

The Coast Guard: Culturally Overboard?

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The lookout sang out "Man Overboard, Starboard Side!" The emergency whistle sounded, the Oscar pennant snapped at the halyard, the crew made for their recovery stations as the ship turned. A Commissaryman First Class walked up the foc'sle with a kapok heaving line in his hand. He fingered the coils loosening the kinks when he heard the captain yell from the bridge, "Make your throw a good one." The PO1 turned half left answering, "I was a *Seaman* before I was a cook." With no further exchange the cook's comment reemphasized the understanding that all Coastguardsmen are in character, and culturally, seamen first--or they should be.

The Coast Guard's character grew from the sea and federal politics. This sea-borne character developed into a worldwide reputation for exceptional seamanship and professionalism. The political gene gave it an uncanny ability to alter course and accept new, often unwanted, missions. However, the contemporary Coast Guard has lost not only the far-sighted ability of any good lookout, but the navigation of its cultural memory as well.

Forgotten is the praise Assistant Treasury Secretary James A. Reed gave the service in

1965 for competently defining new roles for itself in a changing society while maintaining its renowned seagoing character.¹ Reed called the 1965 transformation a renaissance and gave credit to the service's *improvis* ability to the "unusually high *esprit* among its officers and men." His greatest tribute was one known to the Coast Guardsmen themselves, "[they] are justifiably proud of their ability to take crises in stride and to perform their dangerous and arduous tasks with existing equipment." This was the much worn, but true, *Can Do* spirit carried forward by each new generation of officers since 1790.

In 1937, Coast Guard Operations Chief, Commander Joseph E. Stika, USCG, made similar remarks about Coast Guard duties that were often "fully as arduous, and more than often hazardous, as our duties in time of war," he, of course, was speaking of World War I. The service then under assault to turn many of its duties to civilian control, Stika added the Coast Guard

"... cannot operate without [military] discipline," as a base to fulfill its missions. He struck an image of a Coast Guard faced with lifesaving, law enforcement and national defense without a naval character; without the discipline to answer "a call[for help or assistance] without question, no matter how hopeless the occasion, well knowing that there is always a chance of their not being able to get back."

This selflessness supported the sea heritage built into the culture over the previous one hundred years.

Stika spoke in an era where decision processes were in the hands of a small officer corps and not from a committee. Quality management systems were not stated in policy procedures but were an integral part of the service's culture. Quality was the responsibility of all, not the few. Ironically, the quality management system uses culture (history) as a corner stone, yet committees often ignore it. As the 1965 renaissance ended in the 1970s the Coast Guard did not

usher in a modern era.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Coast Guard kept its sea character alive with an operating fleet of ill-supported and aging cutters. There were enough berths for most junior officers to learn their roles without being continually cycled through a number of shipboard jobs before going on to other endeavors. There were enough hulls afloat to give sea duty for all those wanting to accede in areas of increasing responsibility and command at sea.

What is more important, there was official and positive recognition of those serving at sea and this made sea duty desirable. Sea duty gave opportunities to weed out the less competent. Apart from recognition, one officer remembered this era for the personal gratification that outweighed professional awards and promotion. This self-rewarding character trait continued the tradition of the Revenue Cutter Service officers of the early twentieth century - the same officers who created the modern Coast Guard. Unfortunately, sea duty has since become a nuisance or considered *passé* when compared to the personal gains afforded by becoming a staff officer, duty at regulatory billet, or post-graduate schools.

Currently some officers may count one sea duty assignment and while others none at all. The immediate results from lack of familiarity are individual decision process errors with the loss of service character in the long term. The closest most come to a foc'sle is the anchor on their buttons. The same situations affect the enlisted force. Many avoid or are not required for advancement to serve at sea.

The dismissal of sea duty crept into the enlisted corps as well. Whether from a lack of desire for, or opportunity, for sea duty these nonesuch sailors have abandoned the nautical perspective of teamwork. From the collapse of the one hand for your ship heritage, the Coast

Guard fractured into rival offices partitioning itself into groups of competing autonomous units each with its own champion and campaign. Unfortunately, splicing the parts has nearly become a lost art.

These stay ashore individuals have forgotten the naval adage that in sullen weather it is routine to strike the topgallant masts to the deck and reef the topsails. As each new program takes the watch, the service adds sail and mounts additional spars regardless of the economic and political weather all the while throwing ballast over the side. The latest ejection came in December 1993 when the Coast Guard announced the release 1,000 enlisted personnel while the officer corps grew by 900 from 1989 to 1993.

