Personal Computers â€“ 25 Years and Counting â€“ Part XIII

Description

Part XII discussed my entry into graphics and sound editing. An interesting time, andâ€¦it helps to understand some of this when I do my headers (which I try to make somewhat topical for the significant posting of the moment.

So off to sea duty once more, aboard a small ship, basically equipped with one administrative computer: Shipboard Naval Administation Program (SNAP) II. It runs on a mini-computer (not to be confused with todayâ€™s min sized computers, but â€œminiâ€• meaning it was smaller than a â€œmainframeâ€• computer). Once more, the forward thinking of the Supply Corps is evident, as most of the functions on the computer deal with the supplies aboard, but there were also some basic functions like word processing and a â€œticklerâ€• program (a â€œto doâ€• list). Besides the tactical computers (AN/UYK-7s/43s) and the Engineering plant computers, not much else.

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While I didnâ€™t have to be the Navigator, as the new SURFLANT had recinded the directive requiring the XO to be Navigator, where the Navigator billet was less than O-4, but my CO was striaght forward and told me he was comfortable with that arrangement and he would keep it that way. ON a side note, he did point out he and I had more time in servie and time at sea than the rest of the Wardroom combined. It was a fact of the experience levels we just had to be mindful of.

One of the standard questions, for any ship stationed in Charleston was â€œwhat time should we get underway?â€• The tugs wouldnâ€™t work if the current was over 1 Kt and the Cooper River did have a good cycling of the currents. I took my Mac SE and used HyperCard to make a â€œcardâ€• where I could put in a dayâ€™s tide and current data at the standard station (a reference point in the Harbor â€“ all other locations then had a plus/minus time figure listed from that location), then select which other location in the harbor we were. The computer then drew me a chart of the currents, complete with horizontal lines on the graph at the plus/minus one KT â€œcut off.â€• I could set that up within a few moments, whenever we were given a schedule change to get underway. Iâ€™d printout the graph and sit down with the CO to pick the time, then we would get that info to the Operations Officer to submit the request to the Base Ops. One more time saving project from my hobby to make daily work easier.

The prior XO handed over the â€œtickler list,â€• done on the SNAP II computer, in the form of a sheet hanging on a clipboard in our stateroom. Being new at the XO position, it looked very complete to me, butâ€¦.well, suffice it to say, it had left out several items of interest. Thatâ€™s not so much a dig at Tom, as there is far too many administrative things to keep track of, even if you work hard at it. Tom detached and within a few weeks, there were a few â€œADTAKEsâ€• (Advise Action Taken) messages received, specifically asking (in the polite navy-ese way) where our response were. The Captain told me he wanted to never miss an action item again. He was a serious man, and I was new. I gave the proper â€œaye, aye, sirâ€• and went to planning how to make this happen. I then began reviewing the tickler file to see where the missed items had been listed. Surprise! They werenâ€™t on the list, or the older archived items in the database. I spent a little time trying to figure out how SNAP II functioned in this sub-program. NO one aboard, including the SNAP II Coordinator (an enlisted billet, with specific

training) couldnâ€™t answer my questions on how to get recurring items in, so I basically blew off the SNAP II system as a tool for this work. I learned much later, near the end of my tour, that the tickler program was pretty substantial in itâ€™s abliity to handle the task, but none of the â€œexpertsâ€• could tell me that when I needed it.

I was able to acquire a Z-248 computer and set it up in my room. I purchased a copy of the Ashton-Tate dBase III+ database manager and began a project in search of an acronym, that would keep my butt from being bitten by â€œadminis-trivia.â€• The first acronym was â€œAdmin Warfare SHipboard Internal Ticker,â€• but I canned that one, selecting â€œAdministrative Warfare SHipbOard Operational Ticklerâ€• (AW-SHOOT).

