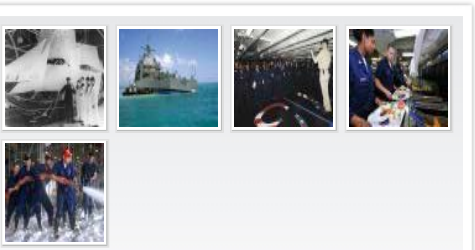
Command Performance



About to become captain of a ship? This compendium of acquired knowledge and know-how can help you minimize mistakes and discharge your new duties with distinction.

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So you have just received orders assigning you as commanding officer. Congratulations on the most humbling honor of your career. Captaincy of a warship is the highest compliment the Navy can pay an officer of the line.

The following suggestions are based on real-life experiences ashore and at sea. While no two captains' tours are ever exactly alike, these hints and suggestions likely will make yours more enjoyable and productive.

Philosophies for Success

The priorities of a surface CO are to operate, navigate, and communicate—in that order. Among myriad requirements you'll face as commanding officer, keep those three at the forefront, and remind your crew to refer to that simple list when deciding what actions take priority. Simply put, you are commanding a ship of the line. You must be ready to fight the ship at all times. You cannot properly fight her if you run aground or collide with other ships. Once appropriate actions are taken to execute your current mission you must ensure you are moving to the next objective in a timely fashion. And all of that should be done while communicating internally and externally to your ship—up, down, and across the chain of command.

Operate . Maintain the ability and situational awareness to fight and defend your ship at all times; don't hit other ships; don't run your ship aground.

Navigate . Get where you need to get, when you need to get there (while remaining tactical and not running aground or hitting other ships).

Communicate . Keep your crew, other ships in company, and the greater command structure informed (as you get to where you need to get, on time, while remaining tactical and not running aground or hitting other ships).

Prepare Yourself

Take full advantage of Surface Warfare Officer School. Improve yourself, whether through extra time with the simulators, in the engineering books, studying tactics, reviewing rules of the road, learning personnel issues, or shedding a few extra pounds. All are worth doing, and you know best what you need most. Also remember that the personal and professional friendships you cultivate at SWOS will make your command tour more enjoyable and successful.

Have a plan—and adapt. During your shore and staff tours, write your plan for command. It can be as simple as Battle E, Gold Anchor, and Warfare Excellence Awards, or as specific as goals for each operation, inspection, and program. Your ship will already be strong in some areas; tie your goals to something positive for the crew, not your career. Once in command, pull that goal sheet out and vector-check yourself every couple of months.

You are not alone, but you are unique. Your commodore, your previous COs, and your peers on the waterfront all have an immense amount of experience and wisdom to share. Reach out to them now and then on those really challenging days. Sharing your worst problems with them over a meal will convince you that your situation is not unique, and that the solutions are not beyond reach.

Schedule Your Days (and Nights)

Manage your own schedule. Set aside time for yourself—time to work out and time to think. An uninterrupted 15-30 minutes daily will do amazing things for your perspective. Send your XO and your well-trained department heads to meetings. You should focus on what really matters. That gives your leadership a chance to show itself and you a chance to think.

Meetings. Meetings and briefings start on time and end on time or else. Remember that 300 people mustered for 30 minutes for no good reason waste 150 hours of maintenance, training, or liberty. If the meeting is useless or presenters are not prepared, cancel it and fix the problem. Finally, never schedule meetings for their own sake; those are self-inflicted gunshot wounds. A rule to remember: Command is about

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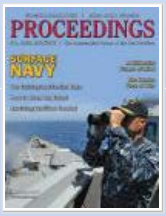

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time management.

Watch the watch. You cannot be awake 24/7, so train your crew to your standards and expectations, starting with your XO. Once your XO is comfortable taking the ship in and out of port, train your department heads to be conning coaches. Take the same approach with tactical action officers and and engineering officers of the watch. A tough set of qualification boards will ensure that they really know their subject and you will avoid the "A-Team" mentality, in which one set of watch-standers conducts all special evolutions.

Set sleep schedules. Consider altering your schedule so either the CO, XO, or senior watch officer is always awake for long evolutions. Some commands have the CO and XO go port and starboard and collapse watch sections to provide that extra set of eyes on the bridge, in engineering, and in combat.

Communicate Across the Chain of Command

When should we call you? Reporting requirements should be very clear. Articulate your expectations clearly and regularly and remember: Don't shoot the messenger. Instead, thank them for the information. The watch-standers should always be comfortable calling you.

Talk with the crew . . . not at them. You both will learn more and respect each other more. But decide whether you are more comfortable speaking to large audiences or walking around the ship talking one-on-one, and adjust your actions accordingly. Make sure you see everyone—every day—and go to their spaces even though sometimes that is difficult to do. Bottom line: Learn something from a crew member every day.

The Triumvirate. CO, XO, and command master chief (CMC) should be able to talk freely amongst yourselves inside your cabin with the door shut. But when it opens, you all should be consistent in your message. Keep an eye on your XO and CMC. Their physical and mental health is directly in your sphere of influence. A friendly game of darts in your cabin before dinner, or a cup of coffee afterward can resolve issues of the day, be enjoyable, and show the crew that you are talking.

