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### **Brotherhood of the Sea: A Sailor's Code**

DURING WORLD WAR II, MY FATHER served as a navigator on U.S. Navy destroyers, dodging German U-boats in the North Atlantic. He had grown up the poor, hardworking son of a work-averse aristocrat, and the Navy gave him the self-esteem he sought in vain from his feckless father. He was proud of his naval service, remained in the reserves for decades after the war, and made the line between sailors and others a defining feature of his worldview. As children we watched the World War II documentary *Victory at Sea* with rapt devotion and were subjected to Saturday morning inspections, white gloves and all. We learned that a ship's running lights were red for the port side (because port wine is red) and green for starboard (because starboard wine is green). And we were given to understand that referring to a ship as a boat, or vice versa, was the nautical equivalent of mistaking a car for a bicycle. Our father was good-natured about it, but he wasn't kidding.

Our home had once been owned by a merchant marine officer who had installed a nearly vertical ship's ladder between the second floor and the semi-finished attic. This sold our father on the house. It was the passageway to his study, christened the Crow's Nest, and it was never, ever, referred to as "stairs." I was eight or nine when I learned the proper way to descend it: Not backing down like a landlubber but face forward, with a steadying hand on the rail. "One hand for the ship, one hand for yourself."

The injunction showed paternal concern for our safety, but it was also a way of bringing back his days at sea. They had scored his soul imperishably, foreshadowed his professional vocation—he became a naval historian—and imbued him with a set of emotional convictions that constituted a kind of sailor's code.

Not a military code. He had as much respect for the military virtues—courage, duty, love of country—as any veteran. But when he spoke of his own time in Poseidon's realm, the qualities he respected, that he enjoined his children to respect, had less to do with martial pluck than with what might be described, mundanely, as decency to others. His few "war stories" celebrated a sense of shared respect among those in peril on the deep that he often referred to romantically as the Brotherhood of the Sea.

In our father's view, nautical brotherhood started with one's own shipmates, meaning all those who sailed with you, regardless of rank. A working-class kid who put himself through college and took his commission after Officer Candidate School, he had a natural affinity to swabbies and noncoms, sharing their disdain for pretentiousness. He had contempt for superiors who chastised screwups in front of their fellows—boot camp DI theatrics were an embarrassment to him—and he insisted, in defining the officer's proper management style, that you should always “praise in public, chew out in private.”

This wasn't a personal inclination. It was a humane best practice he had learned from older officers, and it exemplified the courtesy that was part of the sailor's code. Violations of that courtesy, he felt, made one look ridiculous. He illustrated this in a favorite anecdote.

Approaching each other on a base one day were a newly minted Ensign and a by-the-book Lieutenant. As they passed each other, the Ensign smiled but neglected to salute. Unable to let this gaffe go, the Lieutenant called the Ensign to attention and ordered him to salute 100 times. The Ensign was on his thirtieth or fortieth salute when a Lieutenant Commander walked up and asked what was going on.

“This Ensign failed to salute me, Sir,” said the Lieutenant. “I'm having him salute me 100 times so he'll remember next time.”

“I see,” said the senior officer. “You do realize, Lieutenant, that you have to return every one of those salutes.”

The story showed nicely how the delusion of one's own specialness can deep-six your authority. True authority came not from demanding but from earning the respect of your men.

The good commander, according to the code, was somebody like Admiral William “Bull” Halsey. Halsey commanded the Pacific Fleet during the war, and although our father never served in that theater, in doing research for his book *Climax at Midway*, he developed a great respect for Halsey. He kept a photograph of the admiral in his office and enjoyed summing up his personality in another anecdote:

Two crewmen on the carrier *Enterprise*—Halsey's flagship, which had already seen heavy action—were repairing some damage to a bulkhead and wondering aloud where the admiral would order them next.

“I don’t know,” one of the sailors said. “But I’d sail anywhere with that old bastard.”

At that point Halsey himself stuck his head around a corner, smiled, and said, “I ain’t that old, son.”

That’s a sailor’s sailor. Earned authority and the common touch. No wonder his men were proud to serve under him.

Note that “bastard” here, as Halsey understood, is a term of affection. It’s one of those ostensibly insulting endearments which, like “you old sonofabitch” among close friends, signals a bond so close that, in what anthropologist Gregory Bateson calls a play frame, it can withstand an insult—indeed, be strengthened by it. A similar usage appears in a quatrain our father liked to quote:

The lieutenant rides in a motorboat,  
The captain he rides in a gig.  
It don’t go one goddamned bit faster  
But it makes the old bastard feel big.

Again the sailor’s disdain for pretension—“gig” is simply the term for any motorboat occupied by a captain—as well as the deployment of an abusive epithet in a frame where it is meant to be chiding rather than hurtful.

Out of the play frame, though, such epithets retain their injurious power. We learned this from his recollection of an incident showing that, in the absence of mutual respect, “bastard” could be a hurtful term indeed.

