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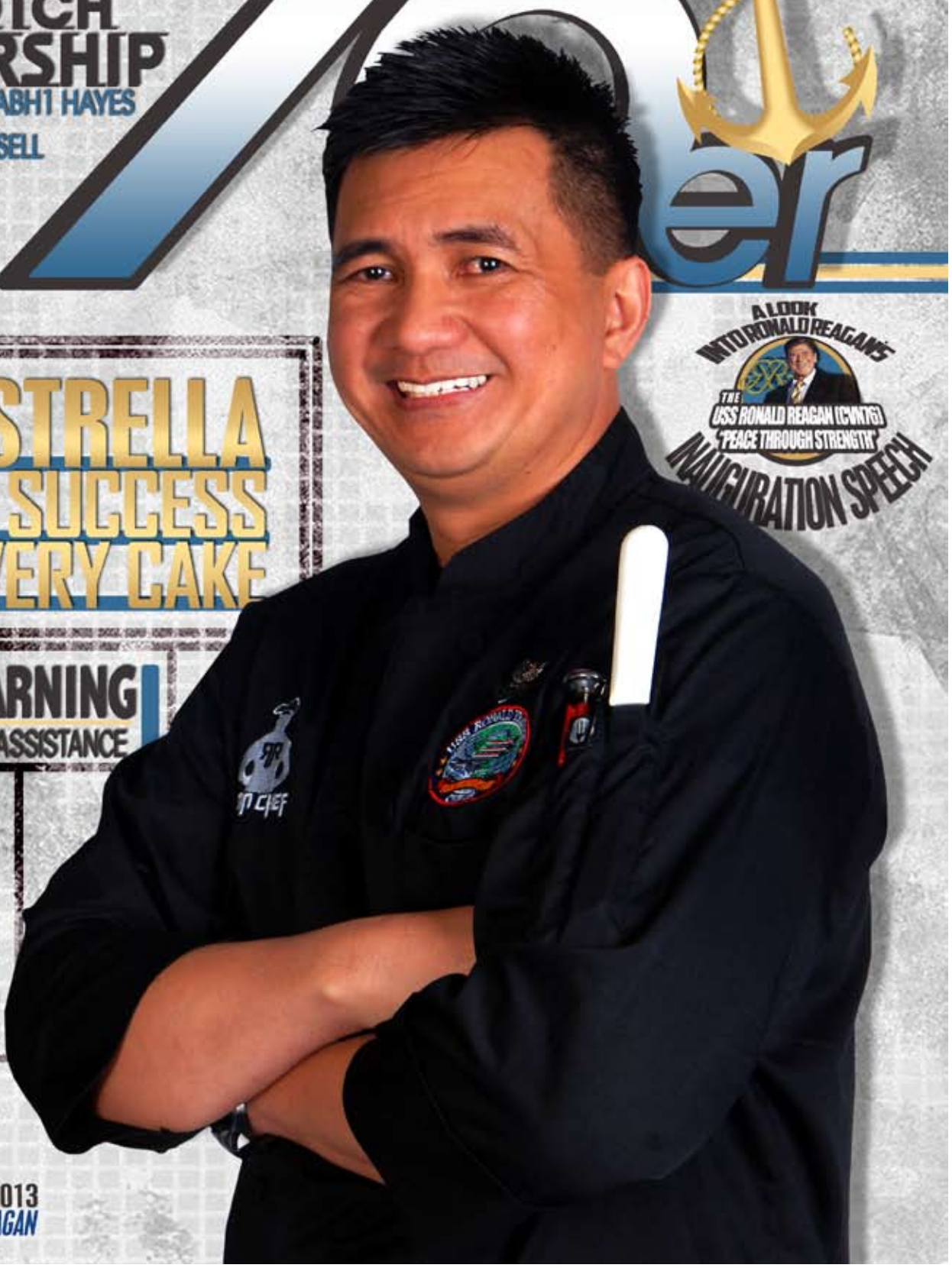

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RONALD REAGAN'S CAKE BOSS

STORY BY FC2 RICHARD GOURLEY

USING COMPETITION-LEVEL SWEETS TO BOOST MORALE

As kids, most of us probably never imagined that a love of drawing could benefit a career of cooking and serving large amounts of food to hungry military men and women. In the world of cake baking and decorating, these two seemingly unrelated skills meet on board the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan – and Culinary Specialist 2nd Class Edgar Estrella is the thread that binds the two together.