The program allowed me to enter any item needing attention, the date received, the date the response was required (internally), the primary and secondary department/collateral duty position responsible for the action and the reference for the requirement. I made the selection for responsibility standard items, easing the effort to keep things standard for report generation. I could have the total report, or select a few common time frames for printout, like 30, 60, 90 and 180 days in the future. I could printout reports by the departments (I placed collateral duty responsibilities within the departments the person was assigned to â€“ more on that choice later). I could dump the entire database as well.

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Items, such as regular reports, could be entered with their periodicity and you then entered how many far into the future you wanted them to propagate the entry out into the future. This was quite a handy feature, and I used it, in one scenario to enter the required officer career counseling (for retention purposes) and keyed them to each officerâ€™s tour aboard the Ship. That helped us establish a mandated program (which I had not seen done anywhere in my prior 13 years of service).

It took several months, and the program evolved daily, but the â€œworkflowâ€• was: Up before breakfast, down to Radio Central, to the Wardroom for a cup of Coffee, back to the stateroom to scan the traffic and add any new items of interest. At the end of the entry process, Iâ€™d pull up the print menu. The normal printout menu dumped an all encompassing report for the time frame selected (normally 30 days, unless it was the first workday of a month, when all itmes would be printed), which would be put on my clipboard and hung near my door, for manual annotations, and then a report dumped for each of the departments and the Command Senior Chief (same time frames as mentioned above). I would, once the print porcess was confirmed to be functioning without the tractor feed mangling the paper, Iâ€™d head down to breakfast. After breakfast, Iâ€™d separate the reports and head for Officerâ€™s Call.

Each report showed the items, along with the responsible parties and the â€œLine of Death,â€• (borrowed from my Ops off of Libya in â€™86 experience) which crossed the page at the end of todayâ€™s items. If it was close to the top of your page, it meant a light day, if it was way down the page, you better be able to muster your â€œstaffâ€• or convince me you needed more time.

While at first, it wasnâ€™t well received at first. Iâ€™ll admit, it did take a little while for acceptance, butâ€¦.one day, the Combat Systems Officer (CSO), Mac, came and asked if I could give him his items on disk (this was after we got computers for all departments), so he could further distribute the tasking to his divsion officers. I did this at first by â€œhand,â€• and later modifed the program so you could install it and set up your own categories of tasking. I refined that version, then it had greater application. The Admin Office began using an installation for tracking their own work, as did the CS Department.

When my relief came, I had 24 months of known reports and all current action items in the program. I got a note from Starr about a year later, thanking me and commenting that early in his time aboard, if he wasnâ€™t sure what the tasking was exactly, the â€œconventional wisdomâ€• of the Department Heads to him was, if itâ€™s on there, do it. He said he never got an ADTAKE, thanks to the program.

Besides the programming aspects, I became very good at checking all the publication/instruction/notice changes coming in and going right to the â€œRequired Reportsâ€• section. I plwed â€œnewâ€• requirements in the program right away. A side effect was I found out there had been reports required that in my some of my earlier duties, I should have prepared and submitted. If I Saw a report in a new document like this, Iâ€™d ask for the prior copy, check the date, and look in itâ€™s required report section. Sure enough, many times there was the same report as in the new version of the documentâ€¦

On top of this part of the story, I used the program to pull off an incredible practical joke. PN1 (later PNC) Weber and I used to have regular conversations about projecting influence beyond your time aboard. What he didnâ€™t know, is I had modified his program. I detached in early March and left from Bahrain. On 1 April, 1990, PNC Weber started the program to be greeted by a splash screen announcing there had been a security problem (it was login/password protected) and all files were being erased! The internal speaker played a siren type sound for about 20 seconds, then the next screen told the operator this was an April Foolâ€™s joke and all data was intact. When the Ship got stateside, PNC Weber called me to concede I got him.

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About a year later, I got a call from one of the former division officers (to remain unnamed, at his request),who said at first he â€œdislked the idea of AW-SHOOT,â€• butâ€¦he was now in charge of a school and would like copy. I sent one, after we had a good laugh and him swearing me to secrecy.

So ends the tale of AW-SHOOT.

Next episode: Automating the workforce and computer generated messages.

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