

68. The Courage To Take And Hold Command (8:23)

"Did you feel you were prepared for that guy in reality?" Yes. Okay. Yeah. I mean the stuff that I didn't write was, that at that moment, my feeling - I felt that I had been trained for this job - that I had been prepared completely for this job and that I could do this job. And at that moment, I climbed up into the Captain's Chair on the wing of the bridge - never looked back.

You can be a watch officer - yes, you are in command of the ship - the control of the ship. As a watch officer, you have a watch section working for you but you know you're not the final authority. There's always someone there. You've got a trained executive officer; you've got a trained operations officer; you've got people with more experience than you - that are right at your shoulder- that will whisper in your ear if you need it - that will give you advice if you need it. But when you're the commanding officer, there's nobody out there with you.

Ultimately, you could say, it was the needs of the service at the time. My detailer in Washington said, "Well, I'll send you back to Honolulu and you'll be the executive officer on Coast Guard Cutter BLACKHAW. We've got a situation there where we've got a Lieutenant Commander who has to rotate unaccompanied tour - we've got to move his family and I need somebody. And I said, "You know I'm just a JG and that's senior billet?" And he said, "I wouldn't offer it to you if I didn't think you could do the job."

I went back to Honolulu. I loved working buoys and I learned from a very good commanding officer how to run a buoy tender, how to organize and reorganize a buoy tender to make it work.

Along comes Vietnam and BLACKHAW is sent to the Philippines to replace the NETTLE and to work in country. It fell to me to write the organization plan to expand it from six officers and 56 men to eight officers and 63 men with all the facilities. And I did it. I brought it in on time and I brought it in under budget and I was expecting to go with it. That was part of what I was told

And I found out that no good deed goes unpunished and they sent me to Guam. When I get to Guam, what they didn't tell me was that the man that I was replacing was a Lieutenant Commander. He was timed out in Guam and it was basically for him at that point - an unaccompanied tour. So they had to move him and they had nobody to replace him.

And the commanding officer who was a Lieutenant Commander was a Mustang and he was drinking on board and he didn't have sense enough to drink alone. The ship was falling apart under him. And I go out there basically because somebody in the district office - a former commanding officer of mine who is now the chief of personnel - knew that any place that guy fell apart I would be able to pick the ship up and bring it home. They didn't bother to tell me that.

So we get a month into my tour - I just reported in - and the CO goes into the hospital with stomach problems from drinking. He's there for more than 30 days; he's got no prognosis as to coming out and I had to do something.

The Coast Guard regulations said I had to transfer him to the group administratively. Well, how can you transfer your own Commanding Officer, right? Is it an act of mutiny or is it following orders. I asked my operational commander who is a flyer - excuse me Les - what should I do.

He didn't know the pointy end from the round end and he didn't care. He didn't know what to do. So I said to him, "Well, Captain - do you mind if I call Honolulu and ask what the District says? "If you can get the time, go ahead."

We didn't have satellite communications, there was a war on and it took me almost 3 weeks to get the time. But I called and I was expecting to talk to the chief of personnel. I got the chief of personnel, I got the chief of staff, I got the chief of operations and the district Commander - Admiral Ben Engle three stars Western area on the phone all at the same time. They're talking to each other and this is when I found out why I was sent out there. Right. And I needed an answer. What was I going to do? What do you want me to do?

And he answers cryptically, "Well son, I guess you're going to have to do what the Coast Guard Regulations tell you to do, aren't you?"

Complete deniability.

And I just took it from there you know. I will admit that I fought everybody who didn't have a seagoing billet and was a sailor. I fought them to hold that command for the better part of the next year.

"Well that sounds like as much a command story as coming to realize you own the ship. And that's prior to that realization, right?"

Yes, it is prior to that realization - knowing that I was going to have to take over - being told to do what the regulations say - knowing that I didn't have the blessing of a letter that said you're in command.

So you go to the next step which is the fact that, when I was on the BLACKHAW, I had a very competent commanding officer. As the executive officer you do the maneuvering of the ship. You work buoys; you learn to work buoys. But you've always got your CO standing on your shoulder. So when you're pulling out from port, you've always got the tendency to look over your shoulder and say, "Captain - is this far enough out for you? Should we back down now or spring out some more?" And he'll give you advice.

Well, I'm getting underway on this trip that I wrote about and I come up to the deck. We're getting ready to get underway and I let go one, three and four and I'm springing out on my number two line. You move forward on the number two line and the moment is that you're bow is held against the dock and your stern springs out and I'm springing out on the number two line and everything is fine and I look over my shoulder and there's nobody there. And I said to myself, "Oh my God."

And I did it and I maneuvered out of Apra Harbor and down the channel. It was when I got to the sea buoy that all of a sudden this hits me. That I'm alone. That it's mine. That this is my responsibility. There's nobody else.

And that's what I tried to convey in what I wrote.

"What a great way to tell a story!"

Related Primary Leadership Principles

Accountability

Authority of Position

Character

Courage

Decision-Making

Drive To Achieve

Effective Use of Resources

Feedback

Military Core Values

Responsibility

Stress