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Pop Rivet

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POP RIVET

February 2019

I sat at a gray Navy desk, in a gray Navy office, on a gray Navy ship, congratulating myself. It was going well. My Supply Department had been awarded the coveted Blue “E,” a designation as the best Supply operation in the fleet. We had the highest promotion rates on the ship with the lowest number of sailors forwarded to Captain’s Mast for disciplinary problems. We were a happy department on a quasi-miserable ship.

Despite my personal backslapping, the morning began on a disconcerting note. Because of Navy policy limiting women to non-combat specialties, the Supply Department had 80% of the females assigned to our ship. Four of the eight officers who worked for me were women, the only female officers aboard. Previous to this, my at-sea assignments had been comprised totally of men. As a submariner, the mixed crew thing made me uncomfortable. Ashore, I worked with hundreds of women, even ended up marrying one. Afloat, the close quarters and the young average age of sailors had me worried about sex in the fan rooms, bad language, discrimination, feminist complaints, boyfriend-girlfriend displays of affection, anger, maybe violence. All that had not happened. I put it down to my leadership. Women were not women in my department. Just sailors, ordinary Navy sailors—until today.

My morning routine was to walk the spaces. I entered the laundry. As usual, it was 120 degrees. Industrial washers and dryers whirred. Ineffective fans tried to blow cool air. A young sailor, SHSN Cheryl Kitna, worked pressing uniforms in a standard Navy undershirt covered in sweat and prominently exposing two small breasts, and no bra. She greeted me respectfully, unaware of the exposure. I tried not to look, stuttering meaningless but polite words. I pretended to inspect the line-up of huge washers and dryers. I wanted to say something. Mention the

inappropriateness, but then she would know I had looked. I left the laundry quickly. Sweat poured off my back from just two minutes in there. I nodded and said something like “Keep up the good work.”

In my office I felt guilty. I should have said something. I couldn't let infractions go, not any. I recognized it was hot as hades down there, but that T-shirt was a recipe for trouble. Often, the men worked down there in shorts with no shirt. Put that all together and something was likely to ignite. I should have said something. The easy out was to mention it to a senior enlisted. One of the Chiefs, but they were all men. The Chiefs wouldn't want to do it. Too much potential for trouble. I could drop it on one of the female officers, but too embarrassing. They'd know I noticed. No, things were going too well. Why make a big deal of it?

A sailor swabbed the deck up in officer's country, a deck he cleaned four times a day whether the floor needed it or not. An officer left her stateroom dressed in a bathrobe and hair net. The sailor's eyes did not meet hers, concentrating on the swish of his mop. She paid him no attention as she entered the female officer's head. The young sailor, just turned eighteen, put the mop against a bulkhead. He scurried down to the wardroom. On his way, a second female officer almost ran into him. She also wore a bathrobe. She cursed at him for running in the passageway. He apologized, not meeting her eyes, then continued to the wardroom. In the wardroom pantry he signaled to his buddy cutting onions. The buddy put the knife down and followed.

“So a couple mess-cooks got caught peeping at my officers? Are you kidding?”

Johan Santos, the ship's lead legal officer, shook his head. “No sir. Not caught. Turned in. Another mess-cook, female, one of yours from the storekeeping division, either saw them or

heard about it. Came to us. We looked in the pantry. All there.” Santos always spoke like he was in a Dragnet episode. Never elaborated anything. A lieutenant who came up through the ranks like me.

“Damn it. The pantry?”

“Yes sir. Worth a look.”

I followed him up the ladder to officer’s country. Mess-cooks were the bane of my existence. Every enlisted sailor who came aboard, regardless of specialty, had to serve 90 days mess cooking. 90 days of peeling potatoes, serving chow, cleaning toilets, cleaning decks, cleaning overheads. When not cleaning they painted. All were the youngest sailors aboard, already pissed off about being in the Navy, on a ship, and now subjugated to being servants of the officers and crew. But this was a rite of passage for a U.S. Navy sailor. Most of them completed their 90 days sullenly. But it was three months of being the butt of jokes and demeaning remarks, until they were transferred to their rightful division. A lot of these kids got in trouble. For that 90-day period, they were assigned to me. When things went to shit with them, I had to step into the crap-pile and figure out what to do. Sometimes I felt more like a Juvenile Court judge than a full-up Commander in the world’s most powerful Navy. That’s why I liked Santos. Despite being a lawyer, he remembered what it was like to be 18 making \$310 a month as an indentured servant. Johan knew how to keep it all in perspective, in order to not throw the book at some kid for just being young and stupid.

