

DAMN EXEC!

The Norfolk wind was streaking the water of Hampton Roads as Commander Martin K. Speaks, U.S. Navy, Commanding Officer of the USS Bowens (DD-891), stepped from his car, slammed the door, and straightened his cap. As he approached the pier head, a sailor stepped from the sentry hut and saluted.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning, Kowalski,” answered Commander Speaks. He took pleasure in the fact that he knew the sailor’s name. Kowalski was a good sailor. He had served his entire first cruise in the Bowens and did his work well.

The Captain noticed that, over his blues, Kowalski wore a deck force foul weather jacket, faded, frayed, dirty, and spotted with red lead. “Little chilly this morning,” said the Captain as he walked by. “Yes sir, sure is,” replied the sailor with his usual grin.

As the Captain approached his quarterdeck, there was the usual scurrying of people, and four gongs sounded. “Bowens arriving,” spoke the loudspeaker system, and Lieutenant (j.g.) Henry Graven, U.S. Naval Reserve, gunnery officer and the days command duty officer, came running to the quarterdeck. Salutes and cheerful good mornings were exchanged, and the Captain continued to his cabin.

Lieutenant Graven looked over the quarterdeck and frowned. “Let’s get this brightwork polished, Chief.”

“It’s already been done once this morning, sir,” replied the OOD.

“Well, better do it again. The Exec will have a fit if he sees it this way,” said Graven.

“Yes sir,” answered the OOD.

As soon as Graven had left, the OOD turned to his messenger, “Go tell the duty boatswain’s mate that Mr. Graven wants the brightwork done over again on the brightwork done over again on the quarterdeck.”

Later that morning, Captain Speaks was going over some charts with the ship’s executive officer, LCDR Steven A. Lassiter, U.S. Navy.

The Captain had just finished his coffee and lighted his cigarette. “Steve, I noticed our pier sentry in an odd outfit this morning. He had a foul weather jacket on over his blues; it looked pretty bad.”



“Yes sir. Well it gets cold out there, and these deck force boys have mighty bad-looking jackets,” the Exec said.

The Captain felt the Exec had missed his point and said, “Oh, I realize they have to wear a jacket, but for a military watch like that, I’d like to see them wear pea coats when it’s cold.”

Lieutenant Graven was talking with a third-class boatswain’s mate on the fantail when the quarterdeck messenger found him. When told that the executive officer wanted to see him, Graven ended his discussion with, “There, hear that? He probably wants to see me about the brightwork. I don’t care how many men it takes to do it, the Exec told me to be sure to get that brightwork polished every morning.”

The executive officer indicated a chair to Graven and asked: “How’s it going these days?”

Lassiter had always liked Graven, but in the past few months, since he had taken over as senior watch officer, Graven seemed to have more problems than usual.

“Okay I guess,” Graven replied with a forced grin. He knew that things were not as they used to be.

It seemed strange, too, because everyone on the ship had been so glad to be rid of the previous senior watch officer, that damn Lieutenant Dumphy. The junior officers even had a special little beer bust at the club to celebrate Dumphy’s leaving and Graven’s fleeting up to senior watch officer. Now the Exec was always after him. The junior officers didn’t help much either, always complaining

about the Exec. Maybe the Exec was taking over as the heel now that Dumphy was gone.

“That’s good,” said the Exec. “Here’s a little thing you might look into. These men who stand pier watches have to wear a jacket, but the foul weather jacket doesn’t look good for a watch. I’d like to see them wear their pea coats when it’s cold.” Graven had expected something like this, more of the Execs picking on him. He responded properly, got up, and left.

Graven told his first lieutenant: “The Exec says the pier head sentries can’t wear foul weather jackets anymore. If its cold they can wear pea coats,” he added.

“But the pea coats will get dirty, and then what about personnel inspections?” asked the first lieutenant.

“I don’t know,” Graven shook his head, “but if the Exec wants pea coats, we give him pea coats!”

“Pea coats!” said the chief boatswain’s mate, “Who says so?”

“That’s what the Exec wants,” said the first lieutenant, “so let’s give him pea coats.”

“The Exec says pea coats for the pier sentries when its cold,” announced the chief to the boatswain’s mate.

A third-class boatswain’s mate walked away from the group with a buddy, turned and said, “That damn Exec. First I got to have all my men polish brightwork on the quarterdeck, now they got to wear pea coats on sentry duty instead of foul weather jackets!”

Seaman Kowalski’s relief showed up at the sentry booth at 1150. “Roast beef today,” constituted the relieving ceremony.

“Good, I like roast beef,” was the reply. “Hey, how come the pea coat?”

“Damn Exec’s idea,” said the relief. “We cant wear foul weather gear no more out here, only pea coats.”

“Damn Exec,” agreed Kowalski. “Captain didn’t say nothin when he came by.”

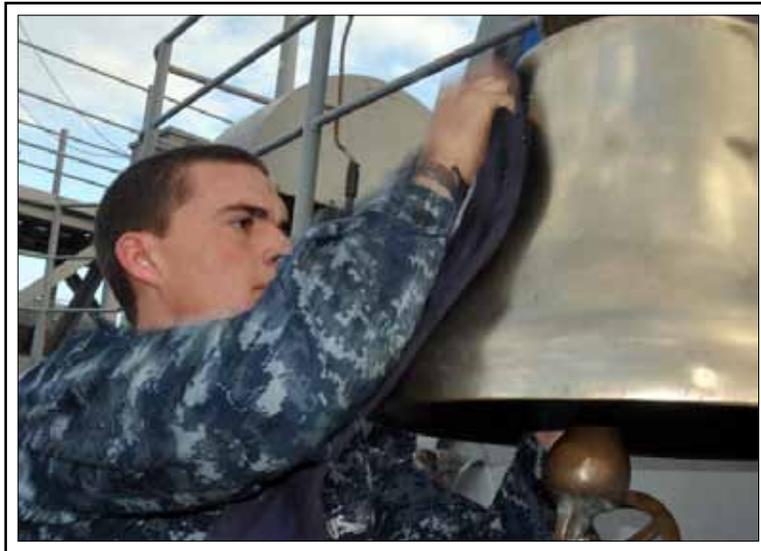
“That Captain’s okay, its the just that Damn Exec. He’s the guy who fouls up everything,” complained the new sentry.

