

COB's affair with mid put crew in the middle

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As the ballistic-missile submarine Nebraska's patrol was extended last summer, an illicit onboard romance was about to boil over.

The lovers at the core of the gold crew scandal were notable in their contrasts: She was a Navy officer in the making, entering her final year at the academy. He was a 41-year-old enlisted sailor, a frocked master chief, with 20 years of service.

New on board and there to learn, she answered seemingly to everyone. He was the chief of the boat, responsible for the crew's conduct and answered directly to the skipper. She was single, he was married. As the patrol dragged on, their relationship became an open secret, with Master Chief Electronics Technician (SS) David Turley leading a cover-up that warped the culture onboard the boat, which contributed to another romance between a crew member and a female mid, official records detail. In this unduly familiar climate, one love-struck sailor went so far as to spy on another mid's email.

Turley's affair — believed to be the sub force's first instance of onboard male-female fraternization by a member of what is known as the "leadership triad" — also played into concerns about integrating women aboard submarines, one of the Navy's last all-male bastions.

Turley set up a fake email account to conceal their messages and used his government credit card to bankroll rendezvous trips. He wielded his authority as the sub's top enlisted man to threaten anyone who inquired about the relationship or the steps he took to hide it, a command investigation found. Navy Times obtained this report under the Freedom of Information Act; officials blacked out names and ranks. Yet, unlike other cases of misconduct and abuse of power by a command leader, the Navy didn't disclose Turley's January relief. In February, a sailor who felt submarine leaders weren't coming clean about the relief contacted Navy Times, calling this "a huge integrity problem." In defending their decision not to disclose it until pressed by Navy Times, a Submarine Group 9 spokesman characterized Turley's firing as not being a relief for cause.

This is the full story of the eight-month affair and cover-up that distorted the command chain on a strategic deterrent patrol and eventually wrecked two careers and one marriage.

Lies, threats and cover-ups

Bald and stocky, Turley was a crew favorite known for telling his shipmates, "You're awesome! I love you." Turley naturally took the mids under his wing, with one officer later describing him as a "surrogate father."

But underneath this pretense, Turley was doing everything he could to keep his budding romance under the radar.

When one chief raised questions about it, Turley told him: "If I was to make it as a chief on Nebraska that I would have to choose my tribe — either I was an Apache Indian or I was against him," the chief later told investigators, apparently using a nickname for the crew. "I was afraid that he could control me at any time."

These threats kept the affair secret until January. In December, Turley was under investigation for a security violation unconnected to the affair. Investigators determined Turley had violated a security protocol by bringing home a classified memory card to upload photos to Facebook. Turley was fired as

Nebraska's COB on Jan. 3. But during this investigation, accounts of the affair surfaced, and Turley was taken to captain's mast three weeks later.

The female mid was booted from the academy in her senior year and will likely have to repay the Navy the cost of her education, said academy spokesman Cmdr. William Marks, adding: "You can take this thorough, yet swift, action as a sign that we hold midshipmen to the highest standards." Marks declined to release her name per privacy laws.

Unlike the female junior officers in the fleet, female mids are not assigned a more experienced female officer to act as a role model. There are no plans to change that policy, or to only send female mids to integrated crews, a spokesman for Naval Service Training Command confirmed.

Onboard Nebraska, Turley and five other crew members were disciplined as a result of the two fraternization cases that took place on the boomer's summer patrol in 2011, said Submarine Force Pacific spokeswoman Cmdr. Christy Hagen, adding that these repercussions ranged "from administrative counseling to guilty findings at mast."

Turley received nonjudicial punishment for fraternization, misuse of a government credit card, dereliction of duty and mishandling classified information, Hagen said. Turley, who had been frocked to master chief, was reduced to senior chief.

Sub force leaders say Turley's behavior is a lone black mark on an otherwise smooth record of integrating women officers into Navy missile boat crews — the only ones large enough to provide them with adequate privacy.

As the sub's top enlisted sailor, Turley's misconduct was "particularly disappointing," Vice Adm. John Richardson, head of Submarine Forces, said in a June 25 interview. Referring to the potential for fraternization with women onboard, he continued: "We were, of course, aware of this vulnerability and have done a lot of training to make people aware of it and so that's what makes this instance particularly disappointing."