Secretary Reed in 1965 saw no such divisions and thought the service reminiscent, in vibrancy, of the 1930s Coast Guard. He saw the service begin a visionary vessel replacement program that included the construction of thirty-six 378-foot WHEC class as well as twenty-nine 210-foot WMEC cutters.² An ambitious plan that did not reach fruition, but it was still a goal for the future based on historical precepts. Twenty-eight years later, Captain Lawson W. Brigham, USCG, termed such a hyperopic plan as an "organizational strategy."³ In 1989, Commander Bruce B. Stubbs, USCG, noted a decisive strategy would be needed if the Coast Guard were to maintain its military character. It would have to make its present and future intentions clear not only to the Congress but to the general public.⁴ Nevertheless, since the early 1970s, the Coast Guard has not made its character clear to anyone including itself despite advertising campaigns with catchy slogans and mottoes. The muddy mixture of individual leadership philosophy unobscured by any long-term goals or comprehensive "organizational strategy" has caused the near demilitarization of the Coast Guard and the scattering of the treasure of its character. A

general philosophy of demilitarization is not surprising considering the Coast Guard has yet to acknowledge publicly with an official comprehensive historical work of its own its excellent service in the Vietnam War--it's last war of combat.

This attitude has not always been the case. Just over a decade ago, then Commandant, Admiral John B. Hayes proudly noted the bargain the nation got for the mere ten percent the Coast Guard spent from its budget for military readiness.⁵ A bargain indeed, but in the last four years the bargain has become a liability that caused Coast Guard policy makers to strip the 378' WHEC Hamilton Class cutters of its only militarily important feature--ASW. Even retrofitting would make them but second-class naval vessels. The 270' WMEC, apart from being too short and too slow for convoy work, is too noisy, electrically or magnetically, to serve in any mine warfare capacity, will also fall well short of many of the world's third world navies. A responsible duty in wartime duty for this class would be as a harbor picket or as a support ship for the 110-foot Island class WPBs that are also too slow for fast intercept and carry less armament than the Vietnam service 82-footers.

The Coast Guard character that gave the service the 327-foot Secretary Class cutters has been lost in a maze of managerial styles, program manager priorities, and a confused array of externally dictated programs, for example Total Quality and Work Life that have neither historical, cultural, nor rational relevance to any Coast Guard mission area. These are merely transitory manifestations and temporary supplements to lagging cultural awareness.

The loss of character may be a symptom of the ever growing hierarchical nature of the service. When Alexander Hamilton commissioned the first Revenue Cutter Service officers he intended them to be vigilant and hardworking and not a self-perpetuating body. To ensure the

officer corps stayed to its duty all the Secretaries of the Treasury kept the officer corps small until the beginning of World War II.

Sheer need caused an explosion of wartime officers to the service with over 4,000 reserve OCS officers, including SPARS, trained at the Coast Guard Academy. By the summer 1945 the Coast Guard top officer corps numbered one Vice Admiral, eleven Rear Admirals (active duty), and four Commodores to manage over 198,589 active and reserve personnel (over half of who were on sea duty), and about 30,000 volunteers. By comparison at the end of January 1994, the Coast Guard counted one Admiral, four Vice Admirals, 28 Rear Admirals(14 of the lower half) to manage 30,400 enlisted personnel.⁶

Upper crowding paralyzed individual thought and removed the risk takers and innovators from the decision making system. In 1980, an interviewer asked Admiral Hayes if the growing number of regulatory functions would dilute the "operational experience and heritage," of the Coast Guard. Hayes responded that a "balance" between operational and regulatory functions would retain that character. He opposed adding further regulatory responsibilities and favored "expanding our operating base at sea," to preserve the character.

In 1945, Vice Admiral Waesche considered marine inspection only a wartime function to be returned to the civilian control at the close of the war. Despite this desire, the Coast Guard's sea based operations shrank and the system became unbalanced. In 1993 the Commandant remarked that an additional 900 officers were needed to fill regulatory inspection positions.

The opposite effect was in place in the late 1920s when there were far too few officers to handle all the tasks especially military functions of readiness exercises. Then, as in recent times, the conduct of exercises was the individual cutter captain's responsibility. However, just as

today, these captains made a wide variety of excuses why these activities could not be done. In 1929, then Commander Waesche, who had near 20 years of sea duty of his total 23 years, solved the situation by developing annual joint exercises between the various cruising cutters and destroyer squadrons. The joint training allowed for complete training and gave an opportunity for the sea officers to compare notes and techniques. Captain Brigham called this style of problem solving "free thinking."⁷ Brigham noted the leadership (the officer corps) "should be prepared to accept challenges to conventional wisdom, and encourage free thinking," returning to the strategy theme he called this "strategic thought" and claimed this type of thinking may become "part of the culture."⁸ He did not say the leadership *will* accept the challenge only that it *should*.

In essence, Brigham's suggestions are the culture of the Coast Guard, something old in a new box with individual officers making individual decisions without second guessing a committee or superiors.

So where did it all go astray? Perhaps it is just institutional growth, but most feel it comes from a general misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of the past. A sea service claiming to be just that has to maintain and protect that culture and character regardless of personal preference. The maintenance and protection, without doubt or hesitation, are the duty and responsibility of the officer corps. If this group is negligent in its duty then it cannot expect its junior people to tread on a secure cultural footing.

As responsible for safeguarding service tradition and culture the officer corps must learn first but if the keepers are not taught how are they to learn?

