

It's All About Admitting, Learning From, But

Despite Doubled Work Completes Navy's Long



Photos by PH3 Joshua Karsten

As this edition of Fathom was going to press, USS John F. Kennedy (CV 67) was completing her nine-month Extended Service Repair Availability (ESRA) pier side in her Mayport, Fla., homeport. It was the longest ever such overhaul of a Navy ship outside a shipyard. The ship's commanding officer, Capt. Ronald H. Henderson, Jr., spoke with Fathom and discussed how he felt when he assumed command of John F. Kennedy after the ship failed an INSURV inspection in late 2001. He shares with Fathom readers his thoughts on why the ship failed INSURV, his leadership philosophy, and how the ship has risen like the mythical Phoenix rose from ashes to fly again.—Ed.

You were in command of USS Juneau (LPD 10) in Sasebo, Japan when you received orders to take command of USS John F. Kennedy—how did you feel?

I was overwhelmed and felt something like what Harry Truman must have felt after Franklin Roosevelt died. I hoped I was up to the task that lay before me. When I reported to the *Kennedy*, I found many safety and failsafe devices bypassed. Also, it

seemed the ship was so intent on operational commitments that these commitments became the ship's number one priority. Now, this is not in itself bad, but making those commitments had hidden costs, as I was soon to find out. When it comes to safety—and some might consider this heresy—safety is not our number one priority. Our number one priority is operating safely. I'm a big believer in ORM, and this process had not been implemented. We embraced ORM principles, included ORM in every briefing, and we debriefed every major evolution. Those debriefs were brutally frank. It wasn't, "Captain, everything went great." It was, "OK, here's what didn't go perfectly" or "How can we do it better?" I attended all of those debriefs, and there were times when I would say, "OK, this is what I, as your captain, didn't do well."

What is your perspective on criticism and making mistakes?

I think once subordinates see the captain is willing to accept constructive criticism without giving up his responsibility they start to get this idea that it's OK to make a mistake. It's OK to make the right kind of mistake. We're human, and we will all make mistakes. The real crime is to repeat them, in other words, to not learn from them.

The purpose of our debriefs was not so much to assess blame—finding some guilty "victim" to hang when something has gone wrong—but, to examine why it went wrong and discuss what we could have done to prevent the problem. What is really important is, "How do we prevent recurrence?"

What makes me really upset is when we make the same stupid mistake over and over again. I know people are going to make errors, but when you have a personnel failure that causes a casualty there are a limited number of ways that can happen.

Not Repeating Mistakes

Package, John F. Kennedy Successfully Largest-ever Pierside Overhaul

Maybe it happened because someone failed to follow a written procedure. Usually that procedure is written in blood. There are two reasons someone fails to follow a procedure: either because he doesn't know the procedure—which is a training or leadership deficiency—or it's a personal failure. In other words, that person is unwilling to show the attention to detail required to follow the established procedure. I think it's important when you look back at a mishap or a casualty to figure out, "Was this because someone was negligent or because someone wasn't properly trained?"

If they were negligent, maybe that person shouldn't be in a position where his negligence could cause such problems. If so, we need to hold them accountable. If it's a training issue, that's something we can correct so it doesn't happen again, and we can learn from the mistake.

What did you find aboard the ship after you assumed command and were able to evaluate the task that lay before you?

Many safety features on equipment had been bypassed. We put a stop to that. More than that, there was an attitude here of leadership by fear and intimidation. Sailors were afraid. They were afraid of their leaders; they were afraid of making a mistake; and they were afraid of passing bad news because they didn't want to be the messenger who got "shot". They were afraid of admitting they had made a mistake. Of course, these are gross generalizations, but I would say that middle management—chiefs and officers—were the ones most reluctant to say that they had failed. One of the things I have tried to get people to do is to admit mistakes. I believe that rather than a weakness, it is a sign of great character to admit mistakes. I actually have more trust and confidence in someone who comes to me and says, "I didn't do this very well; here's where I fell down,

and here's what I will do to prevent recurrence." First of all, it's big of them to admit that, and I have a lot more respect for that person than for the person who tries to buffalo me that he's perfect and that he's brilliant all the time.

When a person admits a mistake, it is often because of a training deficiency that we can correct. That's probably the biggest attitudinal change that I made. The "right kind" of mistakes are permitted—the right kind of mistakes meaning the mistakes you make because you don't have the right level of training, which we can correct, or the mistakes that you make because you're trying really, really hard and you just failed. You aren't up to the task either because you're tired or the task exceeds your capabilities.

I would rather have someone who's trying really hard and is failing occasionally than someone who isn't trying hard and is getting by on image.

