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**"The Remedy for Career Fear"**  
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Introduction:

Over the past couple years, the term "career fear" has come into currency to describe the alleged reluctance on the part of career-minded military personnel to take necessary and prudent risks. Various commentators have expressed the opinion that the service's purported intolerance for mistakes is breeding a generation of warriors more concerned with protecting their careers than performing the acts of physical and moral courage that are the proper foundation for truly successful careers.

The term suggests a paradox in that those who would be the boldest members of society have allegedly been herded into the ranks of the timid by the uncertainties that have attended military service in the post Cold War era.

I have followed the public discussions on "career fear" with the measure of skepticism that comes naturally to one whose vantage point privileges him to see recurring examples of the devotion to duty that characterizes Coast Guard service around the world.

I don't have any problem with the term itself. In fact, I think it is a useful phrase to describe a moral weakness against which all of us should remain vigilant: namely the tendency to forget that the essence of our Coast Guard service is the advancement of America's interests ahead of our own personal goals.

What I take exception to are the assumptions that have accompanied the recent coinage of the term: the assumptions that the problem is new, that it is peculiar to military careers, and that it is pervasive throughout our service. "Career fear" has been present to one degree or another in all human organizations, both military and civilian. In the Roman Empire, Pontius Pilate exhibited "career fear" when he refrained from interfering with the execution of an innocent man because such an act of justice might have been a career-ending mistake.

It is nothing new, and it doesn't characterize the Coast Guard, but it is something we should be aware of.

The Station Atlantic City RHI Beaching:

This morning I would like to draw examples from two recent Coast Guard cases to make three points with respect to "career fear." First, it is not pervasive throughout the Coast Guard. Second, the reason it is not pervasive is that personal leadership—especially at the level of the chief petty officer—prevents its spread. Third, the service supports its

members who conscientiously apply their training, doctrine, and judgment to the operational exigencies they face.

The two cases occurred about a week apart this summer. One case you have almost certainly heard about. The other case you almost certainly have not heard about.

In the less well known case, a 21-foot RHI from Station Atlantic City, New Jersey, was on patrol when it was diverted for an urgent SAR case occurring about a half mile away. A ten-year-old boy and a thirty five-year-old woman had been caught in a rip tide in the surf. The coxswain, a young third class boatswain's mate, brought the boat on scene within just a couple minutes and was immediately confronted with a difficult decision. "Do I enter the surf zone to attempt this rescue?"

If career fear had driven his thinking, the decision would have been easy. "If I stay out here, no one can second guess me because my boat isn't rated for these surf conditions. If I go in, I could beach the boat, lose my coxswain quals or my crow or worse. Sorry. Somebody's going to have to do a shore-based rescue."

As it happened, this coxswain's thinking was governed, not by "career fear," but by his sense of duty, his training, and his intelligent assessment of all the factors that were present in a situation that wasn't covered by his SOP. He made the decision, went in, recovered the two PIW, and brought his boat out into good water—where he immediately faced another decision.

The woman was not responsive and not breathing, though she did have a weak pulse. The boy was hypothermic. The coxswain and his crew—a second class machinery technician and a seaman apprentice—began rescue breathing on the woman and progressed to CPR when they lost her pulse. It was a twenty-minute ride to the nearest boat dock, longer at the slower speed needed to continue administering CPR. EMS crews were on the beach. The coxswain faced the choice of navigating to the nearest docking facility to effect the safe transfer of what would in all probability be a corpse, or beaching his boat right where he was and possibly raising the woman's chance of survival from none to slim.

At that moment "Career fear" had a second opportunity to influence an operational decision. A career-fearing coxswain might have reasoned that there was no point in risking his career for a woman with no respiration and no pulse. There was no possibility of blame if he took the longer and safer route but significant opportunity for censure if he damaged his boat in a futile attempt to save the woman's life.

He quickly considered the relevant critical factors—sea state, weather, the fact that his boat had twin 90-horse engines instead of twin seventies, the sudden loss of vital signs, the availability of EMS on the beach, the distances and times involved—and decided to beach the RHI. He called back to the station and sought concurrence from the station OOD.

