

COMMENTARY

Honoring Tradition

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After more than five years as Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, I have attended many meetings in the Pentagon. One early in my tour still stands out. We gathered to discuss a proposal to modify our published core values to achieve one set of core values for the naval services for use by Sailors and Marines. At that time in 1992, the Navy's official banner words were Tradition, Integrity, and Professionalism; the Marine Corps' were Honor, Courage, and Commitment.

A few tentative remarks were made before General Walter Boomer, then Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, said, emphatically but without a trace of arrogance, "Marine Corps values are honor, courage, and commitment. Marines learn them in boot camp. They identify with them and remember them. We like them; they are working for us; and we are not going to change them!"

There was no similar defense of the Navy's banner core values, and, in truth, the words were never well known among Sailors. The words were not working for us. Mostly they were gathering dust in some lofty places where Sailors rarely ventured. There really was no reason to object to adopting new words to inspire and guide the Sailor.

Initially, though, I deeply regretted the omission of "tradition" from the new banner. After much thought, however, I now know that although tradition is closely related to our core values, it is not in itself a character trait or value. Still, tradition is priceless to our Navy as the bright banner on which our core values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment are flown.



ALL PHOTOS: U.S. NAVY

Demonstrating teamwork and pride, chief selectees run together in specially designed PT uniforms during Chief Petty Officer Initiation

Our Navy life is immersed in tradition. Tradition dictates the way we greet one another and cross the brow. It prescribes the way we relieve the watch, begin and end the day, and it guides much of the routine in between. Naval traditions are the best parts of our past that we preserve in ceremonial and many other ways, from the routine to the spectacular. They are preserved because they link us with unique and memorable aspects of our seafaring and warfighting past for historical, pragmatic, or spiritual purposes—or all three. We must define traditions and safeguard them from perversion or abuse. We must ensure that traditions are not practiced in ways inconsistent with our

Season.

core values. Sometimes we must modify a traditional practice-and some find this disconcerting and objectionable-but change and tradition are not mutually exclusive.

Side boys offer a good example of an evolving tradition. They are a unique Navy tradition: two rows of proud Sailors standing tall, responding as the boatswain pipes the side. Stars and piping on their jumpers shine; the creases in their bell bottom blue trousers run straight and true. Wearing a gleaming white knotted lanyard, the boatswain smartly initiates the ceremony with his silver boatswain's pipe as the honoree strides through the side boys, pausing and holding a salute until the piping ceases. With the notes of the boatswain's pipe still in the air, all in uniform salute sharply while the rest stand in respectful silence. The ship's bell-or ceremonial bell-is bonged; titles are carefully enunciated, each ending with "arriving" or "departing." The focus of every eye is the side boys and the honored guest.

Many aspects of our heritage are focused into this one traditional event: the use of the ancient boatswain's pipe, arrival and departure honors, and the use of the ship's bell. The tradition evolved from Sailors physically lowering and raising a platform so that visiting dignitaries did not have to climb the Jacob's ladder from the launch. Today, we have discarded the ropes, pulleys, and platforms; it would have been cumbersome and counterproductive-not to mention a little silly-to preserve this entire event. What is preserved in our tradition of posting side boys is the pride we feel for our Navy and the care and respect taken in honoring important visitors to our individual ships and stations.

Recently I was privileged to address the assembled Brigade of Midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy. "How do we tell the difference between a good tradition and a bad tradition?" I was asked. "There are no bad traditions," I replied. By their very nature, naval traditions can only be good-that is why they are preserved and ultimately classified as traditions-for their goodness. I knew, of course, what point the midshipman was making, so I quickly acknowledged that traditions can be perverted or abused; bad habits can be labeled "tradition" by the ignorant. The acid test is a simple one: if it is inconsistent with our core values, it is either not a naval tradition or it is not being practiced correctly. Honoring tradition requires what Stephen Carter, in his book-length essay on integrity, called the "hard work of discernment."

A thoughtful and honest recent re-examination of the process of Chief Petty Officer Initiation provided some examples of good naval traditions that were nearly destroyed by misuse. For years, CPO Initiation evolved somewhat haphazardly, with egregious additions unchallenged and without careful consideration of changes. Because the core values test was not being applied to changes, the entire initiation was rapidly headed for extinction. For me, the most regrettable aspect is not how much harm was done, but how many opportunities to do good were lost during the time we were off course.

The tradition of CPO Initiation, an established and crucial rite of passage, continues to evolve, and changes occurring are making the tradition prouder, stronger, and more valuable to our Navy. But because any change to tradition is often viewed as a weak response to political correctness or irreverence-or worse-it is important to

anticipate, lead, and closely manage changes to traditional events and activities. In the case of CPO Initiation, we did not anticipate the need for change early enough. Even when the need was clear, we were initially too tentative in leading and directing change into productive activities above any reasonable criticism.

