



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Vice Admiral Thomas H. Collins

Chief Warrant Officers' Association

April 27, 2002

Amenities:

Thanks very much for that warm welcome, Norm [Robbins, CWOA President]. I appreciate the opportunity to break bread with all of you tonight.

It's been a great evening so far. I sense a feeling of hope and optimism in the air. Maybe it's just that you're hopeful and optimistic that my remarks will be brief!

I'd rather think that it has more to do with the coming of spring and warmer weather...and baseball season.

There's nothing quite so hopeful as the beginning of another baseball season. Or another inning, for that matter.

I'm reminded of the story of a man who stopped by a ball field for a moment to watch a Little League game. He called to one of the youngsters in the field to ask him what the score was.

"We're behind 9 to nothin'," came the chipper reply.

"You don't seem very disappointed," the man said.

The boy shook his head and grinned. "We ain't been up to bat, yet, Mister!"

There's an outlook for you. I can identify with that kid!

I'm very grateful for the honor to have been selected to serve as your next Commandant. Admiral Loy has added blessing to that honor through his tremendous leadership to prepare the Coast Guard for the years ahead.

It's a new inning. And I'm ready for my turn at bat!

I'd like to share with you some of my thoughts about the leadership challenges ahead as we build on the strong lead that Admiral Loy has established during the past four years. My emphasis will be focused sharply in three areas: readiness, stewardship, and people.

We must be ready to perform all our missions; we must strengthen our stewardship of the public trust; and we must remain loyal to our people and inspire their loyalty to us.

All three areas of emphasis will be important to meeting the challenges of the future, as we look forward to the coming days ahead. I'd like to take time tonight to focus on what I think is the most important element of the three: people.

Specifically, I'd like you to consider with me the impact of leadership on keeping and developing our most valuable resource.

Introduction:

Many of you have heard the story of Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated expedition to be the first to cross the frozen continent of Antarctica in the early decades of the last century. Though his expedition failed to achieve its goal, it was a remarkable feat of endurance and leadership under extreme conditions.

Every good story benefits from being told again.

The British Admiralty commissioned Shackleton's expedition shortly before the outbreak of World War I. They sailed in a ship called *Endurance*, bound for the south pole in the fall of 1914. It was nearly summer in the southern hemisphere. When they were just one day's sail away from reaching the continent, Shackleton's ship became trapped in sea ice.

Frozen fast for ten months, the ship was finally crushed and destroyed by the pressure of the ice floes.

The crew was forced to abandon ship. The journals of the crew recorded the death of the ship, and described its last agonizing days, groaning and lurching like a living creature in the clutches of the ice. Finally, on October 27, 1915, the ship sank beneath the ice pack.

After camping with his men for half a year, first on the ice and later on Elephant Island, Shackleton made an open boat journey—a treacherous 800-mile ocean crossing to South Georgia Island—to seek help for his men.

During that dangerous two-week voyage in a 22 foot whaleboat with 5 other men and provisions to last them barely a month, he and his small crew suffered from nearly constant gales, below freezing temperatures, and blinding snow squalls.

It is now considered one of the most daring journeys by open boat in recorded history.

Upon reaching land at the island of South Georgia, they trekked across the mountains...reached the remote whaling station on the other side of the island...organized a rescue team...and eventually saved every single man they had left behind.

Though he failed in his original mission, Shackleton's resolve—the same resolve that urged him to undertake one of the most daring missions imaginable—brought his whole crew to safety from an almost certain death.

His example of leadership is certainly worthy of study, and some of you may have already done so.

The Rest of the Story:

What is truly remarkable, however, is something you might not know.

In September of 1921, Shackleton sailed again to return to Antarctica aboard a vessel duly named *The Quest*. The perseverance of this man was astounding!

But let me tell you something that might raise your eyebrows even a bit more. Seven of the crew from the *Endurance* were with him when he returned! These men included his second-in-command, Frank Wild, the ship's master, the ship's doctor, the meteorologist, the cook, and two able seamen.

