

From: John Paul Jones, Captain
To: Officers of the American Navy
Subject: Standards of Virtue and Honor
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Officers and Commanders of Navy units!

Two hundred and thirty-five years ago, when I was in uniform, the Continental Congress established in Navy Regulations their expectations for American naval officers. They wrote (as I remember), “the commanders and officers of American ships and vessels are strictly required to show themselves a good example of honor and virtue to their crew...”

At the wardroom table, my officers asked me what I believed to be the standard of honor and virtue. What did I expect from my officers, specifically? I believed then, and believe now, that being honorable and virtuous requires two things: the intellectual understanding of the specific actions and attitudes that comprise honor and virtue, and the moral resolve to display those actions and attitudes. So I wrote for my officers the following definition:

“It is by no means enough that an officer of the navy should be a capable mariner. He must be that, of course, but also a great deal more. He should be as well a gentleman of liberal education, refined manners, punctilious courtesy, and the nicest sense of personal honor.... He should be the soul of tact, patience, justice, firmness, and charity. No meritorious act of a subordinate should escape his attention or be left to pass without its reward, even if the reward is only a word of approval. Conversely, he should not be blind to a single fault in any subordinate, though, at the same time, he should be quick and unfailing to distinguish error from malice, thoughtlessness from incompetency, and well-meant shortcoming from heedless or stupid blunder.

In one word, every commander should keep constantly before him the great truth, that to be well obeyed, he must be perfectly esteemed.”

Much time has passed, and my days serving our flag in uniform are long gone. Ships and weapons have changed in ways I never thought possible. But the requirement for virtue and honor has not. No leader can lead without the esteem and respect of those led. As a result, I have been asked to come back to write to you, today, to pass on what I view as a modern definition of virtuous and honorable behavior.¹

First, my expectations for all officers:

Officers must be, above all, scrupulously honest. They must always tell the truth, regardless of the personal or professional consequences. Honesty cannot be turned on or off. Once sacrificed, it can never be regained. The smallest of white lies cannot be tolerated, for any reason, because the mind, over years, can learn to justify larger and larger transgressions. The slippery slope applies; stay away from the edge. If I ever detect any hint of dishonesty in any of my officers, they are escorted off the ship at the next port; it is the only inviolate rule. Dishonesty can include sins of commission (telling a lie), and sins of omission (failing to disclose important information, usually to protect oneself). Both are lies. Do not lie to yourself in pitiable rationalizations about why you are not being forthright.

¹ Because I am unable to operate the computer by which modern officers seem to communicate, I was assisted in transcription by Rear Admiral Robert Wray.

Officers must, in all cases, set the example. They must look smart and professional; they should be well-groomed. They must be in good physical condition, not only to perform their duties, but to set the example. A portly officer cannot urge his men to be fit to do their duties, because his men will smell the stink of hypocrisy. They should have clean, sharp uniforms; they should stand upright and erect; they should not slouch with hands in pockets; they should set the example of that the crew wants an officer to be. All followers want to look up to their leaders; leaders should take care not to disappoint.

Officers should be courteous, to each other, and to those outside the ship. They should speak softly, clearly, without the need for profanity or volume to make themselves heard. They should be able to sit at a table with royalty, and not embarrass the service through poor manners, speaking with mouths full, inability to use silverware, and the like. They should not speak disparagingly of others. They should not gossip. Coarse, slovenly, unkempt, flatulent, ungainly, inconsiderate, inappropriate, discourteous—these terms should never be used to describe any officer with whom I would associate.

Officers must genuinely, sincerely, care for the crew. Officers should eat last. They should ensure that the crew is safe and warm and fed and are given the opportunity to sleep and be well. They should seek to the development of their people, prior to their own. They should know their people—their names, their needs, their families, their problems, their hopes and aspirations. This is not fraternization with the crew; this is caring about them. You must care about your men, because, as I wrote many years ago, the *“men mean more than guns in the rating of a ship.”* Caring for your men is caring for your ship, which is caring for your service and your country. Caring for your people means learning their names, and pronouncing them correctly, no matter how difficult.

On the other hand, officers must keep their distance. The Naval Service is not a normal clerk’s shop, in which all can gossip and remain equals. Officers must earn the respect of their crew, because that respect is essential to the running of a ship; without that respect and trust, all else fails. And true respect requires a level of distance. Officers ashore may enjoy a drink with their sailors they meet in a bar, but they should never plan a night out with their sailors. They may join their sailors on the ship’s sports team, but should not recreate with their sailors outside a ship-sponsored event. Officers should be friendly with their sailors, but not friends with them. Friendship with one’s sailors, sad to say, for the officer can make difficult decisions more difficult; for the sailor it can make result in the loss of trust which is so essential to the successful running of the ship.