By fusing together the precise measurements of pastry baking recipes and his artistic skills at decorating, Estrella creates morale boosting, and competition level sweets. Estrella is the Chief Petty Officer's mess supervisor, leading the charge on feeding the Ronald Reagan's deck plate leaders. It is a tough and demanding job requiring hours of planning and preparation. But that is only the beginning of his contribution to Team Reagan and his division, S-2. He has a handful of collateral duties including divisional Safety Petty Officer, special event menu coordinator, and is also his shop's "go-to guy" anytime an event calls for a special cake.

"I learned how to bake on board my first ship the USS Antietam (CG 54), from the internet, and watching TLC's 'Cake Boss'," said Estrella.

He said that he is influenced by the show's lead character and cake decorator extraordinaire Buddy Valastro. Even though Estrella has not been formally educated, his talent is highly tuned, and he emphasizes those skills with his own mantra.

"Every time I bake, I want the food to be good. I'm looking for it to be delicious; the best product every single time," he said. It's a short and simple phrase, but one deeply ingrained within himself and the Sailors who work with him.

Estrella's special cakes can take anywhere between six to eight hours to produce from concept to out of the oven, with an additional 90 minutes for icing. It's a delicate balancing act between concept and production, but Estrella and his assistant, Culinary Specialist Seaman Pamela

Barnes, pride their production of these special cakes for high-profile events.

"My favorite so far is the Thanksgiving dinner cake," said Estrella. The cake was khaki-colored and topped with an intricate combination of icing and moldable fondant candy – all themed around the holiday. Some of the other celebratory cakes he has designed include the cakes for Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, and a massive flight deck-shaped cake topping a model of the USS Ronald Reagan. He has also created a number of cakes for competition, including the Ronald Reagan shaped red velvet cake for the Olympic College Foundation's Military Culinary Arts competition in Bremerton, Wa. But Estrella said his greatest challenge was a cake for the Naval Station Everett Iron Chef competition. It included every U.S. military branch's emblem surrounding the Prisoner of War/Missing-in-Action emblem – all of which had to be edible.

"It was a very challenging project; I made and drew each of the emblems," said Estrella. The cake was one portion of the larger Iron Chef competition. He placed second in the cake category, but helped the Ronald Reagan team win the overall competition. "I'm proud to have competed; I think we brought a lot of pride to the ship and my division."

Estrella spends his time honing his skills as a baker through both competition and daily work, but like all good leaders, he dedicates time throughout each day mentoring and training his relief.

"He has helped me out so much," said Barnes. "His biggest lesson has been that if you don't enjoy the work you do then you just won't do it right." The two work together in near synchronization, playing off of each other's ideas to mold and perfect their work. Their latest project held special significance for them. It was a retirement cake for their boss, Food Services Officer Chief Warrant Officer Max Agpaoa. Their chain of command has noticed their dedication to high standards and attention to detail.

"Everyone loves baked goods," said S-2 Leading Chief Petty Officer, Chief Culinary Specialist Lindsay Alvarez. "CS2 Estrella provides a huge boost to the crew's morale."

The Docked Planned Incremental Availability (DPIA) has been a long and challenging process for many Sailors. Long hours, physical labor and constant evolutions have constituted the bulk of the Ronald Reagan daily grind. Culinary Specialists like Estrella and Barnes value their job as an opportunity to give Sailors a reprieve from the day's challenges. They simply hope their cakes serve as the "cherry on top."

WARRIOR ETHOS

"The Navy has both a tradition and a future - and we look with pride and confidence in both directions."

Admiral George Anderson,
Chief of Naval Operations, August 1, 1961

USS Ronald Reagan

Sailors Helping Sailors. One Team. One Fight.