

The author is not identified, but if you served during the 1940's and through the 1960's, I think you will probably nod your head in agreement that the author knows what he is talking about. Some of what he writes actually began changing during the late 1960's... and by the early 1970's "political correctness" had permanently surfaced its ugly head. It's a long read, but I think it's a good one.

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The Navy

Before you get all up in my face 'bout what I'm 'bout to ramble on about, lemme first say that I know the human memory tends to heavily discriminate the stuff it stores, cataloguing things the way it wants to and reserving special places for certain select events, sounds, sights, smells, and scenes. And not only does it selectively edit things in and out, but it tends to embellish events with its individualized set of filters, ethics, morals, priorities, and tastes, magnifying some episodes and minimizing others.

O.K. That said, I recently came across something that triggered memories of my early experiences in the Navy. 'Smatterafact, lotsa things do that as I get older. My holistic retrospect on my 24 years in the USN is quite positive, and I often willingly go back to relive what were my most exciting and satisfying times . . . all the way from a raw unranked boot in San Diego to the guy responsible for maintenance and repair of elec comm & crypto equipment for CincPac, SubPac, CinCPacFlt, Com7thFlt, and several other high-powered commands in Hawaii.

Hair all shaved off. Personal effects confiscated. Clothes that didn't fit. Strangers yelling stuff at me I didn't fully understand. Food that tasted like stewed dirt. Beds that spoke of the hundreds who'd slept in 'em before. Marching in formation with guys wearing exactly the same clothes I had to wear, carrying an out-of-date rifle with which I had to master and demonstrate skills useful in no situation my fertile imagination could conceive.

My entire personality dragged out, ridiculed, abused, and tossed on a scrap heap only to be replaced by one that knee-jerked instantly to commands and single-mindedly carried out lawful orders, even though no one had ever explained to me what exactly an unlawful order might have been. No longer was I a college boy pursuing liberal arts and intellectual growth but a cog in a 72-man machine dedicating every single waking moment to causing no demerits to the company during inspections, drills, skill training, or parades.

Home was a narrow cot in an open-bay barracks featuring gang showers and rows of sinks, urinals, and commodes with no provisions for individuality, much less privacy. Lights out happened when the Company Commander decided we'd absorbed enough humiliation for that day, that our lockers were properly stowed, that our shoes were properly shined, our barrack was properly cleaned, and that we clearly understood that we were still useless raw meat that some unfortunate Chief Petty Officer would one day be burdened with molding into halfway decent sailors.

Reveille was 0500, even before the seagulls which swooped down to pick up the lungers off the grinder were up yet. Formation was 20 minutes later, after shaving and dressing and fixing bunks and being reminded that the coming night would indeed be damned short if we screwed up ANYthing that day.

Breakfast was hard-boiled eggs and beans and soggy toast one day, chipped-something-or-other on soggy toast the next, greasy fried mystery stuff with soggy toast the next, hamburger with tomato sauce on soggy toast the next, and all served with something vaguely white called "reconstituted milk" and a dark, vile, burnt-smelling but otherwise tasteless fluid some would-be comedian labeled "Coffee." One good thing, though you could have as much as you could eat in the 15 minutes you were allowed inside for breakfast. Lunch and supper were always filling and nutritious, even if often unpalatable, indefinable, and unrecognizable.

It was cold all morning out marching around toward no place in particular and hot in the barracks at night when the giant inventory of our individual and collective miscreancies was recited to us by members of our own group temporarily endowed with positional authority over us.

And I loved it. I'd go back and do it again if they'd let me and I thought my digestive system could survive it. Yes, I loved it, yet I counted the days, the hours, the minutes that I had left to endure in that young-adult Boy Scout camp before I could go see the real Navy and have some fun . . . AND get paid.

Once actually out IN the real Navy, I was astonished at the importance, the almost religious reverence, that people in khakis showered upon two things: control over the free time of non-rated personnel, and rust. To me the sole purpose of Chief Petty Officers was to ensure that anybody in pay grades E-1, E-2, and E-3 get dirty as soon as possible after morning quarters and NEVER have an opportunity to go ashore and act like sailors (i.e., drink beer and bring great discredit upon their beloved United States Navy).

My first assignment after boot camp was on a tanker whose duty was to fuel ships anchored beyond the breakwater, deliver AvGas and MoGas to detachments on islands off the California Coast (San Clemente, Santa Catalina, and others), and defuel ships going into the yards for overhauls or extensive refits.

