

Old Chiefs

One thing we weren't aware of at the time, but became evident as life wore on, was that we learned true leadership from the finest examples any young lad was ever given, Chief Petty Officers. They were crusty bastards who had done it all and had been forged into men who had been time tested over more years than a lot of us had time on the planet.

The ones I remember wore hydraulic oil stained hats with scratched and dinged-up insignia, faded shirts, some with a Bull Durham tag dangling out of their right-hand shirt pocket or a pipe and tobacco reloads in a worn leather pouch in their hip pockets, and a Zippo that had been everywhere. Some of them came with tattoos on their forearms that would force them to keep their cuffs buttoned at a Methodist picnic. Most of them were as tough as a boarding house steak. A quality required surviving the life they lived. There were and always will be, a breed apart from all other residents of Mother Earth.

They took eighteen-year-old idiots and hammered the stupid bastards into sailors. You knew instinctively it had to be hell on earth to have been born a Chief's kid. God should have given all sons born to Chiefs a return option. A Chief didn't have to command respect. He got it because there was nothing else you could give them. They were God's designated hitters on earth.

When they accepted you as their shipmate, it was the highest honor you would ever receive in your life. At least it was clearly that for me. They were not men given to the prerogatives of their position. You would find them with their sleeves rolled up, shoulder-to-shoulder with you in a stores loading party.

When we ultimately get our final duty station assignments and we get to wherever the big CNO in the sky assigns us. If we are lucky, Marines will be guarding the streets. But there will be an old Chief in an oil-stained hat, a cigar stub clenched in his teeth and a coffee cup that looks like it contains oil, standing at the brow to assign us our bunks and tell us where to stow our gear. And we will all be young again and the damn coffee with float a rock.

Life fixes it so that by the time a stupid kid grows old enough and smart enough to recognize who he should have thanked along the way, he no longer can. If I could, I would thank my old Chiefs. If you only knew what you succeeded in pounding in this thick skull, you would be amazed. So thanks you old casehardened, unsalvageable sons-of-bitches. Save me a rack in the berthing compartment!

Tough love at its finest.