Working with your boss. Figure out how your boss best comprehends or desires to receive information. Is it by e-mail, office call or phone call? Does your boss absorb items just one at a time with a laser-beam focus or take complex issues all at once?

Know what is required and what is expected. Requirements and expectations may be two different things. If there is any doubt, ask.

Clearly articulate the status of your ship to your boss. Tell him bad news immediately; don't be afraid to ask for help.

Take Care of Your Crew

Suppo – A key department head. The supply officer affects every Sailor, every day. So read the NAVSUP publications and know how they affect food, stores, and services. First and foremost, food. Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson put it at the top of his list. It is the center of morale on the ship. Steak and lobster the night before a big inspection tells the crew you care; spaghetti does not. So lead the menu board. If your ship has one menu, ensure that it is prepared the same for the mess decks, Chiefs' Mess and wardroom. Second, stores. Walk your storerooms, read the reports, and know how you compare with your peers on the waterfront. Finally, services. The ship's store is a money generator for MWR and a morale generator for the crew. Only by maximizing stock turnover can you balance making money and morale.

Making the hard call. Sometimes taking care of the crew means running one more main-space fire drill or another man-overboard drill. Keep the crew informed and make them part of the solution, not the problem. Before every port call, provide the crew with the strategic messages you want to articulate. Nothing is more impressive to a foreign TV audience than a young Sailor who can confidently explain why he is there. This is fun for your Sailor and much more credible than having the CO spout the standard lines.

When things are going wrong. If you think your crew or wardroom is "all dorked up," you should consider your own performance. Your crew will make mistakes. But taking care of them also can mean stopping to

truly listen to what your Sailors are saying. If their mistakes occur consistently, you are probably failing to lead them.

Maintain a strong sponsor program. Pre-arrival, the first week and last week that every crew member is on board should be planned carefully. How the command greets and treats officers and enlisted Sailors from the time they receive orders through their arrival is important and sets the tone for the rest of the tour.

Simply said, take care of your people to a fault. You can't give them pay raises so put the crew in for every award you can, because they deserve a shot at being recognized as the best. When they win, the rest of the Navy will start to recognize that this crew is truly special, and success will breed success. Then there is no end to what they can achieve.

Set the Standard

There is no excuse for a dirty ship. Inside the skin of the ship, topside, or over the sides, clean ships require teamwork, planning, and commitment from the entire crew, while in port and under way. The CO may drive the requirement, and the XO and CMC may execute the tasking, but the benefits accrue to every Sailor on board and any guests or embarked forces.

Let them see what you see. The command duty officer (CDO) should walk the pier and look at the ship, entry control point and surrounding area as you arrive each morning. It gives the two of you time to talk and gives the CDO an opportunity to see the ship through your eyes. If he has a CDO under instruction, bring him along. New department heads and senior enlisted also should walk with you to learn what your standards are.

Interview the crew. We recommend this be part of your schedule for the first few weeks in command. It will occupy a lot of time, but be well worth the effort. A formatted interview sheet should be filled out by each crew member and delivered to you well before the interview. Afterward, make sure you know every person in your command down to the newest E-1 (and something about them) so you recognize them and call them by name.

Be "bold" but not "cavalier." You are the commanding officer of a U.S. Navy warship. You should not appear timid or meek. You are the steward of U.S. tax dollars (your ship) and the nation's most precious treasure (its sons and daughters—your crew). If you are not comfortable driving the ship alongside the pier in heavy winds or refueling in heavy seas in the winter, take the time to get in that comfort zone before assuming command.

Training, Training, Training

Wardroom training. You are the top mariner and tactician in your wardroom. Get on your feet at least twice a week in front of your wardroom and teach them what you know. It can be during a navigation brief as you talk through the chart on the bulkhead, or it can be during the evening ops/intel briefing, when you walk them through an operational challenge on the next day's schedule. Either way, just do it.

Advancement—Put $$ in their pockets. If food is the morale center, advancements are the center of the economy of your ship. Make this a top priority of your Chiefs' Mess and one of your metrics on their ranking. Schedule time for training, counseling, and provide resources for exam prep. As one junior officer noted, "What interests the CO fascinates the crew."

Honestly and thoroughly debrief failures and successes. Some commands never grasp the amazing learning potential in thoroughly and completely reviewing failures. Your willingness to sit down with the navigation team and admit what you did wrong, share where you should have listened to the navigator, put in place corrective action (look at the navigator each time he/she makes a recommendation), and then follow through, makes it clear that mistakes occur, but they must be examined and corrected.

Talk about near misses. In our experience, successful surface warfare commands teach their new crew members about near misses. Whether navigating the Strait of Malacca at night, entering a new harbor with a bad pilot, or recovering a boarding team at night in the Arabian Gulf, recounting those stories over dinner with the new ensigns, chiefs, and junior Sailors, and the corrective action taken, does two things. First, it makes

clear there is no joke in the following mission brief admonition: *"Ladies and gentlemen, on a daily basis we are attempting to avoid the combined efforts of Mr. Murphy and Mr. Darwin. Mr. Murphy will screw things up at the worst possible time and Mr. Darwin will kill you if you're stupid. So sit up and pay attention!"* Second, such stories underscore how fatigue, weather, and one or two bad decisions can turn the best plans into near disaster.