Turley, who has since been reassigned to Naval Submarine Support Center Bangor, Wash., did not respond to calls, emails and LinkedIn messages seeking comment.

'Plotting to steal their men'

From the moment Navy leaders first announced in 2009 that women would be assigned to subs, the most strident opponents of the initiative have been submariners' wives. Their husbands spend months away on top-secret patrols. While they were in the dark about the things their husbands did on deployment, there was one thing they knew for certain — they weren't cheating, at least not underway.

But that certainty vanished with the specter of their husbands working elbow-to-elbow with female crew members, perhaps for months on end.

"This is a recipe for disaster," submarine wife Brandy Fleming told Navy Times shortly after the decision was announced. "There is no way they will be able to stop fraternization. This whole idea makes me sick to my stomach. I will never be at ease."

Women are still a rarity on subs — across the entire sub fleet, only 24 female officers are assigned to the blue and gold crews of four boats. Yet Nebraska's deployment last summer, Patrol 56, was hardly the first time female mids were onboard an underway boomer. Boats have taken female mids on short underways at least as far back as 2004.

Nebraska's integrated patrol broke new territory in one way: its sheer duration. Initially set for 26 days, the patrol was extended twice. What should have been a short, thorough introduction to life on a 560-foot-long boomer became a lengthy, monotonous patrol of 57 days during which the mids blended into the 155-man crew.

On the patrol, Turley grew close to a female mid despite their 20-year age difference. They worked out together in Auxiliary Machine Room No. 2, a chief close to the COB said later. He brought her around the ship, sometimes claiming she was recording discrepancies — regardless of whether he was conducting a zone inspection. At one point, he invited her into the chief's mess to watch a movie. That sparked outrage among the chiefs, who said she belonged in the wardroom.

“This is no big deal,” an angry Turley told his chiefs. It isn't clear from the report whether she stayed. Witnesses also recalled Turley and the mid hanging out together in his office. Command leaders, including Turley, had been adamant before the cruise that “sailors should not put themselves in a situation where they were alone with one of the female midshipmen,” an officer said later. The redacted report does not establish whether Turley committed adultery with the mid, either onboard or afterward. Both Turley and the mid would later invoke their right to remain silent.

That didn't stop shipmates from drawing their own conclusions. At some point, a suspicious crew member told his wife and a rumor started: Some of the female mids were scheming to snatch away their husbands. “The rumor was reported to the CO and I by [redacted] as being something about the wives hearing that someone had overheard the midshipmen in their bunkroom plotting to steal their men,” the officer told an investigator. He said the command team, a group that included Turley, “discounted the rumor” after discussing it.

Turley wasn't the only possible reason for the rumor. A month or so into the patrol, another relationship had formed between a sailor and a female mid. It began when the two of them watched “date night” movies together, in the crew's mess and later in his office. They also played cards and worked out together, the investigation found.

The presence of young women on the extended patrol also sparked crushes. Another sailor interested in dating one went so far as to ask a favor of his friend in radio, a witness said: to spy on her emails home. The sailor assigned to radio “was looking at the outbound queue and reading the MIDN's emails, where he was feeding information to [redacted] about stuff she was writing about him,” the witness, a chief electronics technician, said later in a statement.

Based on something she had written, the sailor confronted her and they had an argument in Auxiliary Machine Room No. 2. She complained, although to whom is unclear because the name and title of this crew member was blacked out prior to the report's release. Afterward, the sailor, the radio chief and Turley gathered in an office. Turley and the ETC told him it wasn't OK to fight with her onboard and that any information he had he should “keep it to himself.”

Turley, who was then having his own secret affair, and the ETC said this incident “wouldn't go to the skipper because he would blow a fuse and all parties would be screwed,” according to the ETC who was in the room. Before the sailor was dismissed, one of them told him: “The issue was never to be spoken about again.”

‘On the level’

The sub returned from patrol in July and the mids left. Yet those close to the COB continued to find him acting a little odd. On underways, Turley insisted on being in radio to check his personal email account. Off the boat, he frequently was on his cellphone making private calls and using “pet names,” according to the communications chief, who overheard them.