Officers must be brave, not only physically, but morally. In a career you may have only a few days in which you must display physical courage. But every day, you must show moral courage. Telling the truth; facing consequences; making the hard decisions; placing ship and crew above else. Moral courage. I once heard it said of an officer: “He would gladly sacrifice his life for his service and country, but is not willing to sacrifice his career for the same.” A sad statement, reflecting a lack of moral courage. If forced to choose between your career and what is right, what would you choose?

Officers today face complex social situations I never faced—mixed gender crews. Good officers do not disparage members of the opposite sex; they treat their fellow officers and sailors without regard to gender; they do not engage in gender-related banter, or romantic relationships, or physical touching. Their behavior is above reproach. Even if single, when in uniform or on the ship, they behave around the opposite sex with the level of probity and correctness that they would display if they were married and their spouse were watching. That is the standard.

Officers will value their honor and their virtue more than money. They will never take more from the service in expense reimbursement than is their due. They will never, in any way, seek to “work the system”

for extra benefits. They will never engage in any activity which profits them at the expense of other Navy sailors.

Good officers are calm. They are steady, unflappable. They minimize their displays of emotion, both good and bad. They rarely raise their voice, and do so with all forethought for its effects. They are rock-solid, dependable. They are not hysterical or depressed, or, worse, mercurial, so that their subordinates never know how they may react. They provide a predictable steadiness on which their people can rely. They must be trustworthy, because placing trust in someone, or something, requires predictability.

A good officer will never drink to excess, and will never drink a drop while in a status which requires a clear head. A drunk officer, or an officer who drinks to the point of being visibly affected in front of his or her sailors, is a pitiful creature, and not respected. The officer who searches for popularity with the crew through parties is a fool; the officer should search for respect, not popularity. And deep respect from the crew leads to admiration. Drunk officers are not admired.

Good officers will not speak ill of the service, and especially will not degrade the Navy in front of their men. If the Navy determines that a certain requirement will be made of the ship—from a training drill to an unexpected voyage—the good officer may be disappointed or bitter in private, but will not share that with her sailors. Instead, she will explain to them the Navy's need for that requirement, and the reasons why it is important for the ship to comply. The crew needs assurance from their officers that their toil and their sacrifices are worthwhile; disparaging those requirements takes away that worth, which takes away their satisfaction. Ultimately, if a sailor believes that his life is being employed in a worthy cause, he will be happy; disparaging requirements steals that happiness.

Officers must know their trade. They must be, first, capable mariners. They must know their equipment, their procedures, their planned actions, better than anyone on the ship. They must be experts—enough so to be recognized as such. Their reputation, and the lives of their sailors, depends on it. Too many officers, I have found, minimize the importance of sheer, raw, unadulterated, professional competence. Competence generates confidence in the men, which leads to respect.

A good officer knows his people by their name, and looks them in the eye, and puts his or her hand on their shoulder, and asks them about their welfare. He does this every day, so that over time, each member of the crew knows he is valued.

Good officers must persevere! They must push through impediment, overcome obstacles, thwart enemies and opposition. They must exude willpower and tenacity to their crew and ship. When my crippled *Bonhomme Richard* fought *HMS Serapis*, all we had left was our determination! It was enough.

Finally, a good officer will study his trade—will study leadership and ethics and seamanship and tactics. A good officer reads a book a month to help her be a better officer. Virtue and honor are both innate and learned. Books can provide the learning.

Officers! As I said before, to be virtuous, you must know what virtue means, but, more important, you must make the mental and moral decision to be virtuous. Too many officers, I find, feel that theirs is but a job, an occupation. They see no reason to try to be a better person. Your goal should be to emulate every great officer you know, to try to become a great officer yourself. Your goal is to be the man or woman that every sailor will look up to—that every sailor will want to emulate—that every American family will want their sailor son, daughter, mother, father, sister, brother to work for. That requires a decision on your part. It requires resolve. It requires willpower. It requires dedication and determination. To be a good officer,

to serve your American nation, you MUST resolve to be better, smarter, more honest, harder working, than your peers not in uniform. If you do not make that decision, early in your career, you will first be doing yourself a disservice, because your career will be eclipsed by those who do so resolve, but, more important, you will be doing your shipmates a disservice, and your country a disservice.