I understand that you've been talking about retention a little bit at this conference over the past few days.

Think about this, for a minute. Not only did Shackleton bring back his entire crew from an almost certain death...seven of them came back with him to continue the quest!

All of these men except one were those who remained behind on Elephant Island when Shackleton sailed for help—their last, thin hope had been that he would somehow come back for them.

Some of you might be thinking that 7 men out of 27 isn't a very high rate of retention. Maybe you're right.

But despite Shackleton's heroics, I would have expected his retention rate to be somewhere around zero!

Say what you will about his success as a leader of expeditions, but this man was a true leader of men. I know of no other way to explain the loyalty of his troops.

Retention as an Function of Leadership:

What was it about his leadership that was so compelling? Why would these seven men choose to stay with him through another journey, despite extremely long odds?

I believe that retention is primarily a function of leadership. Shackleton showed that leadership on the *Endurance* expedition in many ways.

I'd like to share three of them with you.

First, he cared deeply about his men. He cared enough to sacrifice his own comfort and safety. Here is what Frank Wild writes in his diary about Shackleton's actions when they were short on food and supplies:

“Shackleton privately forced upon me his one breakfast biscuit, and would have given me another tonight had I allowed him. I do not suppose that anyone else in the world can thoroughly realize how much generosity and sympathy was shown by this: I do, and By God I shall never forget it. Thousands of pounds would not have bought that one biscuit.”

Dr. John C. Maxwell, a noted expert on leadership, calls this the “law of connection.” As he puts it in his book, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, “People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” Maxwell goes on to say that the relationship established between a leader and those in his or her immediate charge has more to do with their loyalty to the organization than any other single factor, including, by the way, adequate pay or benefits.

That is absolutely true in our Coast Guard. We might not want to believe it, but even the Workplace Cultural Audit indicated that the relationship with the immediate supervisor has more to do with whether a person stays or leaves than pay or benefits.

Second, Shackleton made sure that every single person knew his job and knew how important that job was to the well-being of the team. Each person in the crew was very different. There was tremendous diversity among them, but they shared a common identity as a team. Even after they had to abandon ship, everyone had an important job to do. Sometimes the job was as menial as heating the daily rations of milk, but everybody contributed.

Being in the Coast Guard, each of you knows that it is easy to get lost in the cogs of a military machine. It takes the clear vision of leadership to see how much difference each individual person makes in the outcome of any venture. The job of the leader is to maintain that clarity of vision and to convey it to others so as to motivate them to complete the task at hand.

As Stephen Covey, another esteemed expert on leadership, so succinctly states, “Principle-centered leadership suggests that the highest level of human motivation is a sense of personal contribution.” Shackleton seemed to understand this basic principle, and applied it to his own leadership.

Third, Shackleton remained eternally optimistic, regardless of the circumstances. In remaining optimistic, he never lost sight of reality. But he never allowed reality to get him down.

Here is what the master of the *Endurance*, Frank Worsley, had to say about him:

“Shackleton had a wonderful and rare understanding of the men’s attitudes towards one another and towards the expedition as a whole. He appreciated how deeply one man, or a small group of men, could affect the psychology of the others. Therefore, he almost insisted upon cheeriness and optimism; in fact, his whole attitude was, ‘You’ve damn well got to be optimistic.’”

Some critics might argue that Shackleton was too optimistic, and that’s what got him into trouble. Even so, the testimony of his men is that Shackleton’s “never say die” attitude is what got them through the terrible two-year ordeal. And I would venture to say that it was his optimism that kept some of them coming back for more.

A Good Right Hand:

There is one more thing that I want you to notice about the plight of the *Endurance* expedition. Though Shackleton certainly deserves great credit for making sure that his crew survived, it was Frank Wild who was responsible for keeping the crew alive for 128 days, while Shackleton went for help.

Frank Wild, often referred to as Shackleton’s second-in-command, in my mind seems more like a Warrant Boatswain. He was a jack-of-all trades. Very talented...highly skilled...a natural leader, who knew his craft well. He was confident, able, and trustworthy.

