

Reflections on a Naval Career

Larry Di Rita

On board the USS Boorda (CVN-80)—The ship is off the coast of Brazil, conducting rain forest preservation research as flag-ship for Commodore N. Singh Nifighandi, Bangladeshi Navy, Commander, U.N. Environmental Task Force 161.

Captain Will Keith drew on his cigar and let the smoke drift from his mouth. He knew he shouldn't be smoking; his cabin was on the same ventilation system as the crew nursery and the filters wouldn't catch everything. But he had a reason not to care. There was a surprise in the message traffic today: his relief's orders. Keith could start counting down the days until he retired. Funny, he thought, command wasn't supposed to be like this.

When he'd left Annapolis in 1980, carrier command seemed about as likely as spaceship command. His only aspiration was those wings of gold. Only one thing could top the feeling of pinning on those wings: Tomcat. And the hard work paid off; in two short years, Keith was doing touch-and-gos from the deck of the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) in the Free World's baddest plane.

"Captain! Sir, are you down there?" The muffled voice of the officer of the deck wafted down the voice tube above Keith's head. As he cleared his thoughts, he was struck with the irony of this quaint form of communication—which Lord Nelson himself had used—on board a nuclear aircraft carrier. He took comfort in the tradition as he yelled back up the tube.

"Bridge, Captain. What's up?"

"Sir, the Commander of the Peacekeeping Detachment is finished with training on the flight deck. She's releasing it to you for flight operations."

"Great. Have the Executive Officer meet me in my cabin."

Damn peacekeepers, thought Keith. Always fouling the deck with mock hostage situations and crowd-control training. Getting hard to remember this is a warship. It was important, though. Once back home, the ship would be sending peacekeepers to the Commander of the U.S. Internal Security Force in Miami. Keith was determined to send well-trained troops, even if it was a mission he didn't like: U.S. military forces deployed against U.S. citizens. Still, after the second Haiti occupation in '96, when General Colin Powell was named U.S. Governor-General, it seemed less bizarre. Things sure had changed since Desert Storm, though. . . .

"This thing is going down!" Lieutenant Commander Keith whispered to his wing man as the squadron listened to the mission brief. The air in the ready room was electric. It was going to be war after all. Years of training had come to this. Looking around, Keith saw the same mix of resolve, anticipation, and fear in the faces of every one of his shipmates. What could they expect? he wondered.

He'd seen the so-called experts on television in the weeks since Desert Shield had begun. They were predicting thousands of American dead. They talked about chemical warfare, cruise missiles, mines, and the fourth-largest army in the world. To hell with all of them, thought Keith. All the "experts" knew were charts and tables and statistics. They knew nothing about the only things that mattered: the faces of his fellow fliers and the sound of Tomcat engines winding up on the flight deck. The ship continued her full-speed rendezvous with war through the cool Persian Gulf evening. . . .

Knock! Knock! Knock! The pounding on his cabin door brought him back to the rain forest. "Who is it?" he demanded.

"XO, sir. The OOD said you wanted to see me."

"Come in, XO." Keith looked up. "I want to conduct some flight operations. We've been out here a week without any flying. I might even suit up myself."

"What do you mean, sir? After all, we send a couple of V-22s to the beach every day to drop off and pick up the Environmental Control Team."

"Very funny, XO. We haven't done a cat shot since we've been here. We've got the last Tomcat squadron in the Navy on board, and I'm determined to ride it hard."

"Just one problem, Skipper. I've scheduled our Diversity Stand-Down for this afternoon."

"Our what?!"

"You remember, sir. The Chief of Maritime Services ordered it to remind all hands about the strength the Navy draws from their diversity. All because of that business on the *Schroeder*."

Keith winced. After eight years, he still hadn't gotten used to the redesignation of the Chief of Naval Operations as the Chief of Maritime Services. It happened back in '97, when the United States occupied Venezuela to restore democracy after a military coup. The U.N. Secretary-General had convinced the President that "Chief of Naval Operations" sounded too "war-like," since the U.S. intervention in Venezuela—as in Nigeria, Haiti, and Somalia—had been conducted for peaceful purposes.

He recalled the incident on board the *Schroeder*, the new Aegis battleship. After being denied an advancement, a seaman of Indo-Ugric heritage sued his Master Chief. The charge was "insensitivity to diversity," a grievance some of the old-timers were having a hard time adjusting to after spending so many years learning that individuality had nothing to do with military readiness. The sailor claimed that the Master Chief was insensitive to his Indo-Ugric traditions, which required him to spend each Wednesday and Friday afternoon in quiet reflection "away from his normal place of work." The Master Chief thought that sounded like an excuse to goof off twice a week, with the rest of the division carrying his load. But the court ruled that the Chief had shown "reckless disregard for the importance of diversity in defending the national interests of the United States." The Navy-wide Diversity Stand-Down was the result.

"Anyway," the XO continued, "we won't be able to conduct flight operations today. Skipper, you still with me?"

But Keith was in another time and place, thousands of miles away. When everything had begun to change.

He'd been in Las Vegas that week; he'd even been on the third floor that night. And he had lied about the whole thing—under oath. He wasn't proud of his behavior; never had been. But it was every man for himself right from the start. The flags were the first ones: trudging up to Capitol Hill to admit that the Navy had serious problems and that things would have to change; agreeing to just about anything to avoid losing their jobs; and denying that they knew what went on in Las Vegas. In the end, everyone got off. But everything changed—sensitivity training, diversity stand-downs, women on combat ships, women in combat aircraft, and—after the second Gulf War—women in body bags.

