



Admiral James M. Loy

"If I Didn't, It Would Fall Over"

Hampton Roads Coast Guard Ball

April 24, 1999

Amenities:

If this is the second annual Hampton Roads Coast Guard Ball, my superior mathematical reasoning ability tells me that this delightful local tradition probably started sometime on Vice Admiral Rufe's watch.

We need more occasions like tonight's ball to reinforce our sense of community and our spirit of camaraderie, the more so as our operational tempo and personnel shortages put more pressure on our people. My thanks to all who planned and executed this very special evening. Roger, thank you for seeing the need, for doing something about it, and for asking me to be part of it.

I'm delighted to see such a good turnout, and I thank all of you for coming out tonight.

Introduction:

I hate to disappoint you, but I'm going to tell you a little story tonight—and it's not a sea story.

Most of you here are too young to remember John Brodie. Or perhaps you do know him, but only as a golfer on the senior tour. Or maybe you heard that he is the father-in-law of Chris Chandler, who led the Atlanta Falcons to the Super Bowl this year.

But older folks—people like Admiral Rufe here—remember John Brodie as the quarterback for the San Francisco Forty Niners from 1957 through 1973. He was the National Football League's Most Valuable Player in 1970. He held all the 49er passing records until a guy named Joe Montana came along.

John Brodie was a solid starting quarterback for quite a few years, but he never made more than 35,000 dollars per year until the pre-merger rivalry between the AFL and the NFL suddenly made him one of football's first millionaires.

It was the custom back then, as it still is today, for backup quarterbacks to hold the ball for extra points and field goal attempts. Having the understudy perform this task permitted the starter to catch his breath and gave the back-up some game experience. But the Niners didn't follow the standard practice. John Brodie took all the snaps.

And so it happened that a reporter asked John Brodie why a million dollar quarterback was holding the ball for field goals and extra points. Joe Namath didn't hold the ball for kicks. Fran Tarkenton didn't.

John Brodie's answer teaches us several important lessons about leadership, and it is the subject of my speech tonight.

Why did this million dollar MVP quarterback hold the ball on field goal and extra point attempts? "Well," said John Brodie, "If I didn't, it would fall over."

Useful Work is Never Beneath Us:

The first lesson has to do with the recognition that leading is never far from doing. And no useful work is ever beneath our dignity.

If a job needs to be done, and you're best equipped or best positioned to do it—then by all means do it. There's a story about George Washington that illustrates this point. Most people today don't know what an imposing physical specimen our first president was. He ranks with Abraham Lincoln as one of our tallest presidents, but his height was powerfully distributed along a sturdy and athletic frame. And so, encountering a group of soldiers grunting and groaning and utterly unable to budge a cart that had gotten stuck in the mud, George Washington immediately knew that the right place for a large general at that moment was not on a fine white horse. He dismounted, waded into the mud, dispersed the normal-sized soldiers, and shoved the cart onto dry ground.

"If I didn't do it, it would fall over." I've seen this attitude in Coast Guard men and women for my entire career, and it has always been a source of inspiration and encouragement. Maybe our organizational structure of small, remote units and lean staffs—exacerbated by our present workforce shortages—demands it of us. But whatever its source, the attitude is one of those distinctive Coast Guard traits that I will always treasure.

This spirit is the primary reason the Coast Guard has acquired its remarkable portfolio of maritime missions. When a panel studied the Coast Guard's roles and missions in 1962, the Secretary of the Treasury concluded that "many of the Coast Guard's multiple functions were transferred to it during national emergencies under the hard logic of expediency; there was nobody else who could do the job right then. With imagination and flexibility, the Coast Guard fitted each new task into its pattern of operation."

Saying there was nobody else who could do the job is really just another way of saying, "If we didn't do it, it would fall over." The reason the Coast Guard is able to deliver such an extraordinary range of services to the American public is that we have never considered any worthwhile service to be beneath our dignity. The willingness to tackle new missions with imagination and flexibility and vigor—even the missions we didn't ask for—has made us what we are today.

We need to preserve that willingness at the organizational and individual levels as we move forward.

Support Your Team:

We can also look at what John Brodie did not say to learn about taking responsibility for our individual contributions to our team.

John Brodie didn't take the bait offered him to second-guess the decision. He didn't say he hated holding the ball, but the coach made him do it. He didn't say the backup quarterback was too clumsy to execute the quick catch-place-and-spin move needed to spot the ball for the kicker. His answer doesn't offer the least clue as to why the Forty Niners didn't follow the standard practice. It could have been the coach's idea. Could have been his idea. Could have been the backup quarterback's idea. Didn't matter. However they reached their decision, he was going to carry out his part without grumbling about it.