Be Self-Critical

Assess yourself. Are you an operator or an engineer? Are you focused on details, the big picture, or can you shift easily between both? Are you a speaker or a writer? Are you serious or humorous? Are you excitable or dead calm? Are you prompt or do you have trouble staying on schedule? Hone your leadership skills to capitalize on your strengths and focus on improving your weak areas. Once in command, put in safeguards and backups with the XO, CMC, department heads and chief petty officers. Otherwise you limit your command to only executing tasks within your comfort zone, and that's probably not enough.

Be yourself. You were selected for who you are, so don't try and be anything else. History is replete with examples of people who having risen to a position of responsibility, forgot what got them there, and then tried to reinvent themselves into who they thought they should be. The challenge is to continue to grow and develop while still being true to yourself. But remember where you came from.

Be predictable. Always under-react—something that is easier to say than it is to do consistently when you're fatigued. Most situations are never as bad (or as good) as you think. Be slow to judgment and remember the first report is usually wrong. A note early in command that describes whether you are quiet or loud and how you react to bad news will prepare the wardroom and Chiefs' Mess. If those in your command fear bringing you bad news, then they won't—with disastrous consequences for all.

Train yourself and your spouse. Attend the Spouse Leadership Course together. Ask the mentors about the hardest things they walked through. Later you and your spouse can talk through how you would approach such challenges as the death of crewmember, a messy divorce, or a newly promoted Sailor who is failing in the new position. Those situations will affect both the crew at sea and families ashore, so it's good to see where each of you stands on a topic, and it readies you for the real thing during your command tour.

Leave a Legacy

Teach them what success looks like. As XO and then CO you will need a command that can run on autopilot for periods at a time. That is only developed by giving others opportunities to make decisions, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. As CO that means sitting quietly when your intuition tells you something is wrong. Let the XO, the department heads, the chiefs, and the senior petty officers catch mistakes and correct them. That develops the skills, the confidence, and the trust so you can turn your back when the mission requires it.

Be committed. Be technically competent and know your ship from bow to stern. Only then can you maximize the combat power of your ship and maintain the highest standards for your crew. Have impeccable integrity because your crew will follow your example and will expect to be held accountable. Your personal failure can not only end your career, it could cost a Sailor's life. Develop and maintain your physical and mental stamina. Your ability to maintain focus for extended periods may make the difference between mission success and failure. And in those instances when instructions, publications, and doctrine do not exist, you must trust your gut instinct and do what you believe to be right.

Remember the Law of the Sea. The Navy holds its commanding officers accountable for everything that happens to a ship and her crew. As The Wall Street Journal opined following the *Wasp-Hobson* collision in 1952, "On the sea there is a tradition older even than the traditions of the country itself and wiser in its age than this new custom. It is the tradition that with responsibility goes authority and with them both goes accountability." There may come a time when things are going very badly and the only course of action is to say, "This is the captain, I have the deck and the conn." If so, take over, clear up the mess, and then step back out of the picture. There's plenty of time to debrief afterwards over a couple of cups of coffee.

Good luck and Godspeed. Take from this what fits your personality and style, and keep it. Continue to ask mentors for thoughts on what made them successful. One of our favorites was short and simple: “It’s about leadership. Congrats and enjoy. It still is the best job in the Navy.”

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Captain O’Connor is chief of staff for Amphibious Force Seventh Fleet in Okinawa, Japan. A surface warfare officer, he has served in seven ships, including a tour as commander of the USS *Rushmore* (LSD-47). During that time the *Rushmore* and its crew won more than a dozen awards for excellence. He reports as deputy commander, Amphibious Squadron Eleven in February.

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This is a command philosophy that if executed consistently would lead to a highly successful command tour. I found it extremely interesting that the CO would grab the CDO and walk the ship (especially the sides) to allow them to see the ship through the CO's eyes. I can not think of a better way to set the standard. Having recently walked the piers in Mayport, I was extremely disappointed in seeing running rust from nearly every ship in the basin (the one exception being a CG that recently went through INSURV). I realize that some of these ships (the CGs) are now approaching 20 years old, but there is no excuse for running rust on a ship that has been inport for more than 72 hours. I am from the old school that immediately judges a ship by looking at their sides, their Quarterdeck and the performance of their signal bridge (the last not as important as it once was). I worked for a CO that routinely walked the sides and strictly enforced the 72 hour rule upon entering port. (I actually worked for him twice at two different commands). Whenever the BMC would see the CO on the pier, he would immediately go see what the old man was looking at. The result of maintaining such standards would surprise some. Not only did the two ships always look good, but the crews of both ships took a lot of pride in being the best. Once the standard was set, it was not that difficult to maintain. As a side note, both of those ships had a reputation for having extremely high crew morale. The high morale not only resulted in outstanding looking ships, but more