

Drinkin'

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“Don’t drink and drive!”

“Make sure you get enough sleep.”

How many times have you heard these warnings? How many times have you had the misfortune to see the devastating results of ignoring them?

These rules were inadvertently put to the test recently when the junior officers of USS *Stethem* (DDG 63) went to the ship handling complex after a night of much socializing and little sleep.

Two days of regularly scheduled, type-commander trainer time were followed two weeks later by a half-day of reserved trainer time, courtesy of Commander, Destroyer Squadron 21 (CDS 21). During the first two days of training, all officers were able to conduct at least one underway replenishment approach and a breakaway, a pier landing, and getting underway from a pier. To select the junior officer who eventually would represent the ship at the CDS 21 shiphandling competition, *Stethem*’s commanding officer and senior watch officer created a wardroom competition for the best *Stethem* shiphandler (referred to as “Top Conn”). The four finalists went head-to-head during our half day at the trainer. We were pleased with the results of round one. The four wanna-be Top Conns represented the spectrum of our officers: a junior ensign; a seasoned, first-tour division officer (an early roller to department head); a second-tour division officer; and a department head. All had performed superbly. They did so well that the CO would have stayed in his chair.

However, a quirk in our schedule caused round two of the competition to fall on the day after *Stethem*’s dining out. The dinner event was held on a

Wednesday to commemorate both the 225th birthday of the Navy and the ship’s fifth birthday. Our wardroom had authorized late sleepers for the next morning, except for the

four Top Conn contestants who needed to report to the trainer at 0730.

“So what was the problem?” you might ask. We’ve all been there and done that—stayed out late, got up early, and all was good. We all know that if you want to hoot with the owls, you still have to soar with the eagles.

Let’s review the facts concerning the dining out and the four Top Conn finalists:

- All attended the event
- All hit their bunks before 0100
- All had moderate amounts of alcohol, and
- All were up between 0400 and 0630

Their collective performance during the second ship-handling session (which included similar tasks from the first round) was dismal. Two of them crashed into the pier. All reacted too slowly to trends. All confused engines or rudder orders while twisting the ship. The CO never sat down.

The trainer observer—a retired captain—also had observed the ship’s trainer two weeks earlier. He

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asked, "What's wrong with these guys today?" After the first failure in round two (we would have four by the end of the day), we chalked it up to a bad day and the tension of competition. By the time the first mooring was over, it was obvious something was wrong. To a person, the officers insisted they felt fine, but the results showed differently.

Two conclusions were inescapable, based upon our experience in the trainers:

- Decision-making was impaired after moderate amounts of alcohol, and by a lack of adequate sleep before a typical in-port working day.
- In true, can-do, surface-warrior spirit, none of the officers admitted they felt too tired or hung over to stand a special sea-and-anchor watch.

Have you ever been up all day after a late watch, then had a special evolution well into the next night? Have you ever squeezed that last hour of liberty prior to an early underway? Ask these two questions at the next navigation brief before getting underway, and it will bring a resounding yes. As surface warriors, we wear sleeplessness as a badge of honor. At least four junior officers and one surprised commanding officer re-learned an old lesson the easy way — in a trainer.

This lesson isn't only valuable for ship handling. According to an article by Susan Brink in *US News & World Report* (Oct. 16, 2000), about 100,000 automobile crashes a year can be attributed to fatigue. The article pointed out some important facts. Naps are helpful, but only if you keep them under 45 minutes or longer than two hours. Middle-aged people require about six-and-a-half hours of sleep a night, and it takes about three weeks to recover from serious instances of sleep deprivation. You can't "catch up" on sleep over a weekend. The article also discussed a recent study that proved people who were awake for up to 19 hours scored *worse* on performance and alertness tests than those with a blood-alcohol level of .08 percent (which equates to being legally drunk in most states).

Before getting underway from the pier, ask your watches how much sleep they were able to get the previous night and ask them, with a straight face, if they had anything to drink. As a result of our lesson learned in a trainer, I'll do a last-minute watchbill change for any watchstander who answers, "Sir, I pulled an all-nighter and hit my favorite watering hole, but I'm ready to rock." ☺

For more information on sleep deprivation, see "Fatigue: Common, Misunderstood, and Deadly" and "Ten Ways to Deal with Fatigue" in *Fathom* (July-September 1998).