â€œGreat! Youâ€™ve been to Legal School!â€•

Description

Said the XO, CDR Dave Martin on 4/4/1977.

It was a different time in our history, and I present this story as a contrast to the young men and women we see today, who put on a uniform and do the many things they do, at home and abroad, to protect us.

I had officially reported aboard Saturday evening, checking in the with Command Duty Officer, as my first ship was moored at Pier 2 in Norfolk. George told me to take the rest of the weekend off and show up Monday morning.

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I originally had orders to be the Communications Officer on USS OPPORTUNE (ARS-8), butâ€¦.things changed. My orignal orders had refelected that I would have many â€œhatsâ€• to wear, so after â€œLittle SWOSâ€• (Surface Warfare Officerâ€™s Basic Course), I was sent to Communications Officer School and also Legal Officer. The purpose of a Shipâ€™s Legal Officer, which on most every ship is a â€œcollateral dutyâ€• and not a primary one, was to be the person to provide guidance to the Command on the Uniform Code Of Military Justice (UCMJ), mostly from an administative support role. While the XO reviewed my terribly skinny servie record that day, his eye caught that I had attended the training to allow me to handle the Legal Officer duties. No one else aboard had been to the course.

My first ship was USS MILWAUKEE (AOR-2), a replenishment oiler. The letters in the hull humber, we often joked, stood for â€œAlways Out Replenishing.â€• As part of the Combat Logistics Force (CLF), we were not one of the sleek greyhounds of the sea, nor a mighty aircraft carrier, capable of projecting power â€œacross the beach.â€• We were just the ship that hauled around a bunch of crusty old sailors, who had been around the block and the world many times, making sure the boilers and aircraft on those fancy, â€œhigh valueâ€• ships didnâ€™t have empty tanks. As a result, some of the best and the brightest sailors and officers eluded these assignments.

We carried two CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters. On any ship, when â€œflight quartersâ€• is sounded, an emergency firefighting team is on station, with their equipment laid out, just in case. For rhe most part, specially trained crew members man the â€œcrash and smashâ€• team, having recevied additional training over what every sailor gets as a matter of course.

We had many small boats for the ship. The largest ones were the â€œ40 Footers,â€• which could double as cargo haulers, in addition to getting the crew to and from â€œthe Beach,â€• as the ship drew a 40â€² draft, and many times had to anchor away from shore. We also had two 26 foot motor whale boats. When you ride in one, you will notice most small boats do not have â€œdry bilges,â€• and whatâ€™s down there, mixed with sea water, is usually a little diesel fule, as well as engine oil. Flammable stuff. One of the universal rules of Navy small boats: No Smoking, and that was in effect long before the Navy decided Smoking was bad in the mid-80â€™s. Itâ€™s a safety thing.

When you carry fuel in large quantity, and MILWAUKEE did, you need vents on the tanks. On Navy oilers, the cargo storage tanks have very large vents, and are located on the main deck. We worked and walked around them daily. Rule on the â€œweather decksâ€• of Navy oilers: No Smoking (I hope I donâ€™t have to explain that one). MILWAUKEE carried 6M gals of Diesel Fuel, Marine (DFM or â€œF-76â€•) and 2M gallons of JP-5 (jet engine fuel, or â€œF-44â€•).

I was sowrn into the Naval Reserves as an E-3 in August, 72. That was the first year when there was no ore draft. Fighting was still raging in Vietnam, riots were happening on aircraft carriers, where enlisted minority groups made their displeasure known to the chain of command. It was the opening days of the â€œAll Volunteer Force,â€• and I can state I was one of the charter members.

Fast forward to Apr, 1977. I was assigned to fill the collateral duty of Legal Officer, and within a few days, I was attending one of the very many â€œArticle 15sâ€• or â€œNon-Judicial Punishmentsâ€• I would attend over the next 19 years.

Three enlisted men from the Engineering Department were charged with:

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1) Unauthorized Absence (UA) from apointed duty station (crash and smash crew) during Flight Quarters and
2) Unauthorized use of drugs, to wit: Smoking marijuana
3) While in a small boat
4) in a skid (cradle to store the boat in while itâ€™s not in the water), which was
5) On the main deck of an oilerâ€¦.

Five punishable offenses in one moment of drug use. Welcome to the duties of the Legal Officerâ€¦.

By the time I retired in 1996, the crew of ships (and I travelled extensively to Atlantic Fleet ships weekly in 90-93)were exactly the opposite of those early examples of sailors I first ran across in 1977. I donâ€™t mean to imply it happened that late, just that the contrast is remarkable across that time span, and a powerful reason to support and all volunteer, professional fighting force.

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