

Admiral Mike Mullen,
Pod cast Transcript for 11 June 2007

MC1 MCNEELEY: Welcome to the Chief of Naval Operations pod cast for June 11, 2007. I'm Petty Officer Chad McNeeley. This is the second in a continuing series of discussions with CNO Admiral Mike Mullen. Topics this week include updates to the Navy's IA incentive program and the exploration of a possible two-year sabbatical being offered to sailors in the future. Adm. Mullen will begin by explaining the recent decision to rescind the requirement for an associates degree as a requirement for senior chief.

(Music Plays)

MC1 MCNEELEY: Good afternoon, Admiral. I would just like to start off and ask you about a recent decision you made to rescind the associates degree requirement for advancement to senior chief.

ADMIRAL MIKE MULLEN: Well, good afternoon. It's good to be back with you. That was fairly recent policy, only a couple of years old. And one of the things – I have received this question in almost every all-hands call, so has the MCPON. And so it's because of those questions that are coming up from the sailors throughout the Navy that I committed to go – and MCPON asked me to do this – to go review the policy, to look at it and see what the – how reasonable it was, what the likelihood of people who be able to get there would be.

And in that review, which we have gone over the last several months, we found out that we've – the policy really disadvantages a lot of rates in particular because of the higher tempo of operation for some of our GWOT ratings, small boats, special operations, builders, equipment operators; that many of them are very much at risk in terms of – and when I say many, I'm talking well over half are at risk to be able to complete a degree in time to be eligible for E-8.

True also for aviation boatswains mates. And actually, when you sum it up across the Navy, almost 35 percent of the E-7s that are out there would be put in a difficult if not completely disadvantaged position to achieve this degree.

So I don't – our operations are up considerably from where we were a couple of years ago, and I, in making this change, would – which rescinds this requirement, I would never want to undervalue education. A lot of people have worked very hard on achieving this requirement quickly. From the time I have been a division officer in the late '60s, education has been valued by sailors and valued by me as a leader.

So I'm a big proponent of it. I think it will still be important in people's records. I think selection boards will be directed to pay attention to education in terms of overall development. And I – we have recently in the last year or so increased tuition assistance as a very strong signal and indicator that education continues to be important, to be supported by us in the Navy in the leadership positions that we feel as well.

So it's just a requirement that is not achievable right now. In addition to that, MCPON -- and rightfully so -- as well as many senior leaders in the Navy at my level really want the chiefs to focus on deck plate leadership. And so it's those two things. And that leadership is vital at this time. It's vital for retention; it's vital for advancement for everybody; it's vital for our ability to continue to perform our missions. So having the chiefs out and about is really an important part of this as well.

So we gave it a thorough review at MCPON's request, and his recommendation to rescind this requirement. That is why we have done it.

MC1 MCNEELEY: So there is absolutely no basis in a suggestion that somebody would suggest that the Navy no longer values an academic education.

ADM. MULLEN: None whatsoever. In fact, I think – and when I have been asked this question in forums throughout the first couple of years, I've been seeing, oh, the one of the points I really try to emphasize is we do value education. And I think it's going to be more and more important over time.

Nor would I, by this change right now, close the door for all time on this kind of requirement. We may reevaluate it in years to come, but for right now, we think – we were just moving too fast, disadvantaging too many people. Our operations tempo has changed. We want to get this right, but this in no way is meant to undervalue or devalue efforts people have put in or the value of education for anybody that is out there.

MC1 MCNEELEY: Sticking with OPTEMPO, I have read that there is going to be some changes to the IA system and incentives. Can you talk a little bit more about that, sir?

ADM. MULLEN: We have been heavily reviewing the IA – the individual augmentee program over the last year, year-and-a-half. We previously added some incentives tied to those who are IA's, but we have recently completed another review. And so we've – in that review, we have looked at the possible additional incentives, and we have made some changes that really work to – work in the direction of mainstreaming our IA duty, which is a really important – make it part of our normal detailing process, and we're doing that.

We're looking at the number of tours we can reduce from a year's length to maybe about half that timeframe. And clearly, we're also reducing the time for war zone advancement points from 180 days down to 90 days. These – this IA – while it's a relatively small percentage – it's about one percent of the Navy that is doing this, we have had upwards of 50 to 60,000 sailors who have been IAs since 9/11. And their contributions have been

incredible. I have talked to an awful lot of sailors in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in the Horn of Africa, Guantanamo Bay, and other places we've had IAs. And they have contributed significantly, and they have felt very much a part of the force.

This war, particularly in CENTCOM, that we're in right now, it isn't about the Marines ashore, it isn't about the Army ashore; it's a war that we all participate in as a military service. And so sailors have contributed significantly. We have got over 5,000 on the ground right now. We have got over 13,000 IAs throughout the Navy. And those contributions are incredibly highly thought of by our – the other services. And I'm very proud of what we're able to do.