When not involved in the specific act of transferring fuel in one direction or another, my primary value was in ferreting out and annihilating pockets of rust everywhere on the ship except in the engineering spaces, where my red-striped non-rated peers busied themselves at the same thing, except that their enemy was oil, grease, steam, and water leaks.

Six months later, now a fully-fledged sailor in all respects with three white stripes on my left arm, I got orders to Electronics Technician School at Treasure Island (San Francisco), where my primary duty was to listen to fatally boring lectures on basic electricity and make absolutely certain that my shoes were spitshined at all times.

A giant conspiracy existed amongst the staff, primarily the CPOs, at the school command to do everything in their power to keep those of us who had actually been to sea from contaminating the ones who'd come to school straight from recruit training. The strategy consisted mainly of ensuring that we fail enough quizzes and tests to require our spending all our evenings at night study, thereby keeping us from going into town or to the club to fill our bellies with beer and our eyes with the silicone boobies of Broadway.

Probably what amazed me even more than the fanatical interest that Schools Command CPOs had in ascertaining that everyone's shoes reflected light better than polished onyx was the number of people who couldn't take the pressure of boot camp or service schools and went to extreme lengths, such as bed wetting, to get out of the Navy and go back home to Mama.

Other than its unnatural interest in shoe shines and haircuts, tho, the Navy's plan was beginning to make sense to me. First you got stripped down nekkid, both inside and out, all your strengths were identified and your weaknesses exposed, you were shown how to do a job, and then you were sent out into the field to see if you could hack it. In front of you at all times were both good examples and bad examples: you saw the carrot side reflected in the gold hashmarks on Chiefs who'd learned how to work within the system and you saw the stick side in the red ones on career E-5s who either couldn't cut it or didn't know how not to get caught.

Everybody smoked. Everybody drank beer. Everybody had a disgustingly nasty coffee cup. Everybody cussed, except when the chaplain or some officer's wife was around. You did your job, and if you were good at it, you got pay increases through promotions. You pissed people off and didn't get the message, you stayed in the lower pay grades and got really good at handling brooms, trash cans, and scrub brushes.

The Navy I joined had the old-fashioned Chiefs, those keepers of tradition, guardians of ancient lore, solvers of problems . . . those grouchy, irascible, sarcastic, but indispensable guys who'd been around longer than anybody else on the ship, except maybe the Captain. They knew where everything was, how everything worked, what everything was for, and who was responsible for what.

Becoming a CPO was really a big deal in that Navy, involving a time-honored festival of near-orgiastic silliness designed to close out the years of irresponsible ignorance with one last naked dance through the fires of humiliation and excoriation to emerge reborn as full-grown lion guarding the gates of the repository of all useful knowledge.

Amongst the Chief's primary duties were making sailors out of farm kids and smartalecs and goldbricks and Mama's boys, showing them the skills and qualities required for them to fill his shoes when the time came for him to retire his coffee cup. The Chief nominally reported to a young butterbar whom he had the awesome challenge of transforming into a leader of those other young men he was making sailors of.

Chief reported to the Ensign, but he delivered the real status to the Ensign's boss, usually a seasoned Lieutenant or Lieutenant Commander.

Chief generally had a special relationship with both the XO and CO, both of whom sought his advice and assistance in all sorts of problems and situations. His niche and his positional authority were well established and completely understood by every member of the crew. Any white hat entering the Goat Locker had better have his hat in his hand and a damned good reason, and Heaven help him if he forgot to knock first.

Today . . . I'm not so sure I'd make it. Chief no longer has that special relationship with CO and XO, and he rarely does business directly with his department head. As soon as he sheds his dungarees and shifts into khakis, he enters a confusing political arena of Senior Chiefs, Master Chiefs, Warrant Officers, and LDOs all doing what the Chief used to do. He's simply gone from technician to supervisor, and his initiation has become as watered down as his authority.

In the Navy of the 50s and 60s, traditions aboard ship were honored, cherished, and observed. Various initiations occurred from time to time, such as making Chief or crossing the equator, during which rookies or newbies were ritually cleansed, humiliated, and physically abused to degrees generally powers of 10 more severe than anything the Gitmo terrorists ever had to endure from their guards.