I remember the chief engineer officer coming to me one time because we had suffered an engineering problem. The issue was a Sailor had failed to follow a procedure. The CHENG came to me with his head in his hands and thought I was going to shoot him. When I heard about the situation I said, "That's great because we had found the cause of the problem." I think the CHENG was surprised because he thought I was going to yell and scream at him, or yell and scream at the Sailor, or that I was going to be really perturbed that this bad thing had happened. In actuality I was quite pleased that it had happened because it pointed out a deficiency we could correct.

Shortly after the ship failed its INSURV inspection, a critical article appeared in the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings*, titled, "Where Were the Chiefs?" Can you comment on that article?

I appreciate authors who contribute to *Proceedings* because it is an open forum where anyone can

speak their mind on professional issues. The first thing I would say about the *[Proceedings]* article is that the author began with, “If I was the captain of the *Kennedy*...” My rebuttal to that is, “Well, you’re not.” That’s why captains wear the command star. Unless you’re here you don’t know the people. You don’t know the situation, so you have no business throwing stones. He went on to write that he would fire every single leading chief on the *Kennedy*. I would argue that that would be throwing out the baby with the bath water. There were, indeed, some poor chief petty officers in the mess, and they have either left or are leaving. One or two of them had to be dealt with severely. I removed one chief and reassigned a few others. Nevertheless the chiefs on board were fine. The chiefs as a *[CPO]* mess—as a group—were weak. This was one of the things I noticed about the *Kennedy*. Everyone seemed to go about their jobs with blinders on; there was very little interest in other departments or helping other shipmates.

One of the first things I said to my department heads was, “I will evaluate you on what you do for departments other than your own.” That was a shocker because there had been a “me, me, me” attitude. “If I make my fellow department head look bad, I’ll look better” was a prevailing attitude. There was no cooperation among department heads, and that also applied to the chiefs—maybe even more so to the chiefs. There was no sense of CPOs as a community aboard the *Kennedy*. They came to work, they did their jobs, and they went home. As long as their little realm was secure, they weren’t too interested *[in anything else]*.

This problem was one of the things my new command master chief attacked the day he got here. I have a great CMC, and the chief’s mess is much, much stronger now than it was then. I’m not sure we have any individuals who are any better or any worse. They’re the same individuals in terms of talent, but as a team they’re a lot better. So I don’t put much faith in that article, “Where Were the Chiefs?”

You know, there are two reasons why a chief might be ineffective. One is that he’s not competent, and the other reason he’s ineffective is he doesn’t get any support from his chain of command. It was clear to me that there were a few chiefs in *Kennedy* who were, in fact, incompetent. But there were a lot of chiefs who weren’t getting any support from the chain of command. So, to blame chiefs for all our woes is misplaced.

Can you talk about the state of PMS and damage control you discovered when you assumed command of the ship?

Clearly, PMS aboard *Kennedy* had not been emphasized, which was one factor in the failed INSURV. In that sense, INSURV was the best thing that ever happened to us. We asked for a lot of help, and we got a lot of help from the AIRLANT 3M team. They came out to visit us four times on deployment and each time they saw a big improvement in our ability to conduct 3M and PMS. In fact, when they inspected us, we scored an 80, which was the highest a CV had scored under the new system. I believe we were the first Atlantic Fleet CV to pass that inspection. That’s not to bad-mouth the other ships. It is probably a reflection of the enormous attention we got on PMS and the help we got from AIRLANT.

We faced a different challenge with SRA (selected restricted availability) because PMS often does not address what happens to your equipment during SRA. We’re in a difficult position right now. It’s going to take months and months and months of focused effort—including focusing on PMS—to get us back where we belong in terms of material condition.

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Damage control was another area where we were in good shape through deployment because of all the training the ship had done getting ready. Although I benefited from that, I wasn’t involved in it because I took command at sea *[while the ship was]* headed east. So, I inherited a damage control setup that was good, and in fact one of the reasons they were so good was that they were having actual emergencies all the time. They got very good at handling the real thing, and we had our share of casualties and excitement.

So, our damage control posture was excellent, but that all changed when we went into overhaul. In overhaul so much gets ripped apart and taken off the ship, and we’re just now beginning to put it all together. For example, I have 17 hi-cap *[high capac-*

ity *FFFF*] stations, and we had a massive amount of work done on all of them. Now we are getting ready for a light-off assessment, and we need those hi-cap stations, but the contractor hasn't put them back together correctly. So, my damage controlmen are busy—trying to fix toilets so I can move the crew back aboard, fix leaky pipes, fix water heaters for hot showers, and fix air conditioning coils so Sailors can have cool racks when they move back aboard. They were also trying to run fire drills to demonstrate firefighting proficiency for light-off assessment, inventory repair lockers, and maintain or replace old and worn equipment. In the middle of all that they now had to repair 17 hi-cap stations. These guys are working twenty hours a day, seven days a week right now, and they've been doing that for two months. They're tired and there's a safety aspect to that, isn't there? We're challenged here because of poor contractor performance, because of the summer Florida heat, and because of demands placed on us. This is a very tough time right now, probably the toughest time in the ship's life, coming out of overhaul.