It reminds me of the character demonstrated by the commanding officer of a buoy tender some years back. (Okay, maybe just a bit of a sea story.) Just as liberty was about to be piped on a Friday afternoon at the end of a very tough week, the OOD received a report that one of the cutter's buoys had been knocked off station. Uh-oh. With great trepidation, the Ensign OOD brought the message to the cabin.

This incident occurred in the days before we had pre-calculated Discrepancy Response Factors for every buoy. Back then, there did exist some room for negotiating the precise degree of urgency that would attach to individual outages. So the CO called his boss in the district office and made his best case for why this particular buoy could wait until Monday. It didn't work. So the CO made a second plea, this time explaining why this particular crew should be given a little consideration in light of how hard they had been working. The CO pressed the issue so emphatically that the ensign thought it possible that the conversation he was witnessing was taking place outside the bounds of propriety usually observed in communications between mid-grade and senior officers. It was all for naught. The captain at the district was firm. It's an important buoy at a difficult turn. Fix it now.

Sailors aren't stupid, and ships don't usually hold quarters on Friday afternoon to pass good news. So a pretty sullen group had mustered on the fantail when the CO emerged from the doghouse to tell them they had thirty minutes to call their families. He explained the situation simply. "We just heard a buoy got hit. It's our job to fix it. Let's go get it done."

All weekend long, the crew grumbled about the captain's indifference to their overworked condition. Some even speculated as to how unhappy the CO's marriage must be that he actually liked getting underway on weekends. They never knew—because the CO forbade the ensign from telling them—about the phone call to district.

The CO did explain his logic to the ensign. "When you give an order, it has to come from you. You can't have folks wondering who's in charge of the ship."

Or as John Brodie might have put it, "Once the ball has been snapped to you, it doesn't matter how you got behind the center or who told you to get there. Just hold the ball and make sure it doesn't fall over."

Make the Greatest Contribution You Can:

This anecdote also reminds us to make the greatest contribution we can.

Did it ever occur to you that all organizational charts are drawn upside down? That pyramid of boxes doesn't accurately reflect the job of leaders.

In fact, the whole ugly METAphor of climbing up ladders and over people and stepping on their backs is completely foreign to the career experience of the senior enlisted people and the warrant officers and the senior officers with whom I have been most proud to serve.

Officers in charge are not on top of their stations or cutters. They are under their units. Their job is to support the people who work with them. They bear the weight of responsibility, so their subordinates—the people above them—will have the equipment and training and support to do their jobs.

And so it is with every leadership position in the Coast Guard. You start out with the basic responsibility of doing what you're told and staying out of trouble. But as soon as you can do that, you're asked to take responsibility for someone or something else. You're asked to accept some additional weight beyond your own bodily mass. As you progress in your career, you progressively become stronger. When you get accustomed to carrying a certain amount of weight, you prepare yourself to take on even more weight. It's not a process of climbing. It's a process of squatting lower and lower, getting your shoulders under the weight of more and more of the organization, and supporting ever heavier portions of the overall load. "If we don't do it, it will fall over."

For John Brodie, holding the ball for kick attempts could have been one of his ways of taking more of the team's weight upon his shoulders.

Look for People Who Can Learn to Hold the Ball:

I'd like to close by taking this discussion one step further than the METAphor really supports.

There's an important difference between the NFL and the Coast Guard—and it's not that NFL players only have to work sixteen weekends a year.

America's college football programs churn out more excellent football players than the NFL teams can hire. Each year, a flood of eager young men come into the NFL wanting to take on as much weight as they can as fast as they can.

But the people who are already on the team don't necessarily welcome the new guys with open arms. After all, the rookies are trying to take jobs away from veterans. Once in a while, you encounter an experienced quarterback near the end of his career who takes a genuine interest in training a promising newcomer to replace him, but the nature of the competition dictates that the starters aren't much interested in helping the substitutes to take their places.

We're different. We don't have all the people we need. Many of the people we do have don't have the training or the experience they need for the jobs they have. And so, we depend on our veterans to train our rookies to take their jobs. All of us share the obligation to train the people who are above us—that is, the one's not yet bearing all the weight they can.

When you work to prepare yourself to carry additional weight, you're practicing personal development. When you work to prepare somebody else to carry the weight you presently support, you're practicing leadership development. Let's make especially sure that leadership development is one ball that we never let fall over. Our future effectiveness depends on it.

Conclusion:

Tonight is one of those nights when I am especially glad to be in the Coast Guard. I've had a great time visiting with old friends and meeting new ones. Everywhere I look, I see people who are keeping balls from falling over. It's been a wonderful evening.

I don't know exactly which balls all of you are holding tonight. But the superlative performance of the Coast Guard in Hampton Roads and throughout the Atlantic Area so often captures my attention that I know you're holding up your fair share. Thank you for not letting the Coast Guard's ball fall over.

Semper Paratus.