Santos took me in the pantry. A small eight-by-eight room for storage of dry goods, the tight quarters made us shuffle sideways around shelves. We stepped over industrial-sized cans of tomatoes, bags of flour, and enough cooking oil to supply a fast food joint for a year.

“See how? Too easy. Knocked out the pop rivets. The female shower is behind this sheet metal. Made a seat of the sugar bags. Piled up stuff behind. Used the shelves for cover. No light would come through. No alert for the any female officer who might be in there.” Santos turned off the lights.

Small bright circles glowed in the missing pop rivets. Three in a row, twelve inches apart. I sat on the sugar bags and looked in at a clear view of all the shower stalls nine feet away. As usual for Navy ships there were no privacy doors or curtains. Just open, like I and every other sailor had showered for years. “How long did they do this?” Santos turned on the lights.

“Two months, at least. The two kids been here that long. Might be worse. Rumor floating. This bit passed along from mess-cook to mess-cook over time. Sort of fringe benefit for working in the wardroom.”

I groaned. I’d heard that mess-cooks competed over who would work up in the wardroom. That was unusual; most sailors hated officers from the time of boot-camp. Normally, officers were to be avoided at all costs. I thought they just liked us.

“Well, it’s not good, but it’s not like anyone died.”

Santos dropped his voice. “We might have been better off.”

“What did you say?”

The legal officer headed for the door. “Never mind, sir.”

Later that day, I was called to the Captain’s Office. I prepared to have my head ripped off. The Captain directed that I sit while he paced. He screamed, accused, belittled, and almost physically accosted me. This incident was my fault. Not enough leadership, not enough inspections, not enough screening of mess-cooks, not enough of everything. I took the shots

quietly, nodding humbly. Once vented, he sat opposite me at the table. I began a practiced apology. He almost jammed a hand into my eyes.

“I’m taking them to court-martial.” The Captain folded his arms defiantly.

“Yes sir, I guess. I mean it’s a bad thing, but they’re only eighteen. Stupid behavior, but a court-martial seems a bit much. What does Legal say?”

The Captain stood again, leaning on the table, screaming. “You think I give a flying fuck about what Legal says! They said the same thing as you. Haven’t you been following this Tailhook thing? Officers who weren’t even there are being forcibly retired. A promotion can’t go through unless they can show Congress they hadn’t attended Tailhook, didn’t know there was a Tailhook, and didn’t know anybody at Tailhook. You think I’m going down the same road? Half my class at the Academy is under investigation or being forced to go home, and they’d never fucking *heard* of Tailhook! I’m taking these kids down and anyone else who helped, past, present or future!”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Captain, just 18 years old. Half the movies we show onboard celebrate that kind of stuff. *Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, others I can’t remember. Hell, sir, if I was still 18 and mess-cooking my eyes would have been glued to that peephole.”

Hands on hips, the Captain looked disgusted. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. That’s enough to court-martial you for aiding and abetting. That’s why former enlisted shouldn’t be officers. Always apologizing for the troops. Our job is to kick them in the ass. Get out of here, Commander.”

I did what every officer does when his Captain is wrong and out of control. I quietly said, “Yes, sir,” and walked out, shutting the door softly behind me.

Two days later I stood in the female bathroom, watching the placement of not one but two additional layers of sheet metal on all four bulkheads. The engineer bitched as he worked. “These extra layers are just going to trap moisture. And the Captain wants me to seal off all the ventilation ducts? Sir, this place is going to smell like an outhouse in three months. And three combination locks on the door? Who’s going to remember all that? I’ll be up here once a week punching out a lock to let people in.” The rant continued about the other and more important problems in engineering that needed fixing prior to deployment. The steam system leaked like a blown prostate, but his repair people were all triple-layering female bathrooms.

