

MCPON(SW/FMF) Joe R. Campa Jr
Mayport Navy Ball
October 19th, 2007

Good evening ladies and gentlemen and thank you for that warm welcome.

I am very honored to be here with you as we celebrate our Navy's 232nd birthday.

Tonight we pay tribute to our rich heritage and to the men and women who proudly wear the uniform of a United States Navy Sailor.

As many of you know I spent most of my years serving our Navy as a hospital corpsman. But that's not how I started out.

I started my career as a deck seaman. It is a time in the Navy that I will always cherish and look back on as one of the greatest experiences of my career.

Was it hard – absolutely, did I complain – probably.

But in addition to learning the finer points of chipping paint and buffing decks. I came a way from my time as a deck seaman with something much more than I bargained for – something that has stayed with me to this very day – and that's a deep sense of "who we are".

I want to share a story with you about how I came to gain that understanding of what it means to serve our nation as a Sailor.

My first Chief had spent most of his near 30 years in the Navy at sea - and it showed.

He had a long beard and his khakis were almost bleached white from the countless hours of being exposed to the sun, salt and spray of the ocean.

His voice was kind of grizzled and wherever he walked, he left behind a little trail of salt.

Now this Chief was not a man of many words, but when he did speak we listened. He knew the ship, he knew his rate and he had a sixth sense about the sea.

I recall working on the boat deck one day, when the Chief came by—he stepped close to me and looked up at the sky, out at the horizon. He started to tell me to secure things topside for heavy weather. I looked around--the sky was clear--the seas were calm but sure enough a few hours later we were getting pounded by heavy rain and rough seas.

The Chief also had something that I refer to now as cop presence. When he walked into a space the tone of the entire space changed, if you were doing something that you thought he'd frown upon, you immediately stopped.

When he went up to the pilot house to check on those of us standing watch, he'd step on the bridge even the Captain sat up a little straighter in his chair.

That was my Chief.

Shortly after checking onboard, we went on a WestPac deployment.

Our first stop – Pearl Harbor Hawaii. Now for this young Hispanic boy who had never left California, this was exciting. A few days before pulling in, talk of places to go and things to see dominated conversation on the mess decks.

In keeping with tradition, as we made our way into port we manned the rails in our best uniform. I'll never forget the sights of pulling into Pearl Harbor for the first time.

After securing from sea and anchor, the Chief mustered us to give the dos and don'ts of liberty in Hawaii.

Right before he cut us loose, he said in a loud voice: I want the following 5 Sailors to muster with me on the pier at 1600 in your dress whites. As he started to call the names, I silently prayed I would not be one of them. I was anxious to get out and experience my first taste of a liberty port. But low and behold, he called my name.

He didn't tell us why we had to muster and we were all too afraid to ask. When we showed up, he loaded us into one of our boats and we headed out across the harbor. He still didn't say anything about where we were going, but soon it became clear. We pulled up to the Arizona memorial. He led us silently to the wall with the names inscribed and he stood there and stared at it for a few minutes and then he pulled us off to the side and started to tell us the story of the attack on Pearl Harbor. He told the story not in the way it was written in our history books, but he told it in the way that it had been passed down to him from one generation of Sailor to the next.

He told us how the Japanese carriers were able to come within 275 miles off the coast of the island without being detected. He told how the first wave of a 183 aircraft made up of dive bombers, torpedo planes and Japanese fighters flew low over the island and made its first attack, followed by a second wave of 178 planes. He gave us a few other facts such as the number of lives lost and ships sunk. But he also gave us much more.

He told us of names and brave acts of Sailors who fought to save their ships. Names that history did not record but whose bravery and sacrifice make us who we are today and then he told us the story of the sinking of the USS Arizona. How the eleven hundred men went down with their ship – permanently entombed and forever on watch. He told us we were on sacred ground.

As the Chief continued to speak, we all listened – not because we had to, but because by this time we wanted to. I think that we all realized that what he was giving us something very special—a piece of himself, and with it—a piece of our naval heritage. At that moment, I understood what I was part of and it is a gift I carry with me to this very day.

Now I am sure I went out and had a good time on liberty, but that is not what I remember about my first liberty port. What I do remember is being introduced to who we are.

That short trip across the harbor in Hawaii was the first time I realized the true value of our heritage. It's not just reading the history books and memorizing the statistics. It's being able to see the value of wearing this uniform through the selfless acts of the men and women who have gone before us.

It took a deck plate leader to make us aware of what we had to live up to. He showed us the responsibility we have to honor those men still standing the watch aboard Arizona. I don't know what made him pick me that day, but I thank god he did. He taught us a lesson he knew we'd never forget, that the missions, the uniforms and the equipment may change...but only one thing can truly define us, and that's proving through actions and character who we are as United States Sailors.

Happy birthday shipmates. Enjoy your evening and thank you for inviting me to help you celebrate two hundred thirty two years of history and heritage.