

An Ocean Away

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Personal Excellence and the Good Officer

"A good officer is unshakable under fire, gracious as well as deft. He possesses a calm self-assurance that never betrays fatigue or irritation. It is a matter of honor." These are words from an obscure text on military service, but they ring as true today as they did in the Ninth Century when they were written by a Japanese strategist.

The ability to serve with personal excellence as an officer at sea is rare. Many serve effectively, and a great number are very good. Yet few manage to combine all the attributes described above into a coherent approach to both leadership and warfighting. It is instructive to glance through the biographies of some of the great Admirals: Drake, de Grasse, Nelson, Dewey, Tirpitz, Jellicoe, Yamamoto, Nimitz, Spruance, Burke. The common thread, like a constant refrain, has been a **cool and deliberate personality**. That sense of calm, the ability to **bring order out of chaos**, is the first and most important attribute of the good officer.

Grace under pressure is a quality that is very difficult to achieve in an environment that remains extremely unyielding. Very little sleep, intense pressure, and the almost constant requirement to make decision after decision all add up to take their toll on the officer serving at sea. The temptation is to explode at minor irritants, to lose the calm detachment that wins battles. At sea, almost everyone becomes a classic Type A personality—high strung, intensely involved, demanding, harshly competitive.

That is not to say that the good officer is not deeply involved in his task. Clearly, the great gift that the officer must possess is a passion for winning, what some would term the gift of fury. But it must be a cold fury, tightly controlled, capable of emerging as the ability to focus on what is important in the immediate present. The good officer must have the ability to shoot the wolf closest to the sled, then proceed on to the next threat. That ability to prioritize, to focus coldly on the greatest danger, is a critical skill. The mind of the good officer is like a target que, with a constant cycle of assessment, strike, and reassessment examining the threats.

"He was born with the gift of laughter, and a sense that the world was mad," it was said of a fictional character in the 17th Century. The ability to keep a situation moving with humor is rare and valuable to the good officer. In the tense situations that develop at sea, the ability to deflate pressure with a good line can keep people moving through their own numbing

fear. It is the rarest of skills, and indeed is a gift that cannot be taught. That sense of humor is another tool of the good officer.

All will not go well, and the first report is always wrong. Despite the best planning, events often have a mind of their own at sea, in both combat operations and in calm peacetime drills. Yet that is not a reason to explode and merely add to the chaos inherent in a disintegrating situation. Keeping a perspective on the flow of events can save almost any evolution. Not every decision or every occurrence will destroy a career or a ship, and in the long throw of a deployment, a single career, or even a lifetime, many things fade like the wind. From dust to dust, as the saying goes—and this is not a licence to lose interest, only an invitation to keep a healthy sense of perspective on the events that go into a given stretch of time. Since Plan A, the first plan, will almost never work, a Plan B, a back-up plan, is a key part of the good officer's approach.

In addition to all of this, the good officer seeks to ask the second question, to lead the examined life. The surface of events, like the surface of the ocean, conceals both good and bad. It can appear calm or troubled, and give no indication of what is below. The importance of finding the why and matching it to the what of events is at the heart of concentrating on detail. The devil hides in the details, with good reason—very few people ever look there.

A final element of the good officer's approach is that he or she realizes that the world is little more than an enormous mirror, and that you tend to have reflected back whatever you send out. If you are sullen, overworked, exhausted, and downtrodden, you amazingly will find yourself surrounded by others with a very similar attitude. Enthusiasm really is contagious, and people most frequently become what you think they will be.

Mark Twain said that the beginning of wisdom was when a man started to carry a pocketknife. Perhaps he meant allegorically that a person should learn to carry the tools that get the job done. For an officer working in ships at sea, some of the tools include a **calm sense of detachment, a passion for victory, the ability to prioritize the threat, a sense of humor, a delight in the details, a perspective on the long throw of events, and endless enthusiasm**. How often do all of these come together? To some degree in almost all officers, but completely in the very rare officer indeed.

The good news is that none of these are totally innate qualities, although fundamental personality traits tend to produce a baseline in most people. To a large degree, they can be developed over the course of time. In general,

they are naturally encouraged, given the right environment and good role models. Most officers are reflections of those from whom they learn. Every officer can improve by consciously working on the qualities that work best.

In the final analysis, the most dangerous aspect of crisis management, which epitomizes a lack of all these qualities, is that it works so well—in the short run. Enough anger, threatening gestures, and pure intensity will solve most problems, although the costs eventually work themselves out. In the street vernacular, "what goes down, comes around," or stated more elegantly, you reap what you sow. The temptation to explode, to operate on the surface of things, to try and storm through the crisis, is irresistible for most of us. A moment spent receiving is worth hours spent transmitting, both tactically in battle and personally in a life. It is a lesson that bears learning, again and again, in the pursuit of excellence at sea. Calm self-assurance never betrays fatigue or irritation. Indeed, it is more than simple professionalism. It is a matter of honor.

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