Lessons from the Bridge Wing

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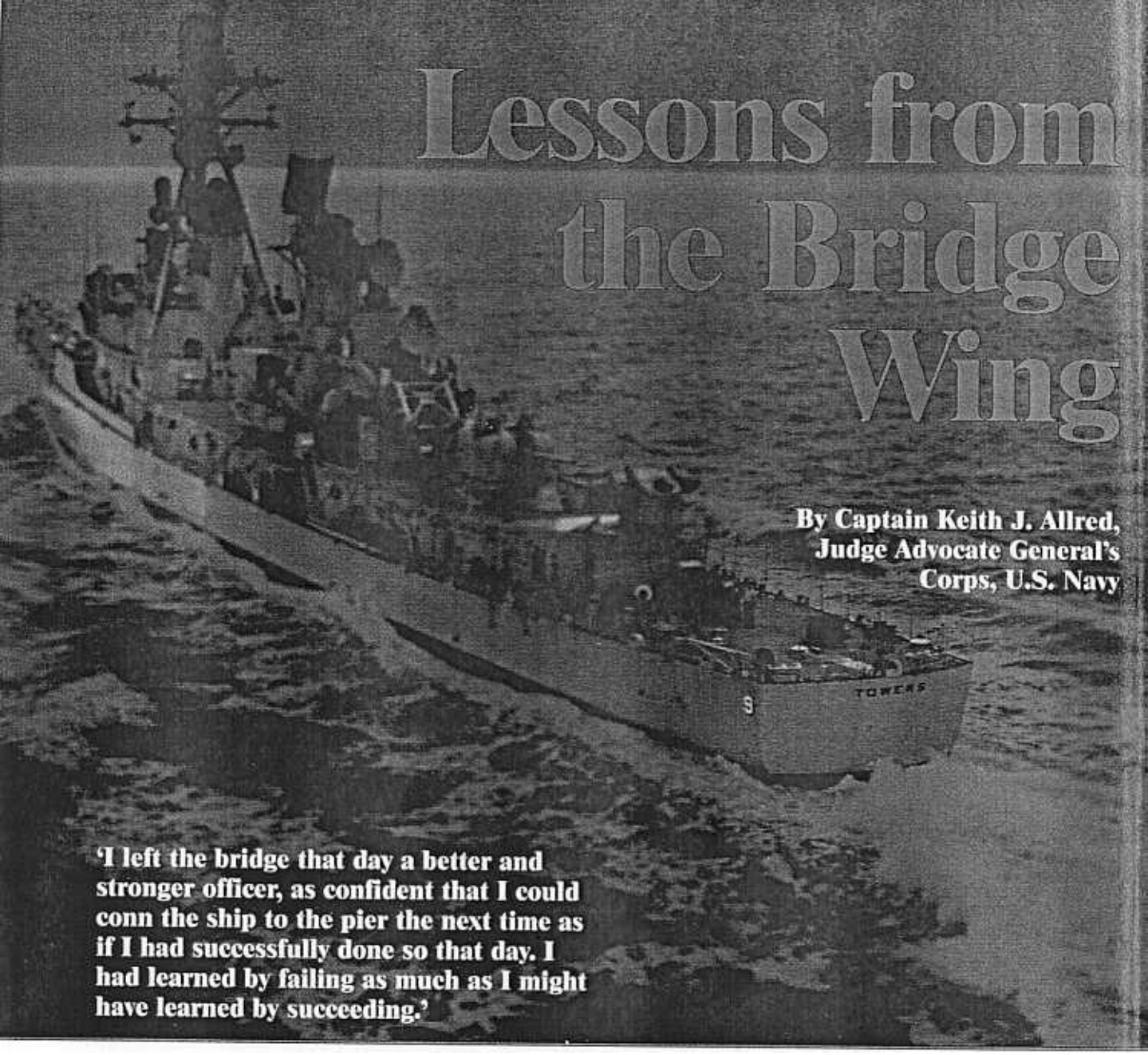

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Ten years after concluding my division officer tour on the *Towers* (DDG-9), I headed back to sea on the staff of Commander, Carrier Group Five. In the interim, I had finished law school, transitioned to the Judge Advocate General's Corps, and served three tours as a judge advocate. As I droned through black Arabian skies toward a Persian Gulf rendezvous with the flagship, long-forgotten memories of that first tour came bubbling to the surface. They ranged from the sobering rescue of Vietnamese refugees at sea to quiet nights on a darkened but starlit bridge, and included recollections of visits to a bewildering array of countries, cultures, and people. The exhilaration of a country boy seeing the world in the Navy had been a dream come true. It had been a good tour, and I savored its memories.

It was my good fortune during my division officer tour to serve under a commanding officer named Hancock. Though he was not my first or only skipper, he loomed larger in my memory than the others did. More than anyone else, he superintended my initiation into surface warfare and the great traditions of naval service, but most important were the lessons in leadership I learned from him. Many of these came during shiphandling evolutions or on the bridge wing, often while approaching the pier. Many years have passed since that tour, and then-Commander Hancock has long since retired from the Navy—but his example is timeless. This reminiscence is both a tribute to his leadership and an essay on every leader's task of mentoring juniors.