When I talk about IAs, though, I don't want to just talk about those that are doing it because it's a new area for our families as well. And we have had some challenges making sure our families have the kind of support. And this is not how we do things normally. So our normal structure, the ombudsman program, the focus from the command master chief or the COB, the focus by the commanding officer, it hasn't been enough. We need to make sure – we needed to make sure that our fleet and family support centers are focused on this as well, that the support mechanisms in regions ashore, on our shore bases are also there. So we still have got some work to do in this area.

There are challenges associated with the reserve force and being in IA because when they come home, they go back to – they go back to their homes all over America. And that support group, when they come back – one -- or two, while they're gone – to spouses and families of IAs, of reserves, and the reserves have contributed significantly, are equally important. So the leadership really needs to stay engaged on this. The families have been as – in so many ways unbelievably supportive, and we greatly appreciate that.

MC1 MCNEELEY: So not to – to jump back real quick, sir, not get the focus off the families, but you mentioned making it a part of the regular detailing process. Can sailors expect an opportunity for an IA tour in between, say, shore duty and sea duty?

ADM. MULLEN: Certainly, at least my experience around the fleet is we have got a lot of volunteers that want to go – that want to become IAs. And what we want to do is see if we can't target both a combination of volunteers, as well as someone that might be coming up for PCS orders to go PCS as an IA for a period of time.

And some of these, by the time you start, conduct your training and then go overseas for a year, and then come back and take leave after that, it can be 12, 13, 14, 15 months. So in that vein, PCS -- someone that would normally be rotating, that eases the burden on commands who have to give people under the current process, although I don't think we're going to be able to do away with that totally, and also incentivize, as we have some overseas duty, of possibly going to the coast of choice and someday the next duty as well. So we're in the middle of understanding how to do that.

The point of this is that IAs is a high priority for us as the Navy. It's a high priority for me as a leader of the Navy. And we're trying to make this as much a part of our normal way of doing business as we possibly can, and take care of our people and their families at the same time.

MC1 MCNEELEY: Switching gears a bit, sir, I have read recently that the Navy is considering implementing a program that would allow sailors to take a two-year sabbatical. How will that work, and what is the motivation behind this program?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, right now, it's not a program; it's an idea that we're looking at. And the idea is to see if we can find some way to give sailors the option of taking time off for life kinds of situations and do that without hurting their career -- have an opportunity to go away for a couple of years and come back. This isn't just about women and childbirth issues; it's about other opportunities as well: the ability to finish a degree, the ability to take care of a sick family member.

So it applies -- it's a fairly broad application. I think both in the near term and in the long term, we're going to -- the opportunity -- this would be an excellent opportunity to be the kind of organization that creates these -- this kind of support, and we would be retaining -- having a positive impact on retention. And it's also about putting our people at the center of the universe, which is something we have been working towards over these -- in recent years. I still believe we're going to have to compete in a marketplace for talent in the long run, for highly skilled people, which we have. And there are many people, many industries on the outside, commercial industries and entities that do this.

So it could be a program similar to what the United States Coast Guard has. I've looked at that. And some of the criteria may apply there. So we're still being worked -- I'm sorry, this is still being worked, and we are very much hopeful that we'll be able to try a pilot in the future. I don't think our demands for what we do as a service at sea are going to change, but when we look at nonoperational, we would like to put some balance into the routine that, when you are ashore, and particularly on the support side as well. And I think we can do this without changing our culture dramatically and meeting the needs of our young people as they gain more experience and certainly ascend to more senior positions in the Navy.

MC1 MCNEELEY: Will it be focused at a younger pay grade versus someone who might be looking toward retirement and what their opportunities are on the outside?

ADM. MULLEN: Can't really say that at this particular point in time. Again, I don't want to pin it down to one area. I think it may have broad application, and again, we're reviewing that. Part of doing a pilot is to learn lessons from it and then role that -- from the lessons, possibly role that into a program. But the overall intent here is to look for opportunities to make sure that our people have an opportunity to both serve in the Navy and also take care of themselves and their family in really positive ways.

MC1 MCNEELEY: Any closing thoughts, sir?

ADM. MULLEN: No, not today. It's good to be with you again. As I indicated last week, I'm excited about being able to do this – do these pod casts on a regular basis, and just want to say thanks to all of our men and women who are doing such a great job around the world.

MC1 MCNEELEY: Thank you, sir.

ADM. MULLEN: Thanks.

(Music Plays)

MC1 MCNEELEY: You've been listening to the Chief of Naval Operations Pod cast for June 11th. Please check back on Monday, June 18th for our next edition of the pod cast. Thanks for listening. I'm Petty Officer Chad McNeeley.

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