At this next juncture, "career fear" pressures might have been brought to bear on the station OOD, who was himself only a second class boatswain's mate. We can all understand the reluctance with which a career-minded mid-grade petty officer would

accept responsibility for an intentional beaching, especially when it was based only on the hurried explanation of a third class petty officer. The least tincture of "career fear" would have caused him to deny the request or pass it up the chain.

But this OOD wasn't influenced by "career fear," and he knew there wasn't time for higher level review. So he approved the beaching on his own authority.

The coxswain beached the boat and transferred the victims to EMS personnel. The ten-year-old boy recovered, but the woman never regained vital signs. Despite the best efforts of everyone involved, she died. It is a very sad case, and we see far too many cases like it in which we arrive too late to save lives.

In the natural course of events, the station CO initiated an investigation and filed a mishap report. That's how we heard about it at headquarters. That report affirmed the correctness of the beaching decision while noting that the occasions on which beaching is warranted occur but very rarely. It also said that training has been conducted to ensure that the crew knew the importance of each factor in this decision. Care has evidently been taken to prevent this good decision from becoming the precedent for future bad decisions.

I am saddened by the loss of life, but I nevertheless draw encouragement from this case because of what it reveals about the health of leadership and core values on our front lines.

It's encouraging because reasoned, informed, risk-based decision making such as that exhibited by the coxswain and the OOD can only happen as the result of personal leadership skills that they brought to the situation.

I contend it was neither automatic or accidental that they were ready to perform. Somebody had to train this young coxswain and this young OOD to think through their decisions even when under extreme operational pressure. Somebody had to train them to operate in that zone of professional seamanship that lies between risk aversion and recklessness, between lack of confidence and overconfidence. Somebody had to develop the mental discipline to anticipate and prepare for emergency situations. Somebody had to instill the confidence that they had the ability to make correct decisions in life-or-death situations. Somebody had to create a leadership climate in which these junior people could make hard calls without fear of being punished if things didn't work out right.

That's where the chief comes in. That's always where the chief comes in. There's a lieutenant involved, too. The station CO has a habit of saying, "junior people make big decisions," and he consciously shapes his leadership efforts to equip them to make those decisions well.

But my focus today is on the role of the chief. When we looked into this case, we found a chief petty officer, the station XPO, who exudes the professionalism and personal leadership that prevents "career fear" from gaining a toe-hold in the hearts of his boat crews. We found a chief who practices constant communication and constant teaching. Constantly using de-briefs to build confidence and strengthen decision-making. Consciously using qualification boards as teaching opportunities. Continuously attentive

to the maturation of his subordinates' thought processes. Always working to maintain an atmosphere of teamwork and learning and service.

The remedy for "career fear" is preparation for personal leadership—instilling in one's crews the conviction that doing one's duty well is the best way to build a successful career.

The other bit of good news in this story is that this chief in Atlantic City isn't alone. He is emblematic of the kind of leadership we're getting out of chief petty officers throughout the Coast Guard. I ask every CPO Academy class to take it seriously and think through personally. The evidence suggests they are—you are (!)—doing just that.

### Conclusion:

Last week, I signed the action of the final reviewing authority of the investigation into the Coast Guard's use of force in the interdiction of six Cuban migrants near Miami Beach in late June. That was another case that didn't turn out the way we would have scripted it, and television cameras were on hand to record the more visually disturbing details.

In my final action, I found that we do need to make some adjustments to our use of force policy so we can manage the level of violence and resistance we now encounter in migrant cases. I also found that the Coast Guard personnel involved in the case were acting within the scope of their federal employment. The Coast Guard will adjust its policy, tactics, and training; but the people who prosecuted that case within the policy and doctrine in place at that time will bear no blame and no stigma.

These two cases make my points about "career fear." First, it is not pervasive, as evidenced by the intelligent risk-assessments that Coast Guard personnel effectively make every single day. Second, the reason it is not pervasive is the exercise of personal leadership, especially at the chief's level. And third, it is unnecessary, because ours is a service that does not search for scapegoats. We seek to learn and improve, not to point fingers at people who perform their duty as well as they are able.

As is the case with virtually all our professional challenges, the Chief Petty Officers Association also serves as a crucial bulwark against "career fear." I am grateful for all the nurturing investments you make to that end. Thank you for allowing me to be with you today.

You have a great convention; I'm headed for leave!

Semper paratus.

