

#### **14. Command Authority (4:19)**

You're at the Academy. The academy is in the leadership business. As you look forward to a Coast Guard career, you should be aspiring to command from the very beginning.

As we pass the sea buoy leaving Apra Harbor - watching it slide aft outside the ship's wake down the starboard side and then drop astern - it comes crashing home to me that I am now the final authority on USCGC Basswood (WLB-388). The ship is mine even though I'm only a 24-year-old Lieutenant Junior Grade - two full grades below billet level.

If I were smart I would listen to the views of the other officers on board but I don't have to. I'm 'in command' of a 180' seagoing buoy tender displacing a thousand gross tons that had a crew of six officers and 56 men and an operating area stretching halfway across the Pacific Ocean. All discretion, the ship and its missions, the lives and safety of the entire crew, everybody and everything on board are solely in my hands. All tactical and operational decisions to be made are mine alone to make. I alone must make them.

In a practical sense, there is no appeal nor is there any time for appeal. A ship at sea is not a democracy. It cannot be run by committee. I wasn't God but I might as well have been - answerable only to God - an awesome responsibility.

I feel like I was standing alone on a precipice looking down from a narrow ledge that dropped off into a void so deep - so dark - that its unplumbed bowels faded into blue and then black. The wind blowing across the deck seemed to be trying to hurl me malevolently over into the abyss. I have to walk this precipice alone - balance alone on its narrow edge because I cannot go back. The only question is, "Do I have the courage to go forward"?

I realize I am ultimately responsible for everything - all performances as well as any failures of the ship's mission and the performances of her crew. There is no one at my shoulder; no comforting advice to rely upon; no one to talk to; no one to rein me in if I misjudge and go too far. I hold the bag - whatever happens - good bad or ugly.

The truly sobering thought is that the bag is mine - alone. The non-dischargeable responsibility is also mine - alone.

I feel a crushing weight of command, a sudden flush of heat at my temples and across my brow. There is an emptiness in my chest and a sudden roiling in my stomach that makes me suck in my breath. I swallow hard to suppress it but I regain control almost instantly. And with the invincibility of youth, I know I can do this job and it will become easier over time.

In the interim I will mask from the world any gnawing insecurity I might entertain in my own judgments. This is what I've spent the past seven years training for. Everything I have done, everything I have experienced, every trial, every success or failure I have learned from since I first raised my right hand to swear into the Coast Guard and to attend its Academy must be - under all circumstances - the natural progression to and prelude of ultimate command.

## **Related Primary Leadership Principles**

Authority of Position

Military Core Values

Decision-Making

Active Listening

Drive to Achieve

Followership

Mission

Information

Inspiration

Connectivity

Character

Courage

Delegation

Credibility

Continual Learning

Ability to Embrace Change

Political Savvy