I pretended to be interested. I had no expertise but had to show I cared. It all seemed like overkill, but the Captain was going nuts. I thumped on the new sheet metal. Seemed solid. I nodded appreciatively to all the working sailors as if I had input.

Santos walked in carrying his usual accordion file of paperwork. He beckoned me to a corner out of earshot. “Eight people to court-martial. Five admit to looking. Three admit to knowing about it and saying nothing. Captain wants them all hammered.”

“How long has it been going on?”

“Unknown. They talked a storm. Then their lawyers showed up. A couple kids pretty proud. Court-martial news silenced them.” Santos pulled out several legal-looking documents. “Need your signature. Captain wants them transferred to the brig. Says they’ve become celebrities onboard.”

I grabbed the sheets. Three of the sailors—the two first caught peeping and one other working down in the galley—were mine. The other five had been in the wardroom area some

time ago but transferred back to their divisions. I signed the documents. “So the Captain is still hard over on court-martials?”

“Yep. All of them. Peeping or not. Ashore legal guys don’t like it. Felony convictions for a prank. Way too little for court.” Santos stuffed my signed copies back into the file.

I shrugged as new pop rivets entered metal. “So, maybe they’ll get it cancelled, referred back, dismissed, whatever it is you lawyer types do?”

“Not a chance. Politics pushes for drama. They want action.” I barely listened while I touched the area, now covered, where the peeping happened. Santos said something about their guilt already established. Bad conduct discharges, maybe jail time.

I walked out, rubbing my temples. Santos followed. “Captain wants to charge your food service officer. Dereliction of duty. Should have known about the peeping. Stateroom on the same floor.”

“Well, so is mine. In fact, the Executive Officer sleeps right across from the pantry door. Charge everyone. What the hell?”

“An officer has to go down. His quote exactly. If not him then you. Stay out of it, Commander. It’s a loser.”

“I talked to each of the four officers who were probably peeped. They seem alright. No big deal to them. Gave them the rah-rah speech about the big deployment. Go Navy bullshit.”

“Doesn’t matter. Out of their hands. Out of yours. Bigger problem. The girl who reported the peeping is catching hell. Crew calls her a snitch. Took up for officers over them. My sources say it’s serious. Your female officers are taking heat, too.”

“My officers are pretty tough. But I’ll bring the seaman in. Find out the scope of the crap she’s getting. This whole goat-rope’s been blown way out of proportion.”

Santos walked away with the papers. I thought he said something like, "It's just starting." But when asked, he said, "Never mind, sir."

Two weeks before deployment. I talked to the seaman who turned in her fellow mess-cooks. A pretty shook-up young lady. She did the right thing, but was now paying the price. This wasn't a man-versus-woman thing. This was wardroom versus the deck-plates. There'd be no solving this with a pat on the back or speeches to the crew. I had her transferred to a ship on the East Coast. Made sure her record reflected that all her mess-cooking time was complete. Gave her top evaluation marks. It wouldn't help much. Word would eventually filter all the way across the country. 450,000 personnel in a Navy that was one big gossip pit.

The news media caught wind of the peeping. Not a big story, just another line in a growing list of Navy offenses against women, real and perceived. The media interest forced the moving up of the court-martials; usually it took months for these proceedings to get organized. These took place in two weeks.

All eight sailors were sentenced to bad conduct discharges and twenty years in a military prison. That took the potential media heat off, but increased bad feelings on the ship. Johan Santos told me there would be an appeal. It wouldn't go anywhere. No Navy court was going to overturn a conviction like this in the post-Tailhook climate. The kids' only hope was to get transferred to a Federal civilian prison. Federal sentencing guidelines would be in force then, with perhaps a chance to get a more reasonable result once out of the Navy anti-harassment frenzy. As ordered by the Captain, and suggested by Santos, I stayed out of it. I concentrated on the upcoming deployment to the Persian Gulf. This could be a dangerous one. Iran-Iraq were done shooting at each other and now both seemed interested in getting even with the US Navy.