Such episodes served the purpose of reminding every member of the crew that new experiences, new threats, new life-altering events could bring even the proudest and strongest to his knees. And when the purging was over, the initiates were welcomed as brothers, tougher than before because of what they'd learned they could withstand if necessary.

But it was a good Navy, a Navy that won wars, intimidated dictators, brought relief to victims in faraway lands, had fun, and proudly carried the flag. And I loved it. But I'm not entirely sure that what we have today is the natural child of that generation.

In 1960 if you got drunk on liberty, your shipmates got you back to your rack and woke you up in time for you to make morning quarters. If you found yourself in jail, the Chief or your DivOff would bail you out and work with the local cops to fix whatever you broke, or stole, or lost, or insulted, or forgot to pay for.

Today you get drunk and you wind up in a rehab facility with entries in your service jacket that'll haunt you for years.

Same thing for behavior on the ship. In 1960, you mouth off to the Chief or get caught goldbricking one too many times and you got a blanket party, or extra duty, or both until you got your act together. You also didn't see much of the quarterdeck or the brow, and you could forget that recommendation to take the next rating exam.

Today you act like a jerk and you wind up in a seminar, or a counseling center, or a psych ward and they load you up with a ton of paper that follows you until you abandon ship and go to work for IBM or AT&T or the local sanitation service.

In 1960 you came out with four-letter words and some heat in your voice toward what you saw as petty rules or regs or some would-be politician, and people either agreed with you or stayed away from you 'til you calmed down.

Today you say "Hell" or "Damn" and you'd better be talking about either the Revelation or furry little aquatic animals with big teeth and flat tails.

In 1960, when they were in schools or on shore duty, sailors lived in barracks and ate in chow halls. Students in today's Navy or sailors on shore duty live in hotels like the dormitories rich college kids used to have in the 60s. They're called "Unaccompanied Enlisted Personnel Housing Facilities" and look like Ramada Inns. And sailors today eat in "Dining Facilities" like debutantes, and there aren't any grouchy old Navy cooks in the back stirring the pots or grumbling mess cooks scrubbing pans and swabbing decks.

In 1960, sailors leaving the ship or station on liberty wore the uniform of the day, either Dress Blues or Whites. Officers and senior enlisted were often privileged to wear civilian clothes ashore, but not always.

Today's sailors wear cammies most of the time, and it's hard to find a sailor in dress uniform any more.

In 1960, the Navy Exchange was there to provide low-cost uniform and toiletry items for sailors and their families. Selections were limited, but quality was good and savings were considerable on things such as booze, cigarettes, candy, and trinkets.

Today the typical Navy Exchange is a poorly managed, badly stocked, miserably staffed business failure that sees more merchandise go out the back door in a lunch bag than out the front with a sales receipt on it.

You want selection and a good price, go to Wal-Mart. Commissaries aren't much better except for meat and cosmetics.

In 1960 many officers had at least some experience in enlisted ranks or engines or management and were patriotic military men who commanded respect by understanding the jobs their personnel did and staying out of their way while they did them, then sending them on liberty when they got the job done.

Many of today's officers are politicians who are afraid to say what's actually on their minds for fear of offending someone's delicate racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious sensitivities. They're generally much better at leaping to premature cover-my-six conclusions than making well-researched but tough decisions.

In 1960 sailors went to night clubs and titty bars and kept pin-up pictures of girlfriends or movie stars in their lockers.

Today the girls go to sea with the guys and hope they bought the right brand of condom. Any sailor looking at a picture of a girl today is doing it either on his blackberry via e-mail or on a porn site with his laptop.

In 1960 you got medals for doing something extraordinary, such as saving lives or preventing disasters or killing and capturing enemies in battle.

Today many sailors get medals for not being late for work for more than 6 months at a stretch and never coming up positive on a random drug test.

In 1960 many sailors were involved in collecting human and signals intelligence and analyzing it. Today the MAAs collect urine and civilian contractor labs analyze it.

In 1960 we had clear-cut rules of engagement and unambiguous descriptive names for our enemies. The basic rule of engagement was to wipe out the enemy by whatever means available, and we called them "Red Bastards" or "Commie Sonsabitches" or words our grandmothers wouldn't like to know we used.