In the 1940s, the kitchen crew on U.S. ships was generally composed of African-American enlisted men referred to, without irony, as “mess boys.” One day, when one of these sailors committed a minor infraction (breaking a dish, I think), an officer referred to him as “that black bastard.” I don’t recall what our father did in response. If the offending officer was junior to him, it was a prime opportunity for chewing him out in private, and maybe that’s what happened. Or maybe the guy outranked him, making criticism difficult. It’s been sixty years since I heard the story and fifteen since the teller died, so I can only guess. But I do remember how he felt about the remark.

Calling someone a “bastard” or a “dumb bastard” or a “lousy bastard” would have been a venial violation of decorum. The adjective “black” made it a racial slur: a term that showed a contempt for the officer’s African-American shipmates that had nothing to do with broken china. That contempt violated the sailor’s bond. And it was beneath the dignity of a U.S. naval officer

Another story illustrated fairness with a special poignancy.

During the war, his ship once spent a week in port to receive minor repairs and a paint job. The first night back at sea—a rough night, with heavy swells—the crew made a disturbing discovery: Some inept workman back in port, in repainting the mast, had also painted over the running lights. Without them, the ship was virtually invisible, which made her a collision waiting to happen. The paint would have to be removed “with all deliberate speed.”

That bumpy night, our father was Officer of the Deck. He had a scraper and a bucket of paint remover brought on deck, handed them to a sailor, and told him to get rid of the paint. The sailor looked up at the mast, pitching wildly, and said, “No, Sir. I’m sorry, I can’t do it.” Without a word our father took the bucket and scraper from him, climbed the mast, and cleaned the light himself.

Given that the sailor had disobeyed a direct order, you might think he was in for disciplinary action. But there were no charges leveled, no brig time, no loss of rate. As far as I recall, nobody jumped in to volunteer in his place, so maybe he didn’t even suffer the quiet shunning that you might have expected from more daring shipmates.

But what happened to the frightened sailor wasn’t the point of the story. The point was that, if you told someone to do something that was disagreeable or dangerous, you had damn well better be willing to do it yourself. If you couldn’t take the same risk that you were telling somebody else to take, you were merely a higher-ranked coward. Hiding behind your stripes wouldn’t save you. If you understood the code of the sea, you gave every shipmate—officer, deckhand, mess boy—the same decent treatment that you expected him to give you. You climbed the mast yourself.

You returned the salute.

To be clear, I’m not talking about democracy. Our father knew that military discipline rested on a respect for command and that, on a tight ship, seniors give orders and juniors carry them out. But that was an operational necessity, not a blueprint for decency. You got decency, you

got a tight ship, you got sailors willing to follow the old bastard anywhere, when a crew understood that they were in this fix together, and that the people on the bridge were too. The captain goes down with his ship not because it's noble but because he has first seen that everybody else is off. He scrapes the running light himself if that's what it comes to.

This gets to the heart of what our father called the Brotherhood of the Sea.

Soldiers speak frequently about the brotherhood of arms, and about how what sustains men in battle is concern for their buddies. There was something of that in our father's worldview, but that wasn't the whole of it. In his configuration, what linked sailors together wasn't just fighting side by side for a common cause but their respect and fascination and terror of that "great leveler," the sea.

In his first and most passionate book, *Twilight of the Sea Gods*, he wrote that the sailor cannot allow his mind to consider the measureless deeps beneath his hull.

For if he did, he would find himself plummeted down into a thousand fathoms of darkness, into a weird world of monstrous forms and snapping jaws and serpentine terror. It is this—the fabulous unknown canyons of the sea floor, the unsounded depths, the cold dark tomb of ships and men—that makes up the adhesive bond of those who go to sea.

Since the bond was formed by a shared trepidation, it linked you not only to your shipmates but—this was the revolutionary part of the code—to your seagoing enemies as well. Our father's notion of nautical brotherhood was broader than the soldier's notion of comradeship in the ranks. It was "something intangible, a vague feeling among sailors"—all sailors—that being at risk together on the boundless ocean was a commonality that transcended nation or creed.

He found evidence for this notion in the actions of his own former enemies. *Twilight*, published in 1958, was a study of the German navy during World War II. Its protagonists were the captains of the battleships *Bismarck* and *Scharnhorst* and *Graf Spee*, those doomed commanders of what our father called "Odin's fleet," but what was in fact the naval arm of the Third Reich.

A dozen years after the war, he was aware that writing about such men might be construed as either a "resurrection of wartime hate" or an "apologia pro Germanis." Careful

to distance himself from those misreadings, he made the book a series of personal vignettes—case studies of professional sailors who, although they may have sailed under the banner of Nazism, “escaped for the most part its malevolent spell.”