Shackleton hand-picked him because he had the qualities that I’ve just been speaking about. He cared about the men.

He made sure that they each knew how they contributed to the team. And he was always optimistic about the future.

It was Frank Wild who made sure that the crew remained together and alive, so they could be rescued when Shackleton returned for them.

It was Frank Wild who was at his side when he returned for another try in 1921.

I wonder how many Frank Wilds there are in this room tonight. My guess is that there are quite a few.

The Challenge of Leadership:

Let me just take a moment to remind you of something that I think you already know very well as leaders. The success of the Coast Guard in the next two years, which is just about the duration of the travails of the *Endurance* crew, depends in large part on our ability today to restore our readiness and shape our future.

I believe that future is bright and full of promise.

But we cannot restore readiness and shape our future without retaining the quality and depth of our workforce. We cannot restore readiness simply by building better ships, airplanes, and equipment. We also must focus on keeping our young sailors aboard. They must be willing and able to stand with us, though the days ahead might be hard.

We have had a retention problem in the Coast Guard for several years, now. Some of our folks—maybe even some of you—have been worried about our past budget woes and the additional requirements that have been placed upon us in the aftermath of September 11th. Maybe that worry has prompted you to think about leaving or retiring.

First-term attrition at an excessive rate of 36% continues to prevent full restoration of our workforce. The high turnover rate places a tremendous strain on our men and women, reduces their quality of life, and diminishes our operational readiness.

That high rate of attrition has eased somewhat since September 11th, but we must see that the downward trend continues.

The cost of recruiting, training, transferring, and paying replacements drains funds from other critical priorities. These members don't even have the opportunity to use the tools that we have devised to encourage re-enlistment.

Think about this for a moment: For every 37 members that we can retain, we save over one million dollars in recruiting and training costs. That would go a long way in easing the pain from a tight budget.

We maintain the highest recruiting standards of the military services. Many of our recruits, who represent much of the spectrum of our society, would compete well against the most elite forces of our national defense. But many are leaving too soon.

Some have caused problems for themselves and their commands. The majority of those who are discharged early have shown a lack of personal responsibility due to youthful indiscretion. That is as much an opportunity for strong leadership and direction as it is a problem of military justice.

Some of our members leave for other reasons, most of them not related to pay or benefits. Most leave due to workplace climate, citing especially a poor relationship with their immediate supervisors...unit morale...lack of proper training...or lack of understanding as to how their jobs relate to Coast Guard missions.

Again, these are clearly leadership issues.

Some leave because they believe that the organization does not want them, or does not welcome their presence among our ranks. This is the most troubling reason of all, and the one most deserving of our attention and commitment to change. We must reaffirm and demonstrate at every level of leadership that we are dedicated to broadening the diversity within our ranks.

Many among us are different in many respects. Just look around. Caring about those who are different from us, valuing those differences and managing them well is crucial to our success in keeping the best talent in the Coast Guard.

We must take full advantage of those differences as we stand together, shoulder to shoulder—one in unity, one in plurality, one in diversity.

Our Human Resources folks are working very hard to improve quality of life and compensation issues that impact retention, such as increased SRBs, incentives for specialties, increased geographic stability, TriCare Remote, and other such initiatives.

Let us all understand, however, that we as a military service will never be able to compete fully with the marketplace, which always entices our members with higher pay, more perks, and an easier life.

Conclusion:

Like the crew of the *Endurance*, we're not in it for the money.

I can't imagine a situation more bleak or harsh than the one that the crew of the *Endurance* faced together. The fact that the crew survived is certainly remarkable.

The fact that they stayed together and depended on each other is the reason they survived.

That they stayed together and remained loyal throughout their terrible ordeal—and even afterwards—was due to the care, the concern for each individual member, and the undying optimism of their famous leader.

But I'll tell you something. If I were in a situation like Shackleton's, I'd be most grateful and most optimistic if I had a person like Frank Wild at my side.

Thank you. I hope you have a great evening.

Stay Coast Guard!