I was commissioned an ensign in December 1979 in the old gymnasium that served as a foul-weather parade ground at Officer Candidate School. By the following year, King Hall and the chill winds of Newport were fading memories. Surface Warfare Officer's School was behind me, my new gold bars had a respectable slight tarnish, and I had reported to the *Towers* for duty. No longer entirely wet

behind the ears, I was on my way to becoming a full-fledged naval officer.

As a new member of the wardroom I was busily learning my lessons and collecting the signatures required for the coveted surface warfare officer's pin. Among a dizzying host of other requirements, each candidate had to conn the ship successfully to the pier twice, collecting two signatures in the process. The chance to take the conn was relatively rare, and we all waited patiently for our turns. Though I was eager when my turn came, I was not fully ready. Captain Hancock stood beside me on the bridge wing as we entered Tokyo Bay. Following the navigator's precise recommendations, I conned the ship confidently into Yokosuka basin. It was there that my troubles began. The *Towers* glided through the glassy waters toward the pier at five knots, but as we approached, it slowly dawned on me the ship was moving too fast. There I stood, watching the pier grow larger, but unsure whether to issue a command or to wait for the captain to direct me. He stood silently beside me, waiting for me to give the order to slow. We moved steadily forward in this silent standoff until at length the captain spoke. Firmly, but without reproach, he announced to the entire watch team, "This is the captain. I have the conn."

Then, with the easy touch of a practiced ship handler, the captain brought the *Towers* safely to her berth. Now it was I who stood quietly watching him do what I should have done. More stinging than the realization that I would not get my signature and would have to wait for another turn to try was the knowledge I had failed so completely. I had been summarily relieved of the conn, and everybody on the bridge knew it. When the lines were passed and the captain prepared to leave the bridge, he placed a kind hand on my shoulder. There were no barbs or words of reproach, just an understanding smile and encouragement for the next time.

The lessons of that day were manifold. First, from my ringside seat I had watched a master ship handler bring the ship to the pier, and I learned much about engines and rudders. Having failed so miserably at my own attempt, I was an especially attentive pupil, and the lessons sank deep and affixed themselves firmly in my mind. I learned that when I had the conn, I must exercise it confidently, without waiting for prodding, and I quietly resolved that in the future I would do so.

Second, and the most important lesson I learned that day, was the way the captain handled me. Having given me a challenging task, he stood beside me as I tried to accomplish it. Although he saw the need to slow the ship far earlier than I did, he stood by supportively as I flirted with failure, giving me an opportunity to succeed before rescuing me from catastrophe. And while he did let me fail, he did not let me hazard the ship or the crew. He let me stretch and flap my newly feathered wings, squawking and teetering at the edge of the nest as if I would really fly. When he saw I was not ready, he did not let me plummet to the ground, but pushed me gently back from the edge and showed me yet again how wings are supposed to work. I left the bridge that day a better and stronger young officer, as confident that I could conn the ship to the pier the next time as if I had successfully done so that day. I had learned by failing as much as I might have learned by succeeding, but with a bonus prize: a powerful lesson about the art of developing young officers.

My next attempt at bringing the ship to the pier, though much improved, also fell short. Leery of the hazards of approaching too fast, my second approach was too slow. The bow made it safely alongside the pier, but the ship went dead in the water with the stern still extending into the channel. An on-setting wind or current pushed the stern firmly against a braided rope fender that guarded the corner of the pier. The *Towers* was a twin-screw destroyer, and the captain did not like using tugs unnecessarily, so I twisted the stern out and moved the *Towers* forward to her berth using the ship's engines, scraping three lifeline stanchions and a bit of gray paint off the weatherdeck in the process.

I was embarrassed by this mistake, but the captain had been standing beside me as it happened, and he was not worried. "That's what [hull maintenance technicians] are for," he said with a smile. The stanchions soon were rewelded and repainted, and the *Towers* was no worse for the wear. This time, the captain had let me fly, and while it was not a beautiful, soaring flight, I had launched from the nest, fluttered unsteadily forward on my own, and landed safely but imperfectly.

Several months later, one of my colleagues was trying his wings as the *Towers* came alongside the ammunition pier at Naval Air Station Cubi Point; by this time I was the navigator. I gave my reports and recommendations to the conning officer until we were close to the pier, then fell silent as he made the final approach, the captain at his side. Regrettably, my colleague made the same mistake I had made on my first attempt, approaching too fast. Although he ordered a backing bell as the *Towers* drew near the pier, the order was too late. Her strong bow and sheer mass moving slowly forward knocked two or three wooden pilings from the pier into the water before she lumbered to a stop. This was more than a little unbraided rope fender; the *Towers* had caused some significant damage to the pier, and a report had to be made.