How accurate that assessment was I cannot say. But our father believed it. In his salt-sprayed worldview, seafarers were a breed apart from those who fought by land or from the air. He distinguished between “the Prussian Army, the Imperial Navy, and the Nazi Air Force”; he formed a professional tie with the *Scharnhorst’s* navigator, Kapitan Helmuth Giessler; and he convinced himself that German sailors had more in common with other sailors than with the politics they defended.

One exhibit for this heretical notion was the skipper of the pocket battleship *Graf Spee*. In the first three months of the war, Kapitan Hans Langsdorff sank nine British merchant ships in the South Atlantic. In each case, he took their crews to safety onto his own vessel—an action blatantly in contrast to the Hollywood cliché of Germans (and Japanese) routinely torpedoing ships and then strafing survivors. Langsdorff’s chivalry earned him such admiration that at a funeral for his own lost crewmen, his former prisoners laid a wreath on their grave, inscribed “To the memory of the brave men of the sea from their comrades of the British merchant service.” For British sailors to call their former captors “comrades”—that was the essence of nautical brotherhood.

There is a moment in the 1957 film *The Enemy Below* which captures that essence beautifully. The film depicts a battle of wits between an American destroyer escort commanding officer, Captain Murrell (Robert Mitchum), and a German U-boat commander, Kapitan von Stolberg (Curt Jurgens, in a staunchly non-Nazi characterization). Subchasing was our father’s turf during the war and this film, a family favorite, stresses the respect that the rival seamen develop for each other as they are trying to sink each other’s vessels. At the end, with both ships disabled, the two captains salute each other and Murrell rescues von Stolberg and his badly wounded executive officer from the sub just before its scuttling charges detonate. In that moment, the political context vanishes. We see only two sailors, acknowledging each other’s courage on this watery field.

The tone of nautical brotherhood is enhanced as the two crews’ survivors pull away in the same lifeboats from their sinking vessels, and then, on a rescue ship, as they attend the burial at sea of the U-boat’s second officer. For that brief reverential period, they are no longer

enemies, but only witnesses to a fate that beckons them all. With the guns silent, they are sailors together, mourning one of their own.

In our father's code, though, there was something more—something beyond respect for one's adversaries, perhaps beyond respect for human beings themselves. In his phrasing, it was never “brotherhood of seamen,” always “brotherhood of the sea.” What ultimately made seafarers kinsmen wasn't their common humanity, but their common insignificance in the face of mystery, of vastness, of all that spumes its way up from that little word “deep.”

In *Twilight*, he wrote of the “solemnity” with which, if he is true to himself, the sailor “must face his world.” This was the appropriate reaction, he felt, to every changing face of God's watery realm, but the sailor felt it most keenly under the star-swept sky. “For it is at night on the sea, when the earth is dissolved in darkness, that the sailor loses himself in the vault of space. He is then alone with all that is and all that ever will be.”

What a strange observation for a navigator to make! It is the navigator's nighttime duty to reduce that black immensity to measurable coordinates, to “fix” the wandering stars so they may serve human ends. To be “dissolved,” to “lose oneself,” to be alone: For a navigator, these should be anathema. Yet to our father—who pointed out Polaris to his children before we could walk, who kept an ancient sextant in his study, who daubed constellations in luminous paint on his Crow's Nest ceiling—they were like a soothing nectar to the angry god Poseidon.

It was our father's faith that all who lived their lives on the deep shared his sense of awe. It was because of that, because they understood their own smallness that it was easier for them than for landmen to be decent to one another. That, I believe, was the heart of his code. And that is why, decades after hearing the boatswain's pipe for the last time, he still dreamed about the pulsing of a deck beneath his feet, still would rather have been at sea than anywhere else on earth.

In his papers after he died, I discovered a poem he had published in a 1950s anthology: “Lines Written on a Destroyer's Bridge.” Unabashedly romantic, it rejects the lure of “concrete canyons” and bustling crowds to celebrate quietly the wonders of a salt-stung Nature: thunderheads, spray, swells, the immensity of night. It ends with an affirmation of faith. Scanning the endless sky from the bridge of a warship, he writes, “I have seen the sweeping hand of Love.”

I do not know whether our father's code was a form of what folklorist Jay Mechling calls "solo folklore," an attitude universal among seafarers, or something in between. To judge from its marketing campaigns, the Navy's selling points today are job training, educational benefits, action, and patriotism. I don't know how much of a grip our father's sense of oceanic awe might have on this generation of sailors. When I look up at the night sky, though—as he did nearly every night until he died—I cannot help but feel he was on to something.

**Tad Tuleja** has published widely on American history, folklore, and popular culture. With Eric A. Eliason, he coedited *Warrior Ways: Explorations in Modern Military Folklore*. He was also the cowriter on *Hammerhead Six*, Special Forces officer Ronald Fry's memoir of his unit's 2003-2004 deployment in Afghanistan.