Second, my expectations for Commanding Officers:

As a fathom is to a foot, so must your standards of behavior be many times higher than the already high standards of an officer. As Commander, you are now not only an example for your crew; you are an example to your officers. A Commander who drinks too much, swears too much, doesn't know his or her profession, who doesn't place the welfare of his people far above his own—that Commander will create officers who behave that way, for lack of proper example.

A good Commander will, immediately upon taking command, publish in writing to his command his expectations, his desires, his standards.

A good Commander will write himself a private letter, describing the Commander he resolves to be. He will set standards for himself. He will re-read that letter at least monthly during his time in command.

A good Commander will sit with his senior officers and instruct them: "Help me to be better. Help me to avoid temptation. Help me to avoid breaking any rules, however slight, either through ignorance or neglect or lack of attention." A good Commander knows he is human, and seeks the counsel of his support team to keep him on the straight and true.

A good Commander will have read all the guidance provided by the service concerning the ethics and behavior required of commanders. He will keep those papers in a packet at his desk, for frequent reference. As even the godly among us go to church often, and re-read from the Bible often, so too must even the virtuous Commander frequently review, and re-read, the guidance on ethics and behavior. Actions form habits, which in turn form character, which leads to destiny.

A good Commander is transparent; he does not hide facts; he provides knowledge. He imbues his crew with confidence, because they know where the ship is, they know where it is going, and why. They know their mission, and that they have a good Commander to lead them there.

A good Commander teaches. She understands that her ship is only as strong as the skills of her officers and crew, and that she must teach, daily, the ethics, the professionalism, the dedication, on which our service relies. And she understands that the greatest teacher is simply in her setting the example.

A good Commander shows up at social events on time, and leaves early, leaving the crew time to socialize without his presence.

A good Commander never, ever, has more than two drinks at a time, or has a drop of alcohol in his veins when in a duty status.

A good Commander never profits by a single penny from any involvement with his ship or service.

A good Commander leads a clean life, both on the ship, and off. Even when unobserved, he behaves in virtuous ways that, if observed, would cast credit upon him and the service.

A good Commander takes care that his personal staff does only what is allowed and required by naval traditions and regulations. Staff members are not considered vassals or servants; they are not butlers or maids; they are used only for official business as prescribed by service rules.

A good Commander never demands loyalty from his subordinates. Loyalty is earned, not demanded. It is unasked for. I have found that Commanders who demand “loyalty” from their officers generally want the officers to choose the commander over the service. They want “loyalty” to cover up, or forgive, some shortcoming on the part of the commander. Loyalty to the country is first—then loyalty to the service—then loyalty to the ship. “Loyalty” to a transgressing commander is disloyalty to country and service. A good Commander would never ask his subordinates for that.

Finally, a good Commander puts his crew first. If the ship is sinking, he is the last to step off. If a space is on fire, he is the first to step in. He leads through subordination-- subordinating his personal welfare to that of his unit and his crew.

How to acquire virtuous values:

Some may say that my views of officers and Commanders are outdated. I assure you-- while ships and weapons and circumstances may change, the concepts of honor and virtue are timeless. What was important and valued three hundred years before my service was valued when I was in uniform, is valued now, and will be valued three hundred years after your day.

I said before: virtue and honor requires two things. The understanding of what virtue and honor is, and the moral conviction to be virtuous. Of the two, the latter is most important, because with that conviction, you can attain understanding. But understanding without conviction is worthless.

That conviction is not in-borne; it is acquired. If you do not feel it, it can be grown within. How? By absorbing into your heart and soul the messages from the past. By talking to those who have served before you, and who embodied honor and virtue. And by reading. I assure you: if you read books, you will know. Read, and through those words, listen to the lives of Navy leaders like Preble, Decatur, Farragut, Dewey, Nimitz, Halsey, Spruance, O’Kane, Peary, Rickover, Stockdale, and Michael Murphy. Those lives, those stories, will paint for you the picture of Navy honor and virtue. If you don’t feel it after reading those stories, you never will.

You are an American naval officer. You have a terrible responsibility and a wonderful opportunity. We need you to be up to the task, in all respects. You must be above reproach. You must fulfill your duties. You must carry on the torch that I once held, and now pass to you. Our job never ends. What my friend Thomas Paine once wrote in 1776, still stands today, in many different ways:

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value."

I pray that you will resolve to take on this task, and to carry my torch—America’s torch. I wish you good luck, fair winds, and God speed. May He bless you, and our American Navy!

JPJ