



MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN RETENTION

A while back, I was forwarded an email with the comment: "Having been on the cutter _____ recently, I saw the command kick out more than 15 non-rates because they didn't want to deal with them or even try mentoring. We could resolve our retention problems..."

Here's one officer's commitment to do his very best at retaining those people the Navy worked so hard at recruiting into their Service.

P.S. RADM Konetzni has subsequently been reassigned as Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet with a promotion to Vice Admiral.

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How Adm. Konetzni Intends To Mend the Navy's Staff Woes

By GREG JAFFE

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

HONOLULU, Hawaii -- When Rear Adm. Albert H. Konetzni took command of the Pacific submarine fleet two years ago, he inherited a Navy-wide personnel crisis.

Subs were going to sea without full crews. Junior sailors were streaming out of the service. Inside the Pentagon, officials blamed a strong economy and pushed through the largest pay raise in decades.

Adm. Konetzni blamed his top officers. If the Pacific submarine fleet "were General Motors, they would change our management team," he wrote his captains and commanders in July 1998.

Today, despite the additional pay, the Navy is still struggling to field full crews. Adm. Konetzni is not. Sailors in the Pacific sub fleet sign up for a second tour of duty at twice the rate of the rest of the Navy. To keep sailors, the two-star admiral has slashed the hours crews work in port, hired civilians to do scut work that typically falls to the troops, and harangued captains who push their crews too hard. In his most controversial move, he has fought to save hundreds of sailors who a few years ago would have been kicked out of the service because of psychological or disciplinary problems.

"There just aren't enough sailors coming in the front door," the admiral wrote in a memo to his commanders last year. "We must make every effort to keep all our junior sailors. We must find the square hole for the square peg."

Has Adm. Konetzni, known inside the service as "Big Al the Sailor's Pal," figured out a solution to the military's personnel woes? Or, as some of his critics claim, is he lowering standards to keep sailors in the service? Simply put, is he making the Navy too sailor-friendly or just friendly enough?

These are questions the Navy itself is struggling to answer. Three months ago, Navy brass put out a message that officers and senior enlisted personnel would be judged not just on their battle skills, but also on their ability to keep people in the Navy. "We are trying to get out the message that we will do anything to keep good people," says Vice Adm. Norb Ryan, who runs the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

Even the Navy, however, admits that at times it has had a hard time figuring out how much it should bend to make its sailors lives easier. Eager to reduce the number of young men and women flunking out of boot camp, the Navy in 1998 passed out blue "time-out cards," which recruits were to hand to drill instructors when they felt overly stressed. The cards became a subject of ridicule within the Navy and were abandoned. "In that case we went too far," says Adm. Ryan. "We need a certain amount of anxiety and stress."

Halfway around the world from the Pentagon, Adm. Konetzni is sure that he has found the right balance.

It is a little after 11 a.m., and the 55-year-old admiral is on the phone in his Pearl Harbor office loudly expressing his love for a fellow admiral who has agreed to take on one of his chief petty officers. "You know I love you," Adm. Konetzni brays into the telephone in his booming New York accent. "Oh yeah, I love you."

It is a phrase he repeats dozens of times a day. When his public-affairs officer walks into his office, the admiral drapes an arm around him and says, "I love this guy." In the next hour Adm. Konetzni goes on to profess affection for New York Knicks forward Latrell Sprewell, as well as for a group of Korean admirals who inexplicably sent the admiral a Mother's Day card. "I love these guys," Adm. Konetzni says, holding up the card, which features a dreamy picture of flowers in a crystal vase. "These guys are my goombahs."

A bear of a man with a passion for sailors and a background in military personnel, Adm. Konetzni seemed a natural to attack the Navy's people problems when he arrived in Pearl Harbor. Just days after he assumed command, he concluded that to keep his sailors, he would have to make sure they had more free time between their grueling six-month-long deployments.

"We were running our sailors to death. They had no life outside the Navy," he recalls.

The admiral took \$500,000 from his spare-parts budget and hired civilians to paint subs and fix the galleys. He shelled out an additional \$12,000 from the travel budget on a conveyor belt to load boxes onto ships. His are the only subs that use a belt rather than a line of sailors to load supplies.

"All these things are small things but they give sailors a piece of their life back," the admiral says.

The payoff, however, was also relatively small. Sailors were still putting in too many hours, he says today. To make a big difference in sailors' lives, the admiral decided he had to change the way his top officers thought about their men and their missions.

Submarine captains typically have to make huge sacrifices to attain command; once there, they demand perfection from their crews. An oft-repeated joke among sailors is that SSN, the acronym the Navy uses to describe its attack submarines, stands for "Saturdays, Sundays and Nights," a reference to the long hours submariners spend working in port.

