

## SKYLARKING WITH THE CHIEF

We were Sailors then, fresh out of basic, embarking in a life altering vessel promising high adventure and dangerous excitement. We had naively traded the life of a landlubber for an adventurous life upon the great oceans of the earth. Buccaneers we were, finding our way across the awkward abandon of adolescence to the torturous responsibility of adulthood. We traded in our parents for what seemed like a fate worse than death, beholden to men ... no, not men, rather hardened steel statues hammered into the shape of a man by Thor himself, and set to life with tears of the Phoenix only for the purpose of providing entertainment to the gods as these Chief Petty Officers set about their work, making our lives a living hell. These scaly old bastards took joy in bellowing with all the fervor and volume of a blasting foghorn right in the tender ears of the young Sailors in our lot, spraying about the stench of kimchee and coffee. They were not of our world and they made no bones about their intention to squeeze the life out of us or pound us into Sailors, even if it took us to the precipice of death. These wearers of "the hat" always seemed excessively intent, with leather faces, cured in the Pacific surf, shaped by the pounding seas of the North Atlantic, and tempered by the frigid ice of the Arctic Sea. Faces imbedded with salt crystals from the years of salt laden spindrift settling on them before drying in the intense heat of the unrelenting sun of the open sea. These motherless sons of Neptune himself were Gods curse to our very existence; for all the things we had done wrong in our youth, the Chief was put on this earth, and us in his charge, as penance, hell on earth with no end in site. A catharsis, I reasoned, the great purge that would get me right with the lord if it didn't kill me first.

With the passage of time, I became aware of a different side of these crusty old salts. There was never a more knowledgeable person to put upon the open sea. These cursed men could navigate a deep drafter through a narrow channel

surrounded by uncharted shoal water, with a broken turbine, a bent shaft, a damaged screw, and a twisted rudder by the shear power of will. They embodied the attributes of more than 100 years of history ... and tradition... There was never a more capable leader put upon this earth. For the Chief Petty Officers could lead us into hell, 'cause we all knew we'd be coming back out, ...alive.

The work was hard, swabbing decks, chipping paint, and scrubbin' bildges 'till the sun was over the yardarm, all the while under the skilled -and watchful eye- of the Chief, ever vigilant, as he intently watched to catch us Skylarking or Goldbricking. ... and when the Chief caught us at our games, he gave no quarter and readily lowered the boom on us, crafting punishments that could only be learned after years spent, honing his skill at this merciless employ. But with this "personalized attention", (which we despised) the Chief would impart his wisdom and experience on the likes of us landlubbers, constantly pounding and working us to know the ropes, to make the best come out of what was within, to find the stuff we were made of, and to finally and assuredly, make us into Sailors.

And when our home upon the sea put into port, and all was ship shape, stem to stern, the Chief bestowed upon us, liberty cards. With a crisp salute to the Petty Officer of the Watch and permission granted to disembark, down the brow we went paying proper tribute to our cherished ensign as we took to the shore for the night. We quickly made our way up the pier and along the quay wall, passing the many bollards, cleats, and chandlery shops that peppered the shoreline along the way. All of us were making it a point to be somewhere other than where the Chief Petty Officers were. We would find a watering hole along the wharf, where the beer was cold and the whisky was strong. Once settled in, we would all splice the main brace and toast our newfound, albeit temporary freedom. As the night turned to the wee hours of the morning, we would find ourselves three sheets to the wind, outdoors, and unable to get our

bearings back to the ship. Off in the foggy distance, in the direction of the muffled sound of foghorns from some far off shoal, the moonlight revealed the silhouette of a man facing us, whom appeared to be walking towards us, although one couldn't say with certainty in the misty light and our fogged cognition. As we approached, we could see by the cut of his jib, the coffee cup in his hand, and the faint yet pungent smell of salt and barnacles that it was one of the feared Chief Petty Officers from our ship. "Aye mates", he says, 'aving a bit of a go of it finding yer way back to the ship? A bit groggy I 'spect. I figured as much, 'at's why I'm 'ere. You mates were 'aving way too much fun out there, wanted to make sure I got ya back to the ship, is all, I got too much invested in ya ta give ya up to Davy Jones.

It became apparent at that precise moment, that the Chief was, after all – human;...even though this benevolent outpouring was self serving and probably only provided that we could continue to entertain him in our floundering with our duties yet another day. From that point forth, we all walked a little taller, ...and we all felt just a bit more ownership for our ship and Navy, and began to feel just a wee bit salty. As we groped through the forecandle that night, looking for a hammock to bed down in for the night, we looked ahead with new optimism. The Chief, after all, VALUES us! ...and the morning foghorn of the Chief screaming in our ears came early, but even with a hangin' head banger from a night of steaming, it was a little easier to take; and the lashing we took for skylarking was a little more palatable, knowing that the Chief (Whom we despised mind you.) VALUED us!

The legend of the Chief Petty Officer is not lost in the conundrum of the Naval lexicon. ...And my reverence for these naval assets was not lost in the benevolent and caring abuse I took over the years, for I embody the axiom: "that which does not kill me makes me stronger." Young Sailors come up through the ranks, at times despising what the Chief puts them through before becoming a Sailor, yet cherishes the knowledge

imparted and particularly the caring protection rendered by these peculiar, hardened steel statues: The day the Chief considers you a Sailor, is the point of embarkation, from the chiefs perspective, of your naval career. Somewhere along the way, we slip the bonds of our youth, take on all the character of a Sailor, we are tested and, and for some- selected, to be hammered into the shape of a man by Thor himself, and to be set to life by the tears of the phoenix, only for the purpose of providing entertainment to the gods ... 'nuff said!

Never forget from whence you came! I think there are at least a few Buccaneers out there, landlubbers they are, making their way across the awkward abandon of adolescence towards adulthood, they are, just waiting their turn to try their skill skylarking with the chief. Hopefully, you've honed your skills over the years crafting punishments especially devised for them. For soon you will join our ranks, and have a whole new peer group and professional network that knows the ropes, but, from now 'till such time as you complete your assigned right of passage, don't get too cocky ... You aint a Chief yet. And if you've got a problem with that, don't complain at me ... Go tell it to the Marines, ...mate!