

CHANGE OF COMMAND CEREMONY – HOW DID IT START (taken from a speech by VADM Paul Reason, 1992)

Naval ceremonies antedate the Christian Era. Common dangers and shared victories tend to the creation of brotherhood, and in none is it closer than that of the naval profession where men are bound by common traditions, shared practices and ancient customs. The Navy, an organization of explicit discipline, lends itself to the perpetuation of the more venerated customs, heroic traditions and dignified ceremonies such as that which we have today.

The ceremonies, customs and traditions of today's U.S. Navy draw their origin from ancient customs and laws of the sea begun in historic times by seafaring men and gradually merged into the British Naval Regulations in effect at the time of the American Revolution. The effect these old customs have had in the formulation of naval regulations is a marked example of the influence of tested usage.

John Adams, who compiled the first rules for regulation of the Navy in the United Colonies and thus set a precedent for future provisions, used as his guide the instructions and regulations of the British Admiralty, themselves a product of time-honored traditions and custom. It was under the direction of these that the Father of the U.S. Navy, John Paul Jones, a born British subject, gave our Navy its earliest traditions of heroism and victory.

Today's Change of Command Ceremony is not prescribed specifically by U.S. Navy Regulations, but rather is a honored product of the rich heritage of Naval tradition. It is a custom wholly naval without an equivalent counterpart in the Army or Air Force. Custom has established that this ceremony be formal and impressive – designed to strengthen that respect for the authority vital to any military organization.. Parading All Hands at Quarters and public reading of official orders stems from those days when movement of mail and persons was a very slow process. This procedure was designated to insure only authorized officers held command and that all aboard were aware of its authenticity.

The heart of the ceremony is the formal reading of official orders by the relieving officer, and the officer to be relieved. Command passes upon utterance by the relieving officer. "I relieve you, sir!" The officer being relieved responds, "I stand relieved!" This simple procedure is duplicated hundreds of times daily throughout the navies of the world as each watch officer passes responsibility to their relief in the conduct of each ship's routine.

The strength of today's Navy stems in large measure from the observance of customs and traditions, each founded on need, each contributing its share of stability, combat effectiveness, and smooth transfer of authority. This simple ceremony passing authority and responsibility to another officer reflects the dedication of free men serving their nation proudly.