A few weeks after he took over in Hawaii, Adm. Konetzni ordered that submarine crews should work from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. in port. He even sent out a sample plan of the day. Among the sub captains, the mandate was seen as a threat to their authority and the success of their boats. "I specifically wrote in my plans for my ship that I didn't intend to comply with the schedule," says Cmdr. Dennis Murphy, captain of the USS Tucson, an attack sub. "I was taken aback that a flag officer would send out that kind of message. It was akin to putting his hand on the rudder of my ship."

Sensing resistance, Adm. Konetzni decided to make an example of another ship, the USS Honolulu. At the time, the Honolulu was considered the best boat in Pearl Harbor. The sub's leader, Capt. Cecil B. Haney, was revered by his fellow commanders, who selected him as the winner of the Vice Adm. James Stockdale Leadership award.

Capt. Haney's crew, which regularly put in exhausting 12-hour days in port, thought their commanding officer was driving them too hard. Only 18% of the

Honolulu's junior sailors signed up for a second tour in the Navy. "There were some times you worked so hard you felt like you spent your whole life on the ship," says Second Class Petty Officer Paul Dean.

Capt. Haney acknowledges that he pushed his crew, but says an unexpected early deployment led to some of the long days. "We worked hard, but the sailors got a lot of kudos. The Honolulu had a great reputation," he says.

In summer 1999, Adm. Konetzni attacked the problems on the Honolulu head-on. Speaking to his top officers, the admiral criticized Capt. Haney, who had recently left the boat, for demanding too much of his crew.

"It grieved him to do it, but he said the Honolulu was not a successful boat. No one wanted to be

there," recalls Cmdr. Dick Pusateri, the Pacific submarine fleet's lead chaplain. "His words changed SUBPAC. The admiral was telling us that taking care of people means something even if we've been pretending it does not."

Within weeks, 20 of the admiral's 29 ships, including the Honolulu, were complying with the 40-hour workweek, according to a tally the admiral posted for the officer corps' perusal. "If you are still an unbeliever" in the 40-hour week, "you are in the minority and you need to talk to your fellow commanding officers to see how they are doing it," Adm. Konetzni wrote in a message challenging the holdouts.

On the Honolulu, the change was striking. Instead of putting in 12-hour days, the sailors rarely worked past 4 p.m. To give the crew more free time, the new captain, John Richardson, delegated additional authority to his junior officers, allowing them to approve work on their own. He cut back on unnecessary meetings and inspections, and prodded junior officers and chiefs to become better managers by planning schedules as much as six weeks in advance.

"A few months ago, I don't think anyone really cared how much time sailors spent on the ship," says Chief Petty Officer Anthony B. Kostner. "People enjoy coming to work now. I don't think they did before."

Admiral Konetzni's workweek edict, however, caused new problems on many of the ships, including the Honolulu. Without full crews, the shorter week was a Catch-22 for the more senior sailors. In many cases, chief petty officers, the ship's foremen, were taking on extra work so those under them could go home early. Jobs weren't being completed. Some chiefs were on the "verge of revolt," according to one commanding officer.

To make the new hours work, Adm. Konetzni needed to find some more sailors. He began focusing on the high number of sailors who were being discharged because of so-called "personality disorders" and misconduct. In 1997, the year before Adm. Konetzni took over in Hawaii, about 25% of the Pacific submarine fleet's junior sailors were kicked out of the Navy, close to half after seeing a psychiatrist who said they had a "personality disorder."

"Personally, I think all of us have some sort of personality disorder," Adm. Konetzni wrote in a message to his commanding officers shortly before Christmas 1998. The Honolulu's new captain and its senior enlisted officer were the first to heed the call. "We put out the word if you've got bodies you don't know what to do with, then send them to us," says Senior Chief Billy Cramer.

At 5 a.m. on a cool Thursday morning, one of those bodies, Seaman Robert Tregaskes, is wheezing his way through a required two-mile jog for the Honolulu's 16 sailors who can't meet the Navy's basic fitness requirements. Mr. Tregaskes's pre-Navy life wasn't easy. He has no memory of his father. At age eight, he left his mother to live with an aunt and uncle. Although he finished in the top 10% of all recruits on the military's entrance exam, Mr. Tregaskes found himself ill-equipped for the Navy. "I was kind of a dirtbag on my first boat," he says. "I didn't want to be there, so I just kind of stopped trying."

He quickly was labeled as having a personality disorder, kicked off his first sub and told to pick up trash around the base. A year ago, he would have been kicked out of the Navy. But at the admiral's urging, the Honolulu snapped him up.

Now the boat is trying to whip him into shape.