For some reason, the captain called me to his side that afternoon as he sat in his chair on the bridge, preparing his report to the commodore. He showed me the draft message, written in his own hand: "While approaching the pier at NAS Cubi Point, I failed to properly gauge the effect of the wind on the bow and failed to reduce speed in time to avoid a collision with the pier." The message went on to explain the damage to the pier, but it was this frank acceptance of personal responsibility for the incident that the captain wanted to talk about. He explained very carefully what he was doing: although a junior officer had made the mistake, the captain was responsible for it. He had been there watching the approach; he also had

misjudged the winds and failed to order the ship's engines reversed in time. The mistake was his, just as surely as if he had been the conning officer. It would have been inappropriate, he told me, for a commanding officer to assign blame to the conning officer, or to shift it onto the wind or the seas. That being the case, his only course was to write to his boss, frankly accepting responsibility for the damage.

That brilliant tropical day brought me my first lesson in the tradition of responsibility in command. I understood it more clearly because I had been there, watching the ship charge into the pier, screws flailing helplessly, and seeing the pilings fall. With another choice of words, the captain might easily have shared some of the fault, deflected it, or minimized his misjudgment. His refusal to take that easy path taught me about responsibility in command in an immediate and powerful way. He was responsible because he was the captain.

Another memorable lesson came on the bridge wing, but not while maneuvering the ship. A young boatswain's mate third class named Maldonado had been reduced at captain's mast to seaman; his beautiful white crow and red chevron were replaced by three diagonal stripes. While his offense now is long forgotten by me, I had heard the witnesses and seeing the evidence and considered the reduction an appropriate punishment. To my great surprise, I later saw Maldonado wearing his crow again and wondered how he had been able to earn it back so quickly. I inquired and learned the captain had reinstated Maldonado to petty officer third class. I mulled it over and steamed privately at this great injustice. I never would have been so soft on crime, I thought to myself, and looked for an opportunity to discuss this issue with the captain. I fancied I had gained something of his confidence, and believed that after hearing my objection and my strong reasons, he would see the error of his ways. The chance presented itself one night as the captain sat quietly thinking and smoking on the bridge wing. I made bold to ask if he would be willing to tell me why he had done it, and he was happy to discuss it.

The captain explained that Seaman Maldonado had completed his enlistment and was about to get out of the Navy. It would cost the Navy nothing to let him go home with a crow on his sleeve, and might return great dividends. The crow would allow him to return to his family and friends with honor, wearing the proud insignia of a petty officer third class. His memories of the Navy would be upbeat and positive, and in his hometown in Middle America this might cause him to influence other young men to join the Navy. The captain hoped that Maldonado would become a valuable Navy ambassador for years to come.

Whether the captain's hopes proved true, of course, never will be known. It probably is true it cost the Navy nothing to let Maldonado wear the crow home, and it likewise probably is true he had fonder memories of the Navy for having been able to do so. And it may well be that somewhere in the middle of America there now is a middle-aged man named Maldonado who once served under Captain Hancock, and who remembers him as a firm but fair disciplinarian, and who urges the young men and women who come under his influence to give the Navy a try. It was not important to me then, and it is not important now, whether the captain was right. It was important that he cared enough about one young sailor and his future to take the chance, to balance the unyielding demands of justice with consideration of the personal hopes and fears of a seaman under his command.

I do not mean to suggest Captain Hancock was a sugar daddy. He was not a screamer or a thrower of things, but I saw him relieve a department head and throw him off the ship for incompetence; I also saw him punish senior petty officers at mast. But Captain Hancock balanced mercy with justice, and firmness with fairness. Perhaps that is why I walked away so deeply influenced by his example. From these and many other exchanges with the captain during my impressionable first tour at sea, I became a confident and capable ship handler. I sufficiently earned his confidence to be assigned duty as the navigator, and qualified as officer of the deck under way, command duty officer, and as a surface warfare officer. And far more important to me, I learned deep and abiding lessons about the art of leadership.

Much has been written lately about a failure of leadership in the Navy. There reportedly is a lack of confidence among junior officers in their seniors, a sense that those in the lead are watching out only for themselves and their careers. Whether or not this is true, it has not always been so, and it need not be so. In Captain Hancock's example I saw the moral courage of a leader who stepped to the front and accepted responsibility for the performance of his command. I saw a leader who developed young officers and sailors alike with a mixture of discipline, encouragement, instruction, example, and reproof. These are the timeless needs of the Navy, and in his example there is much that will benefit others who lead. As much as I admire him, the captain was not perfect, and I probably could think of shortcomings if I put my mind to it. But if failings are there, they pale in comparison to the powerful, positive experiences that come so readily to mind now. When the whole of my experience as a first-tour surface warfare officer is sifted, I am left with memories of great naval traditions, fine leaders, and wonderful experiences at sea. These experiences form the basis of my understanding of what it means to be a naval officer.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Captain Allred's former commanding officer, William J. Hancock, later won the Vice Admiral Stockdale Award for inspirational leadership in the Pacific Fleet, commanded a carrier battle group, and ultimately retired from the Navy in 1998 as a vice admiral.*

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