And then there was the Arthur affair. Admiral Arthur, the commander of Desert Storm naval forces, had his career short-circuited in '94 when a j.g. who had washed out of flight school complained to a senator about a "climate of sexual harassment" at Pensacola. As Vice Chief of Naval

Operations, Admiral Arthur had reviewed her record. He reprimanded her instructors for inappropriate comments, but stood by their decision to deny the woman wings on the basis of poor performance. Wrong answer. He had been nominated to be Commander-in-Chief Pacific, but that was not to be.

The whole thing had a perverse logic. That this wartime leader should be lost because of "insensitivity" reflected a turning point for the Navy that had started somewhere between the deserts of the Middle East and the deserts of Nevada. Anyway, the lesson was clear to mid-grade officers like Keith: If flag officers could watch Arthur go down with nary a whimper, what could a lieutenant commander with kids and a mortgage hope to achieve by speaking out?

"Skipper, did you hear me?" intoned the XO. "I saw your relief's orders. Do you know her?"

"Met her once," said Keith. "Year behind me at Annapolis. CH-46 pilot; had the *Wasp* during the Jamaican Drug War."

Keith had missed Jamaica in '01. He was pulling a U.N. tour in Sudan. U.N. assignment was critical for anyone with flag aspirations; back then Keith still saw stars. He worked for an Indonesian two-star as Chief of Police for the U.N. government in Sudan. Keith never had given much thought to disarming private citizens, distributing food, and patrolling the streets. But he had to admit that it did prepare U.S. forces for the kinds of missions they were doing in Miami, Los Angeles, and St. Louis.

Keith always had sensed a vague connection between Tailhook and these strange new missions. The Navy brass already had been concerned about the budget cuts at the end of the Cold War and were willing to sign up to just about anything to keep the money coming. And after Tailhook and Arthur and all that, they weren't in a very good position to choose the good missions and reject the bad. After a while, patrolling the streets

of U.S. cities didn't seem much different from catching drug runners at sea and occupying Third World countries.

"Captain to the bridge!" blasted the speaker. Thoughts of an imminent collision raced through his mind as Keith bolted out of his cabin. The OOD must need him up there bad if he didn't have time to call himself. When he arrived, he saw Commodore N. Singh Nifighandi sitting in the commanding officer's chair. These U.N.-types always ignore military tradition, he thought—the sanctity of my bridge chair. "Yes sir," he saluted.

"Good morning, Captain," began the Commodore in his curious British accent. "I just saw your Marine detachment holding close-order drill on the hangar deck. We are on a peaceful U.N. mission here. Please have them stop."

"But, sir," began Keith, his jaw tightening. "Those men must stay sharp. That's what they're trained to—"

"Thank you, Captain," clipped the Commodore. "That is all."

"Aye aye, sir." Keith realized it was more despair than anger that he felt. As he turned to leave the bridge, the bos'n handed him the phone.

"XO for you, sir."

"Yeah, XO, what is it?"

"We just got an order modification on your relief. She'll be here three months late. Turns out she's expecting; taking mandatory family leave. You know the regs. Skipper, you there?"

He wasn't. He was back at Annapolis, tossing his cap in the air. He was pulling Gs at 30,000 feet, locked on to a bogey with weapons free. He was feet dry over Kuwait and itching to splash an Iraqi fighter. Something had changed, and it wasn't him. Maybe it was better; probably not. He didn't know for sure, but he knew it wasn't fun anymore. And it had stopped mattering.

Mr. Di Rita, a former naval officer who served in Desert Storm, and is Issues Director for Senator Graham's presidential campaign.

ARLEIGH BURKE ESSAY CONTEST

The U.S. Naval Institute invites entries for its prestigious Arleigh Burke Essay Contest (previously known as the General Prize Essay Contest), an annual competition now entering its 116th year.

Three essays will be selected for prizes.

Anyone is eligible to enter and win. First prize earns \$3,000, a Gold Medal, and a Life Membership in the Naval Institute. First Honorable Mention wins \$2,000 and a Silver Medal. Second Honorable Mention wins \$1,000 and a Bronze Medal.

The topic of the essay must relate to the objective of the U.S. Naval Institute: "The advancement of professional, literary, and scientific knowledge in the naval and maritime services, and the advancement of the knowledge of sea power."

Essays will be judged by the Editorial Board of the U.S. Naval Institute.

ENTRY RULES

1. Essays must be original, must not exceed 3,500 words, and must not have been previously published. An exact word count must appear on the title page.
2. All entries should be directed to: Publisher, U.S. Naval Institute, 118 Maryland Avenue, Annapolis, Maryland 21402-5035.
3. Essays must be postmarked on or before 1 December 1995.
4. The name of the author shall not appear on the essay. Each author shall assign a motto in addition to a title to the essay. This motto shall appear (a) on the title page of the essay, with the title, in lieu of the author's name and (b) by itself on the outside of an accompanying sealed envelope. This sealed envelope should contain a typed sheet giving the name, rank, branch of service, biographical sketch, social

security number, address, and office and home phone numbers (if available) of the essayist, along with the title of the essay and motto. The identity of the essayist will not be known by the judging members of the Editorial Board until they have made their selections.

5. The awards will be presented to the winning essayists at the 122nd Annual Meeting of the membership of the Naval Institute. Letters notifying the award winners will be mailed on or about 1 February 1996, and the unsuccessful essays will be returned to their authors during February.

6. All essays must be typewritten, double-spaced, on paper approximately 8-1/2" x 11". Submit two complete copies. If typed on a computer, please also submit the entry on an IBM-compatible disk, indicating word-processing software used.

7. The winning and honorable mention essays will be published in the *Proceedings*. Essays not awarded a prize may be selected for publication in the *Proceedings*. The writers of such essays will be compensated at the rate established for purchase of articles.

8. An essay entered in this contest should be analytical and/or interpretative, not merely and exposition, a personal narrative, or a report.

Deadline: 1 December 1995