Two days later a knock on my office door brought in my four female officers. My office barely held two comfortably, so I had us adjourn to the wardroom. Get some coffee. Presumably talk about the upcoming deployment and last-minute preparations.

In the wardroom I poured a cup for myself and offered some to the others. My disbursing officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Sheila Harrison sat opposite me, hands folded, grimacing, fidgeting. The other three sat heads down, not looking at anything other than the tablecloth.

“Okay, we’re two weeks out. Deployment lists almost all checked off. What’s left to be done?”

Harrison took a breath then blurted, “Sir, we’re not here about the damn deployment!”

I’d sensed something was wrong, but nothing like this. Harrison looked like she was at a protest rally—the others at a funeral. I waited.

“We want off the ship. No, we demand to be off the ship, right now!” Harrison’s fist slammed the table. The others looked up at the noise, but returned to staring at the tablecloth. Harrison produced a folder and pushed it hard across the table.

It was not only a request for transfer but also to be discharged from the Navy. My gut twisted. Not what I expected, not in a million years. I stayed expressionless. I’d misjudged something. For 30 seconds nothing was said.

Then Harrison demanded, “Well, are you going to sign it?”

“Are you going to sign it ... Sir?”

Harrison mumbled something, then said reluctantly, “Sir.” The other three officers seemed to quiver in unison at the exchange. I made a ‘come on’ motion with both hands. I wanted her to talk because I was lost for words. I’d never had this happen before.

“You don’t know what it’s like. We’ve been violated. The entire crew knows. They make fun of us.” Lieutenant Harrison faltered, her words grew less ardent and softer. She had a prepared speech she didn’t remember perfectly. It began to jumble. The crew blamed them for the other sailors going to court-martial. None of the four could sleep. They kept checking their staterooms, the heads, their offices for hidden holes. Except on duty nights, all four resided in a hotel ashore. On duty nights they stayed in their staterooms with a chair against the door. Enlisted men and women were intentionally bumping into them in the passageway. Harrison ran out of steam; she joined the other three gazing at the table.

It was my turn. “If the members of the crew are being disrespectful then you need to take charge. Jack them up. Don’t put up with that bullshit.”

Harrison growled, “That’s just what I’d expect from you. Mr. Gung Ho. Get the mission done. You’ve got no sense of what it’s like for us. Mr. Lifer.”

“Mr. Lifer ... Sir.” Harrison did not respond with a Sir, but in the lengthening silence one of the other officers did.

I held to an easy, passive, voice, not wanting to reflect my absolute surprise. I appealed to reason. “We’re two weeks out from deployment into a war zone. You’re great officers. My best leaders, probably. Over half the department is women. I know many look up to you. One of the reasons you’re here is to help old assholes like me transition to this new Navy. Help everyone transition. You just can’t leave.” I found myself with hands folded in a pleading gesture.

“No, we’re going. Out there, in the Persian Gulf, who knows what someone will do to us. This bullshit has been going on since the Academy. We thought it would end in the fleet, but it’s even worse. You don’t understand. You don’t see us. We’re just cogs in your machine.”

Now my teeth clacked. I drummed my fingers loudly. “So in twenty years when you all go to a Naval Academy reunion you can tell your classmates how you did one year on a ship, mostly in port, and then quit when the money round actually came. How many years do you owe for your schooling? I guess that doesn’t matter either.” Harrison looked incensed, shoving the folder at me harder. I pushed it back forcefully calling out the names of the other three officers, “Do you all concur? I see your names here. Do you concur? One at a time, tell me.”

Each did, one did so crying. The other two tried to comfort her. Harrison shoved the folder back at me. I grabbed it. “I’ve got twenty-four hours to approve or disapprove. I will not recommend approval by any stretch of the imagination. Twenty-four hours for you all to think about this. Someone sees you naked and you throw away four years of education and a career. Grow up. Be Navy.” I stood.