“Hang on, I have to take this call from DC,” Turley would tell him.

To stay in touch with her while underway, Turley used his influence to establish a Sailor Mail account, an email exchange that sailors use to send and receive messages underway. These messages are monitored by the command, including the XO. But the address Turley set up for the mid was a “false” Sailor Mail account that somehow went unnoticed, according to the investigation.

The radio chief “likely aided” Turley in setting up the false account and hiding the electronic love notes from the command, investigators concluded.

The affair didn’t taper off even after the COB and the mid were on different coasts. On the contrary, Turley flew to the East Coast on Sept. 29 to see her. Earlier, he’d told a shipmate that the mid was going to get him a ticket to a Navy football game.

That Saturday, Navy lost in a nail-biter by one point to Air Force; while it isn’t clear whether Turley was in the stands, he had been in Annapolis for at least two days. He spent \$20.11 at Chick and Ruth’s Delly, a diner near the academy on Sept. 30 and \$9.79 at Potato Valley Cafe the next day, putting both Annapolis purchases on his government credit card. Over the five-day trip, Turley charged \$451.15 to his government credit card account, statements show.

The government credit card is only for official travel expenses. Turley violated these rules, an auditor concluded later, saying, “He has on numerous occasions used his GTC for his own personal use.” When the mid flew out to visit him in Washington state for New Year’s, Turley paid for part of the trip with his government card, spending \$150 on outdoor activities at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. in late December, records show.

Back on the boat, Turley pressured his subordinates to keep the affair secret, the report said. That effort centered on the radio chief, a newly frocked ETC who knew about both Turley’s phone calls and the bogus Sailor Mail account.

Turley’s responses to the chief varied from hot to cold, records show. One minute, Turley would tell him “I freaking love you!” and the next, he’d make an explicit threat, like the time he told him that the CO, Cmdr. Mike Fisher — whom Turley called “Mikey Fish” — “doesn’t give a [expletive] about” the ETC and, because he was new to the command, Fisher would trust Turley’s word over his, the ETC later told investigators. Turley had one more card to play: Freemasonry. Both Turley and the ETC were master Freemasons at different lodges. They talked about the order and practiced Freemason ceremonies, “which would keep us sharp on the words and phrases,” the chief said. On occasions when the ETC asked Turley about the mid, Turley launched into a rant. He reminded him that “we would have to be on the ‘Level,’” a Masonic term that evokes the idealized equality and comradeship among Freemasons.

Turley “would remind me often about the inner circle and being a Freemason and the brotherhood that I was bound to protect by fraternal laws and customs,” the chief said.

These entreaties and threats proved effective. This chief and at least one other crew member knew about the relationship and didn’t report it, investigators concluded.

There were many red flags. At one point, Turley called the ETC into his office and said he needed to destroy a hard drive — fast.

“I told him there were several ways to do it. For example, a shred CD, smash it or a magnet,” he said. “I asked him why, and he said that he needed to get rid of a laptop, and what was the fastest [way].” But someone did find out. Late in 2011, Turley’s wife of four years, Sharon, caught him chatting with the mid on Facebook, said the chief, who found out when Turley approached him and asked him if he knew a marriage counselor.

But it was too late. “This marriage is irretrievably broken,” stated Turley’s divorce paperwork, which was filed Feb. 6.

Reached on her cellphone in Bangor, Sharon Turley said she had been his third wife, but that their marriage was now dissolved. She declined to comment further.

The cover-up ended not long afterward. The ETC sat down for a second investigative interview in January. The interviewer told him he “was being given an opportunity to say anything else and to dig way, deep down,” as he later recalled.

Silent so long, the ETC unloaded like a burst dam. Feeling “ashamed” to have held back information before, he “realized I didn’t have to worry about protecting [redacted] or Masonic code because it was clear to me now that he wasn’t living by either of them,” he wrote in a 15-page statement signed Jan. 14 at 6:47 p.m.

“I am hurt thinking that all this time I was being befriended by [redacted] and that he would do the things that he did, and use scare tactics on me,” he wrote. “I hate that this was held onto for so long.”