Seaman Kowalski had just gone aboard the ship when Captain Speaks stepped out on deck to look over his ship. The quarterdeck awning shielded the Captain from the view of those on the quarterdeck, but he could clearly hear the conversation.

“Roast beef today, Ski”

“Yeah, I know, and we wear pea coats from now on.”

“Whaddaya mean, pea coats?”



“Yeah, pea coats on the pier, Damn Exec says no more foul weather jackets.”

“Well that ain’t all, we got to polish this here brightwork ‘til it shines every morning before quarters. Damn Exec says that too.”

Damn Exec.

Captain Speaks was shocked. Why “Damn Exec” from these seamen, he thought. It was easy to

see that the Executive Officer had passed the order along in proper military manner. It was easy to see that the junior officers, leading petty officers, and lower petty officers were passing it along saying, “The Exec wants...” That’s the way orders are passed along. Why? Because it is easy.

“All ship’s officers assemble in the wardroom,” the boatswain’s mate announced on the loudspeaker system. Lieutenant Commander Lassiter escorted in the Captain. The junior officers took their seats when the Captain was seated. The Executive Officer remained standing. “Gentlemen, the Captain has a few words to say to us today.”

The Captain rose and looked around slowly. “Gentlemen, we are continually exposed to words like administration, leadership, management, capabilities, organization, responsibilities, authority, discipline, and cooperation. You use these words everyday. You give lectures to your men and use them, but if I were to ask each of you for a definition of any of these words I would get such a wide variety of answers that an expert couldn’t tell what words we were defining. Some we probably couldn’t define at all. We still use them,

and will continue to use them as they are used in the continually mounting number of articles, instructions, and books we must read.

“If I were to ask any of how we can improve leadership I would get answers filled with these words - undefined and meaningless.

“If we listed all the nicely worded theories of leadership, studied them, memorized them, and took a test in them, we would all pass. But this would not improve our ability as leaders one bit. I can tell a story, containing none of these meaningless words that will improve your leadership.

“In 1943, I was secondary battery officer in a cruiser in the South Pacific. In my second battle, gun control was hit and I lost communications with everyone except my 5-inch mounts. I could see that the after main battery turret was badly damaged and two enemy destroyers were closing us from astern. At the time, my 5-inch mounts were shooting at airplanes. I ordered my two after 5-inch mounts to use high capacity ammunition and shift targets to the two destroyers closing from astern. ‘But Mr. Speaks, 5-inch mounts are supposed to handle the air targets; who said to shift targets?’ my mount captain asked.



“There were noise and smoke and explosions that day, but the explosion that I heard and felt was not from a shell, but from those words of the mount captain.

“Those attacking destroyers got a few shots in at us before we beat them off. Maybe those shots found a target and some of my shipmates died. I never found out. There was too much other damage.

“I thought over the battle afterward and realized that this entire situation was my fault, not the mount captain’s. I may have been responsible for the death of some of my shipmates because up to that day I always gave orders to my subordinates by attaching the originators name to it.

“What does that mean? It means that it was the easy thing to do, to say, the gunnery officer wants us to shift targets.

“In this peacetime world you may say that we no

longer have this struggle on a life or death basis. Quick response does not mean life or death now, but it might tomorrow, or sometime after we’ve all been transferred elsewhere and this ship is being fought by people we don’t know. Whether you’re cleaning boilers, standing bridge watch, or administering your training program, it’s easy to say ‘The Exec wants’ or ‘Mr. Jones says.’ It’s the easy, lazy way; not the right way. You can sometimes discuss or even argue with an order, but when you give it to a subordinate, make him think it is coming from you.

“Giving orders the lazy way is like a drug. Once you start saying ‘The Ops Officer wants’ you will find yourself doing it more and more until you can’t get a thing done any other way. Your men will pass along orders that way, too,

and it will become a part of your organization right down to the lowest level. When some problem arises and you want action, you’ll get ‘Who wants this?’ or ‘Why should we?’

“Each of you—ask yourself if you have given an order today or yesterday in the lazy manner. I think almost all of us have. Now ask yourself if that order really originated with the person who gave it to you, or did he receive it from a higher

level? We never really know, do we, but why should we even care?

“In almost every unit the lazy ordering starts on a particular level. From personal experience I can tell you that this can be an exact measure of a unit’s effectiveness. If it starts at the department head level or higher, it’s a relatively bad outfit, and if it starts at the chiefs’ level, it’s a relatively good outfit. You can find the level below which it starts by hearing a new title preceding a primary billet. ‘Damn Exec’ means that the executive officer is the lowest level giving orders properly. ‘Damn Division Officer’ means that the division officers are taking responsibility for that order.

“Here I am using some of those words—responsibility and authority, those undefined terms we want to avoid, but perhaps we have helped to define them.

“To be more specific, every officer does some lazy ordering, but we need to do it less and less. We must try to push the ‘damn’ title down as far as it will go.

“Let’s push the damn officer down all the way to the chiefs and below, then we will have a Damn Good Ship.”