected only from the pool of applicants, whoever they might be. It makes sense that there may be a difference, and there probably is, between some of the chiefs who want to be a CMC and some of the chiefs who are ideally suited but for whatever reason don't apply.

With regard to selection, candidates should be qualified in multiply warfare areas (even if this dilutes you in terms of experience; many of the chiefs you lead could have more time in, for example, combat ships than you do). You should also have a good record, as measured by competitive performance. But how do we know if you can lead other chiefs? Surely we all have served with Command Master Chiefs who were disastrously ill-equipped to lead the complex and disparate people who make up the Mess.

While being a CMC may be broadly analogous with being a Commanding Officer, the process for sorting the elect from the manqué is different. Command boards at least get to see how an officer has done across a range of at-sea leadership billets. For officers, the standard is and always has been sustained superior performance at sea, as measured by performance in increasingly complex leadership positions. On the other hand, how can a board know if a chief has the right leadership characteristics? How can a board know whether it has the best possible competitors for the few CMC billets chosen in a given year? Do they even consider whether the applicants have spent time at sea? We all have worked with CMCs who have little, if any, sea time.

Reversing the Decline

Several connected issues have had an impact on the decline in performance of the Chiefs' Mess.

First, we have established policies and procedures that have diminished the technical expertise that chiefs bring to the Mess.

Second, it is not evident that having broad, degree-bearing Chief Petty Officers has in some way made up for the diminution in technical acumen; consider INSURV results.

Third, we have established a Mess leadership position that probably does not assure only the best of the best are chosen to preside over individual Messes.

At a minimum, we need to exercise more care in how chiefs are groomed and selected and what messages we are transmitting to them along their path. We should be careful to more clearly reward attributes that have historically been desirable in Chief Petty Officers; recognized leadership, technical expertise, sea time. These chiefs, and only these chiefs, should be rewarded with the privilege of serving in afloat Chiefs' Messes. From these select few we should select those qualified to lead the other tigers.

As for Chiefs' Mess leadership, Commanding Officers should be given a quota - a very small quota - of CMC nominations each year. The small number would limit the amount of "gifting" that could occur, and it would save the CO from endlessly justifying himself to those not nominated. From this pool, the immediate superior in the chain of command would select a smaller number of people for ultimate CMC training and assignment. This method would almost guarantee that only the right chiefs ever get to be CMCs.

Further, selection as Command Master Chief should not guarantee repeat assignment to CMC billets. After all, while some will arrive truly ready for the job and some may eventually grow into it, others will be simply not up to the task, and they never will be. These should be prevented from further CMC assignment, but this is not what happens now. Indeed, a provision in the rules allows for CMCs to be transferred, without prejudice, out of a troubled situation. This esoteric rule was probably implemented to guard the reputation of the CMC community, but it only serves to guarantee that "once a CMC, always a CMC." In the end, it is far easier to fire a captain for incompetence than it is to fire a Command Master Chief.

This discussion, of course, only scratches the surface. Other significant questions remain to be addressed, and should be. Evidence suggests that the Chiefs' Mess is not doing what we want it to do. And that means a public dialogue needs to be undertaken. After all, if the expert operation of our ships and the leadership and training of our junior officers and young sailors is not our priority, then we have truly lost our way.