Sullenly, Harrison said, “What you mean to say is man up.” She indicated the folder. “The captain is looking for that paperwork right now. He’s already going to approve it.”

“That’s why he’s the Captain and I’m just a Commander. Since you’re such good friends with the Captain tell him what I said.” At the door. I pointed to all of them. “Twenty-four hours for all of you. Honor, courage, commitment, duty. I’ve got a deployment to worry about. I’ve got four hundred sailors I need to bring home alive.”

I was wrong. My guilt trip didn’t change their minds. For the rest of that day and into the next I hid out, going ashore to do business, eat at the club, make myself unavailable. Plenty of people told me the Captain’s yeoman was trying to find me, looking for ‘some papers.’ Finally, Santos caught me in a storeroom working on a portable computer. Since it didn’t appear my wayward officers would change their minds, I’d prepared an explanation, a long explanation, of

why it would be inappropriate to approve their request. Santos read it. Told me to tear all that up and just sign the papers recommending approval. My Food Officer remained on report for dereliction of duty. The Captain would take him to Captain's Mast if I didn't sign. My Food Service Officer was guilty of nothing, but a record of having been put on report would ruin his career. Once the ship was underway, away from the prying media, the Captain would tear up the charges. My signing would make it look like I initiated the approving recommendation. Give the Captain top cover. I signed 'Approved.' Sick, angry, and tired of running, I hid out some more in my office.

I was right. The Captain signed the chit approving their transfer and release from the Navy within seconds of the paper hitting his desk.

Within two days Navy Personnel approved. The four officers could return to civilian life with a full honorable discharge. Paperwork like this usually took months to go through. Santos said the Navy would do anything to prevent a repeat of bad PR like Tailhook. They wanted these women away from the press, sent to their hometowns to disappear into the woodwork. So far, media attention had been scattered and light, mostly focused on the 20-year convictions of the sailors. A bunch of female officers to interview would be tough to resist. An agreement was reached that they would not seek out the press if the Navy waived repayment of any college debt. Once the ship left port the matter would disappear. In eight months, we would be back, maybe. Rumor was that the Navy might change the ship's homeport to Guam.

I stood near the starboard lifeline on the 03 level thirty feet above the pier. One week to deployment. I was down four more officers added to the shortage I already had of two. A 400-person Department was being managed by only the four of us that remained. No reliefs. We

would double up. A disaster waiting to happen. I wondered how many troops would die if we went into combat? How many might die of accidents, suicides, or falling overboard from just normal deployment shit?

Behind me, Santos' voice emerged above the noise of the cranes, paint chipping and welding that went on all around us. "You up here to see them off?"

"Who?"

"Half your department leadership. I just signed them out. Forged your name to acknowledge the transfer. Figure you'd hide out. The Captain wants them gone."

I came close to the lifeline to look at the brow. My four officers, my four former officers, all in their whites, came down the companionway dragging green sea bags. They stepped onto the pier. I pulled back so they wouldn't see me.

"No, just up here taking in the air." The four strode purposely over coiled rope, around small arms ammunition, avoiding pallets of food and medical supplies awaiting lift aboard. They didn't look back until just past my position. One of the officers glanced up like she knew I was there. For some stupid reason I made a little wave. No wave back. Just forward motion towards the land end of the pier.

My head hurt. I had a headache almost every day now. Almost every second. Santos meant to leave but I grabbed his arm. "What did I miss here? Am I that much of a dinosaur?"

"Not a dinosaur, Sir. Just overly bought in. For you, everything ..." the young lawyer waved an arm a full 360 degrees. "Everything is a means to an end. That end is to fight. That was commendable in 1944. Not so much now."

"Means to an end? I took care of them, I did right by them. I wasn't using them like some garbage to throw away. Isn't fighting what we do?"

“You need to understand, Sir. In peacetime, the means are the end.”

I rattled my head. “Well, I hope we get into a damn war and end this silly shit.” Santos mumbled something that sounded like ‘dinosaur’ or ‘meteorite,’ but I didn’t quite catch it.

“Sorry, Lieutenant, what did you say?”

“Not important, Commander. Never mind.”