Today we call people who want to destroy us, cut our heads off, enslave our women, end our way of life, "Aggressors" or "Combatants" or "Opposing Forces" or "Islamic Warriors" to avoid offending them. Our sailors are no longer allowed to kick ass and take names, only to Mirandize and make comfortable.

In 1960, victory meant that the enemy was either completely dead or no longer had the ability to resist, that all his machines and networks were captured or out of commission, that he had surrendered or been locked up, that the fight was over and he accepted defeat.

Today we declare victory when the opposing forces call time out, insist that it was all a big mistake, and that they'll stop resisting if we rebuild their cities, their refineries, their factories, their infrastructure.

The Navy I joined was easy to understand. It was organized and straightforward. The hard workers got the bennies and the shirkers got the brooms, and everybody in between was anonymous and safe so long as his shoes stayed shined and his hair never touched his ears or his collar. Chiefs ran the place and officers did the paperwork until required to put on their zebra shirts and referee bouts between CPOs engaged in pissing contests.

Anything a sailor needed to know, the Navy taught him, from tying knots to operating fire-control computers on 16-inch guns. A sailor never had to worry about what he was going to wear; that decision was made for him and published in the Plan of the Day, which was read every morning at quarters, usually by the Chief, the source of continuity, stability, and purpose for everyone in the division.

Today a kid can't even get in the Navy unless he finished high school and has a clean record with law enforcement. He's expected to be keyboard literate from day 1, and he speaks a completely different language from what his Korean- or VietNam-War grandfather spoke, no matter if that was English or what. He doesn't play baseball, or football, or hockey; he plays golf, and tennis . . . more often on a Wii than on a course or court. The modern Navy doesn't keep people around to dump trashcans and scrub galleys and clean heads; that's done by civilian contractors.. And the majority of CPOs today are expected to either HAVE a degree of some kind or be working toward getting one soon.

Today's successful Navy non-com is a paper-chasing button pusher, not a sweat-stained commie killer.

Today's sailor is in touch with his "significant others" by e-mail or cell fone almost anywhere he's sent. The idea of a 6-month deployment to Southeast Asia with no contact other than snail mail seems cruel and unusual torture to him.

No, it's doubtful I could succeed in today's Navy as I did in yesterday's. I prefer my triggers to be on pistols and rifles, not on joysticks controlling surveillance drones and other bots. My policy as a division officer was never to tell a tech to do something that I couldn't do myself, much less that I didn't understand. Today I'd have to learn a completely new vernacular and become familiar with a strange culture before even TALKing to my troops.

And though it dates me and cements me into a mindset that's fallen out of fashion, I think I liked the Navy that I joined better than the one we have today. Yes, of course the capabilities we have now are wider, more sophisticated, more potentially effective. But they're more fragile, too, and techs can't even FIND the discreet components in a printed circuit board any more, much less actually isolate a bad one and replace it.

I've let technology pass me by, willingly and completely. My skill set is anchored in tubes and resistors and 18-gauge wire and cathode-ray tubes and hand-held multi-meters and bench-mounted o-scopes that weighed 120 lbs. But still, I LIKE those old Chiefs with the pot bellies and the filthy coffee cups and the scarred knuckles and the can-do attitude backed up by years of hands-on experience, both on the job and in the bars all over the world.

I LIKED guys like Harry Truman who weren't afraid to make hard choices and fire egomaniacs and take personal responsibility for their own decisions. It was GOOD to see people standing on a beach or a pier waving when the ship pulled in, knowing there'd be dancing and singing and fistfighting and dangerous liaisons, not snipers with Russian-made rifles and lunatics planting IEDs along the streets. Yes, we lived with the omnipresent fear of instant nuclear annihilation, mutually assured destruction, uncertainty about tomorrow, and all that.

But it seemed that the government was on our side, that our country did good things throughout the world, that the US was the best place to live on the planet and our presidents didn't feel they had to apologize for a goddam thing to anygoddambody.

It's not so much that I want a do-over; I just want teachers, and senators, and taxi-drivers, and clerks, and college professors, and congressmen, and judges, and doctors, and kids growing up to see my country the way we all saw it in 1960 . . . as a strong, charitable, fun-loving, loyal, don't-piss-me-off place with no patience for petty tyrants and loonies.

I wonder what my British counterpart might feel about the direction HIS country's taken in the last 60 years or so. Probably much the same as what the native-born Roman Legionnaire of the 4th century felt when he saw what had become of his beloved SPQR.