To date no academy cadet receives any comprehensive historical training about the Coast Guard.⁹ Most receive a glossy clichéd version based on lazily prepared and overworked

secondary sources. Stories that are little more than sea stories and for the most part less interesting. To understand fully the nature of the service these young people must be fully indoctrinated in the factors that should control their lives. The studies of these future leaders are full with professional studies but yet few know the psychology and character of past Coast Guard leaders. Considering six out of ten officers are trained at the Coast Guard Academy and none receive appropriate historical training then it leaves little to the imagination how the culture has declined became lost. In contrast, Vice Admiral James Pine, USCG, spoke that "leaders became so through training and that the Sea has, through the ages, been of all schools, the best for bringing out the qualities of leadership."¹⁰

In his 1855 commencement speech to the U. S. Naval Academy, Commander Charles H. Davis, USN, observed the best educated sea officers fall into two groups; those studying histories and historical science or the natural and physical sciences. Educated officers continue active study of all branches. To exclude any subject is an error in individual and institutional judgment.

Future judgments made without knowing the achievements, failures, triumphs, and sufferings of the past will be flawed. How are the future leaders to know love of nation, moral goodness, and integrity of duty if given no pertinent examples? The continued use of honor codes applies only if the social culture enforces them. Honor codes learned and enforced on regional social norms or individual interpretation instead of the service's cultural expectations and mores--then the codes *must* fail. Frayed and mildewed strands do not make a good rope.

There are no substitutes for examples of failure and success to make one abide by those ideals. Captain Michael A. Healy, USRCS, the newest icebreaker's namesake, is an excellent example. Healy had an excellent yet controversial career that in part ended his employment in

the service.¹¹ His professional successes and personal shortcoming would be an excellent study topic.

Historical and culture knowledge provides a base on which to ground not go aground all precepts of personal and professional behavior. Logical and scientific knowledge is not enough. The growing gender and ethnic diversity of the Coast Guard demand the service's naval theme.

There has been passing discussion of culture, Vice Admiral Howard B. Thorsen noted the new Coast Guard Academy cadets "learn the proud history and traditions of their service," yet it is unclear where this knowledge will be learned or presented.¹² Admiral J. William Kime also presented diversity in his State of the Coast Guard Speech, but left open how this diversity would meld with, and not supplant, the Coast Guard culture an open subject.¹³ Other supporting officers have turned the phrase diversity into a buzzword that is somehow supposed to mean culture but could mean anything but probably nothing. They also speak of diversity as if it were new to the service. For example, the Revenue Cutter *McLane* of 1890 had a crew of 6 Norwegians, 9 Americans, 2 Finlanders, 4 Swedes, 1 Irishman, 2 Frenchmen, and 5 from Nassau, N. P.

To add to the disarray, an internal Coast Guard study is underway, or on the table, to streamline the Coast Guard. Part of its charter is to make recommendations for change that will "preserve core characteristics, capabilities, and attributes,"--whatever they may be.¹⁴

The cultural construction of the Coast Guard is a continuing process of labeling. The service must be able to look at itself through the looking glass and use the reflection to gauge the general public's and peer services' viewpoint. This is a historically correct method of self-appraisal and self-preservation that is wholly in character.

The quest for diversity will not make the Coast Guard a stronger, more healthy organization unless it regains the character that gave it world respect and begins to teach its future leaders that it is their responsibility to protect the image that you have to go out but you do not have to come back.

To make the future a viable option for the Coast Guard, the service needs to put about and recover its character and culture before all the cooks with line heaving knowledge and abilities are gone to save it.

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1. James A. Reed, "Renaissance of the U. S. Coast Guard, *Proceedings*, August 1965, pp.27-39.
 2. Only 11 of the 378' class and 17 of the 210' were built.
 3. Lawson W. Brigham, "The Next Commandant's Challenges," *Proceedings*, December, 1993, p. 29.
 4. Bruce B. Stubbs, "A Defense Doctrine for the Coast Guard," *Proceedings*, October 1989, pp.120-122.
 5. "...the Desperate Straits We're In," *Proceedings*, October, 1980, p. 19.
 6. Figures provided by the Coast Guard military personnel office Washington, DC.
 7. Lawson W. Brigham, "The Next Commandant's Challenges," *Proceedings*, December, 1993, p. 29.
 8. Ibid.
 9. United States Coast Guard. 1993-1994 Catalogue of Courses. New London, CN.
 10. James Pine, "The Salty Sea: Proud School of Courage and Adventure," Newcomen Society, 1952.
 11. Evans, Stephen H., *The United States Coast Guard: 1790-1915*, The United States Naval Institute, (Annapolis, MD, 1949): 130. Evans work is one of the finest of general Coast Guard history.
 12. Howard B. Thorsen, "The Honor Code: Master or Servant?" *Proceedings* April 1994, pp43-44.
 13. "State of the Coast Guard" *Commandant's Bulletin* Issue 4-94, May 1994, GPO, Washington, DC.
 14. Lawson W. Brigham, "The U. S. Coast Guard in Review," *Proceedings*, 20 (May 94): 141.