

A Shipmate Lost—Wh

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Rarely a day passes that I don't ask what we could have done differently to prevent our petty officer's death and to make sure we don't have another tragic mishap. He certainly fit the classic high-risk category: a young, unmarried, first-term Sailor away from home for the first time, doing a good job, making new friends, and enjoying both his time ashore and afloat.

From when he first notified us that he intended to buy a motorcycle, the command actively monitored his training and experience. His LPO, who also is our motorcycle-safety petty officer, does a good job of monitoring the status and progress of all our motorcycle owners and operators. He stays abreast of both their training and experience levels.

The LPO and many shipmates counseled our young petty officer. They urged him to slow down and always to use his PPE, but he kept pushing his motorcycle beyond his experience level, thus building a false sense of confidence in his ability. He then added alcohol to this overconfidence, which, when combined with continued poor personal decision-making, triggered the series of events that took his life.

Mentoring is important, because Sailors sometimes make decisions that negatively affect their lives. These poor decisions often are linked to using alcohol or failing to comply with safety regulations and rules.

Once we give Sailors the proper education and training on alcohol awareness and safety, holding them accountable for their decisions is probably the best way to reduce mishaps. People who know they will be held accountable tend to think twice and ask for help when high-risk situations arise.

Risk management has been a very valuable tool for preventing mishaps afloat and ashore. Forcing Sailors to submit personal travel plans for leave periods or long weekends away from home port has been another tool that causes shipmates to think about what they are doing and the risks associated with that long trip.

Safety is a mindset and lifestyle much like fitness, morality, and ethics. We still have a number of personnel who overeat, rarely exercise, make poor choices concerning morality and ethics (consider the number of COs relieved



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last year), and ultimately personify the imperfect humans we've been throughout time.

I don't think one program or process will prevent all mishaps. However, I believe we must continue to educate all hands on the right thing to do, the possible unintended consequences of their actions, and how they will be held accountable for their actions and decisions.

This petty officer is the first shipmate I have lost while in command. This is my third consecutive command since 1999—the previous two were USS *Champion* (MCM-4) and COMCMDIV 31 in Bahrain. Perhaps I should have been a more proactive leader, should have personally identified him as a high-risk shipmate, and should have let him know in no uncertain terms my expectations concerning his conduct ashore. If I had, he probably still would be alive today.

We have a shipboard mentoring program, but a face-to-face discussion with the CO (we did talk during a Division-in-the-Spotlight interview) has a bigger impact on shipmates. I'm talking about the kind of discussion that might follow a commodore or admiral calling a commanding officer or staff member and asking him/her to "come and talk."

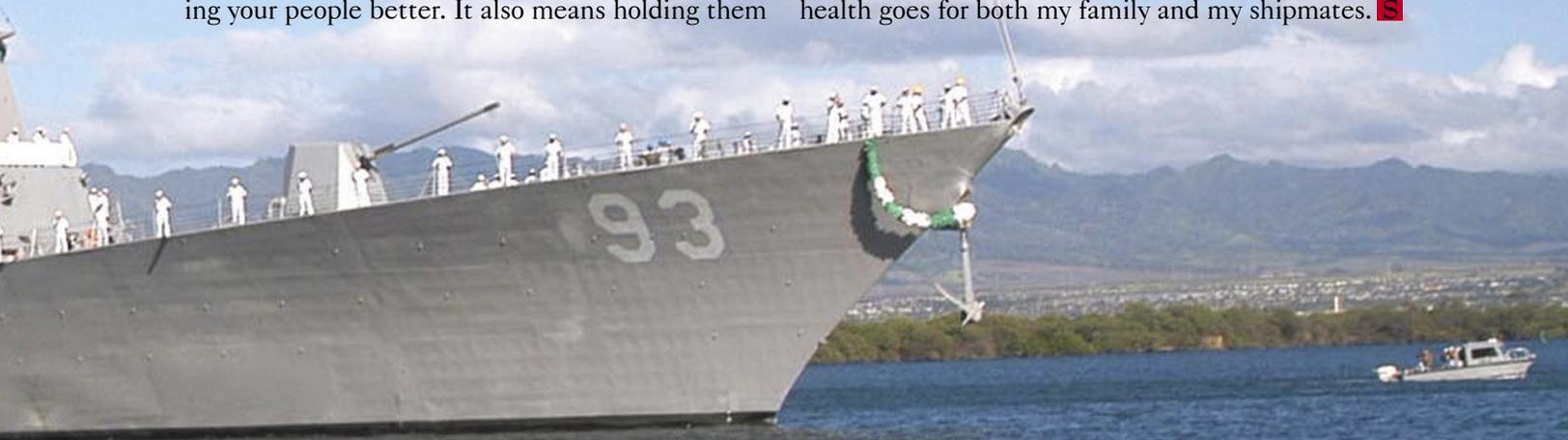
I think the intrusive/proactive leadership approach we're trying to develop is the right way to go, but that concept means tracking and knowing your people better. It also means holding them

accountable for their actions and inactions. This culture needs to start at boot camp as the Sailors depart on leave or PCS to their next assignments. Right then, we need to ask, "What are your travel plans?"

We need to stay very actively involved while the Sailors are in "A" and "C" schools (especially during weekends), as well as when they are en route to their first commands. The old and new commands should communicate about the status of young Sailors in transit. The 18-to-27-year-old, unmarried, high-risk, first-term, devil-may-care Sailors beginning their journey deserve better care and feeding from their first day aboard.

Many of us were high-risk Sailors when we began our Navy journey, as well, but we either made good choices, were lucky in the outcome of our decisions, or had someone looking after our welfare. I also think we used to be held more accountable for our actions than Sailors are in today's Navy.

If I could prevent Sailors from buying and riding motorcycles, like I can with my own children, I would without hesitation. But I cannot treat Sailors like my children any more than I can treat my children like Sailors (as my kids remind me at times). However, that common thread of caring about their physical, mental and spiritual health goes for both my family and my shipmates. **S**



Navy photo by PH3 Victoria A. Tullock