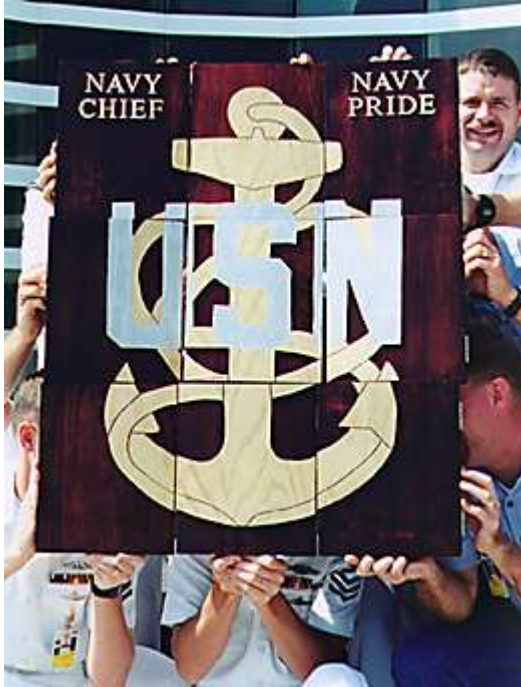
Late or not, the Chiefs did not walk away, and our Navy leadership was appreciative of the tremendous potential of this great tradition. We successfully preserved the tradition of CPO Initiation as a legitimate rite of passage, and we are on the cusp of a time when the tradition of CPO Initiation Season will not only be above suspicion and criticism but will be universally admired as a time of sustained reflection on the Navy's heritage, tradition, and core values. This reflection is an active pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

The goals of CPO Initiation include congratulating, welcoming, inspiring, improving, instilling trust, and motivating the CPO selectee while simultaneously teaching leadership, building esprit de corps, promoting unity, building teamwork, and occasionally having some fun in the process. Selectees join group physical fitness routines (moving to CPO Pride/Navy Pride cadence calls), construct charge books, read about our naval heritage, and participate in core values discussions, civic and community projects, and various leadership and teamwork training efforts. The season ends with a formal advancement ceremony on 16 September each year, although the mentoring by assigned sponsors continues throughout the following year.

When the initiation is done right, we ensure a deeper understanding of our traditions, our heritage, and our values, not only in the newest chiefs, but in the entire CPO Mess. These are noble and challenging goals, and the Chiefs' Mess is achieving them.

One of the most useful tools of the process is based on an old one: CPO charge books. At a memorable CPO anniversary dining-in, instead of delivering a conventional speech, Admiral Stan Arthur (then the Vice Chief of Naval Operations) read excerpts from the "Memory Book" of his father-Machinist Mate Chief Holland Arthur. The first entry included Recruit Arthur's thoughts on the train ride from his Illinois home to Recruit Training Command Great Lakes in the '20s. The chiefs listened with awe and pride.

Many Sailors kept such a record; memory books were a combination journal, scrap book, and diary of their Navy experiences to take home and share with family. During World War II, CPO hopefuls often carried a more formal log book, recording the wisdom and advice collected from chiefs in preparation for advancement into the Chiefs' Mess. For many years after the war, the contents of a charge book were seldom worth preserving. They were nothing more than government issue log books, sporadically carried by selectees, eventually becoming the center of much negative activity, some of it egregious and outrageous.



Chief petty officer selectees in Kings Bay, Georgia, put together their nine charge book covers to form a Chief's anchor. At a CPO anniversary dining-in while he was Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Stan Arthur read from the "Memory Book" of his father, Machinist Mate Chief Holland Arthur.



Recently when I spoke on the importance of honoring tradition at a Navy Birthday Ball, I was questioned afterward by a senior officer: "How do you reconcile your respect for the past with Admiral Johnson's charge to look up and forward to the stars, not back at the wake?"

Today's reinvigorated charge books tap the roots of these early traditions of pride in accomplishment and knowledge. CPO initiates now build a book or box (or both), some of which are so creative they qualify as genuine works of folk art and instantly acquire status as family heirlooms. The traditional CPO charge book has changed, evolving in strength from the old tradition, as the Chiefs' Mess directed it. No one would argue that the change in charge books is a bad thing or a part of the politically correct movement.

In many different ways, we are thoughtfully honoring our traditions, and we are better for our efforts. Since that Pentagon meeting five years ago, Sailors have learned our core values. We can now say, just as General Boomer did then, that the core values are working for us. We recently revised the Sailor's Creed for all hands who "proudly serve my country's Navy combat team with Honor, Courage, and Commitment." The revision of the Sailor's Creed, in combination with Secretary of the Navy John Dalton's action designating "Sailor" as a proper noun (always capitalized when used to describe a service member), has given us a new strength. Our proudest title is neither Chief nor Admiral; our first pride and greatest strength is in being a Sailor—a new tradition which will take us forward together.

Similarly, our service song "Anchors Aweigh," is learned and sung by Sailors in boot camp; our newest Chiefs sing "Anchors Aweigh" throughout the Initiation Season. A real revival of tradition is under way.

This strong reverence for tradition which I harbor (and which seems to be increasing in the CPO Mess and elsewhere throughout the Navy) is not a reactionary longing to return to the past, not really even a wistful backward glance. Following the CNO's guide stars of operational primacy, leadership, teamwork, and pride honors tradition by heeding the lessons of the past. Honoring tradition ensures that our pride is not shallow, self-centered, or focused on individual accomplishment, but is instead anchored in the institutional strengths of the Navy. Such pride is invigorating and empowering.



Tradition has been defined by some critics as "allowing dead men to vote." While the thought originally struck me as macabre and inconsistent with my definition of tradition, I have come to see that the dead from Guadalcanal and every other naval action in our history earned and deserve a vote. *Honoring our traditions is not about looking back at the wake—it is about not forgetting.*