At the one-mile mark, Mr. Tregaskes isn't sure he'll finish the run. "How you doing, shipmate?" asks Lt. Cmdr. Dennis White, the boat's executive officer. Mr. Tregaskes, fighting for breath, complains that his ankle is sore, but he presses on and finishes with the group. He's not the best sailor on the Honolulu. His chief petty officer complains that Mr. Tregaskes sometimes falls asleep in class, but adds he is doing "OK."

"I like this boat," Mr. Tregaskes says before heading off to class. "The whole attitude here is different. Everyone wants to get their work done and go home. They look out for you. It's like they know that being on a sub just stinks."

To accommodate sailors labeled as having personality disorders, Adm. Konetzni has pushed the limits of the Navy's personnel system in all sorts of ways.

Convinced that psychiatrists were too prone to discharge struggling sailors, he urged his commanders to try all other options. "Let the young man talk to a priest, a minister, his mother, but in most of these cases the psychiatrist is the last person you want him to see," Adm. Konetzni says he told his captains.

When commanding officers recommended a sailor for dismissal, Adm. Konetzni required a full accounting. For someone commanding a force of 11,500, such personal involvement was unheard of. It did, however, have an immediate effect. By early 1999, chaplains, who rarely heard from commanding officers, were getting regular requests to talk with young seamen. Troubled sailors were switching boats. And the number of sailors who didn't complete their first enlisted tour dropped by nearly half to 170 in 1999, compared with 300 a year earlier.

"We've saved two boats of sailors by reducing attrition," Adm. Konetzni says today. "I am not sure I want them all on the same ship, but I want them in the Navy."

Saving sailors, however, often involved tough judgment calls. Last summer, while strolling along the waterfront in Pearl Harbor, Adm. Konetzni ran into then-Seaman Sean Holland. Noticing that he was wearing a hat from the USS Columbia, which was on deployment, the admiral asked why he wasn't with his crew. Mr. Holland told him he was being discharged because of a personality disorder. The admiral asked him to stop by his office the next morning to talk about his problems.

To Cmdr. William Drake, Mr. Holland's captain, the case was clear-cut. From the moment the then-23-year-old stepped on the USS Columbia, he'd made it clear that he didn't want to be on the fast attack sub, but on the USS Florida, a nuclear-armed Trident submarine on which he had several friends.

Cmdr. Drake and his top chief petty officer tried to help the young sailor adjust, telling him the Navy needed him on the Columbia, not the Florida. They talked about music, books and swimming.

"He was very anxious, nervous and self-conscious," Cmdr. Drake says of the young sailor. "He wasn't getting it. He was a smart kid, very bright ...[but] he couldn't adapt to the rigors of the Navy."

Today, Mr. Holland says he felt claustrophobic on the far smaller attack sub and had trouble managing his temper. "I was asking for help. All I wanted was to see a doctor, and they weren't letting me," he says. Eventually, Mr. Holland, who had finished first in his class at sonar school, saw a doctor who recommended he be discharged from the Navy.

When the young sailor and the admiral met in his office the next morning, Adm. Konetzni had one question for him: "What the hell do you want to do with your life?"

Mr. Holland replied he wanted to be on a Trident sub, specifically the USS Florida. "Would you work your ass off?" Adm. Konetzni asked.

When Mr. Holland nodded yes, the admiral called Cmdr. Drake and asked how he would feel about trading Mr. Holland for a sonar operator on the USS Florida. Cmdr. Drake, who had earlier recommended Mr. Holland for a dishonorable discharge, agreed to the deal.

Cmdr. Drake's colleagues recall that he was initially "upset" that the admiral had interceded in the case. He says today that he was worried that granting the sailor's wish would undermine the ethic of self-sacrifice and duty that is critical during times of war. "It's a tradeoff," he says of the decision to give in to the sailor and thereby keep him in the Navy.

Others, outside of the Pacific submarine fleet, say the case is worrisome. "You can't allow people to show disrespect for the Navy chain of command one minute and expect they are going to change during a war," says retired Vice Adm. Joseph Metcalf, who has written about military personnel issues. "It is a dicey proposition."

Today, Mr. Holland, who was recently promoted to third class petty officer, is doing well on his new ship. Meanwhile, the admiral notes, there are more telling signs the new personnel policies are working. The percentage of Adm. Konetzni's sailors who sign up for a second tour of duty has doubled in the past two years, morale is high, and there has been no falloff in the fleet's ability to execute its mission.

Adm. Konetzni says his decision to move Mr. Holland was a "simple one." "I really disagree with those who say if you make this exception, everyone will ask for something," he says. "Guys will say that the Navy looked after this guy so I know they will look after me."

Write to Greg Jaffe at greg.jaffe@wsj.com

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