In fact, I think this is harder than being in combat or on cruise. We do get to go home to our families. That part is nice but, in terms of the work, my engineers have worked seven days a week for the last two months to try to complete everything. This overhaul is huge, which many people don't understand. It's the largest overhaul ever conducted outside a shipyard. The ship's force work package has grown from 40,000 man-days to 75,000 man-days. We were told we couldn't accomplish 40,000, but now we're on the verge of accomplishing 75,000. I am proud of them for that.

The civilian contractor workload has also expanded, from something like 250,000 man-days to 450,000 man-days. It's a huge amount of work we've undertaken. The amount of work that still needs to be done is huge, too. The ship was never SLEP-ed [service life extension program], and we're paying the price. Some things we are finding I call "time bombs" because we didn't expect the failures, and they have lain dormant since the 1996 overhaul. The [ship's] SLEP that was started in Philadelphia in 1996 was never finished because of BRAC [*base realignment and closure*] decisions. We have found several "time bombs," some of which could have had big safety implications. Once again, bad news is really good news in the long run.



Would it have been better had the ship gone into a yard?

That's debatable. I think that in some ways it would have been better, but in others it wouldn't have been. This overhaul has been a huge challenge with many setbacks but with many great successes. Like I said, no one thought we could do the amount of work we were originally assigned. The work we were originally assigned has roughly doubled, and now we're down on ourselves a little bit because we're a little behind. If you consider the growth we've had, I do not believe we really are behind.

What is your current duty-section structure?

We've remained in eight-section duty throughout the overhaul. Engineers have recently collapsed to four-section, and for our fire drills we're collapsing to four. I only do that as necessary. I want to stay in as many duty sections as I can. Most ships in overhaul are in three- or four-section duty. My manning has actually been excellent, and I have no complaints there. The Navy has supported me very well and has enabled me to maintain the manning level I need. So, [*with the tremendous work-package growth*] are we



behind, or are we ahead? If we were on our original work package we'd be done. But our work package has grown 52 percent, and if you look at the historical norm for aircraft carriers, 20 to 25 percent [*work package*] growth is what's expected. We were told our [*original*] package was too ambitious, and then we grew it 52 percent!

In a speech you gave about a month after you took command, you said to the crew, "Stay sharp, stay focused, stay safe. Use the training that has made you the best Sailors in the world. Trust in your faith and in your shipmates." Is the crew staying focused?

I think they are. They continue to amaze me with their good attitudes and willingness to tackle new challenges. You know, you would expect a ship in our situation to have very low morale and a lot of long faces. Don't get me wrong—Sailors are always grumbling, but—all in all—I think the morale here is good. The crew is focused. They are excited. They want to get out of port and go to sea, where we belong.

Keep in mind that I've had about 45 percent [*crew*] turnover since last deployment. Put another

way—45 percent of my crew has never been to sea, ever, in any ship, on any ocean. They didn't join the Navy hoping to chip paint, they didn't join the Navy hoping to crawl through a vent plenum and needle-gun the rust. They joined the Navy to fix radars or move airplanes around the flight deck or operate machinery or whatever they joined the Navy to do. They want to go do that now that we are almost done with overhaul.

They're tired of being shipbuilders. It's time to get underway, and they know the way out of here is to pass these drills, pass LOA [*light-off assessment*], get the ship fixed, and go to sea.

The Sailors who have been here for a while, particularly down in engineering where you have machinist's mates who have been on board for four or five years, are amazed because they've never seen any of this stuff fixed before. They were living with inoperable equipment for so long that they got used to it. They were used to "that pump over there in the corner never worked." I've had Sailors say to me things like, "Captain, I've never seen that pump work. We've had a job in on that for three years and couldn't get the resources to get it fixed." You might get away with that on an aircraft carrier because you have so many redundant systems. The CV was built that way to take battle damage, not to leave that redundancy at the pier. This, of course, is something the nuclear power community preaches all the time. "You don't leave redundancy at the pier."

Ship designers gave you eight boilers for a reason. It wasn't so that three of them don't have to work. Designers gave us eight boilers because we know that at any one point in time, one is probably getting some maintenance done on it, and another one might fail for some other reason. You can do very well on five boilers, but that isn't why they gave you eight—so that three could be broken. They gave you eight [*boilers*] because you need that kind of redundancy. In the past we had mortgaged our redundancy on this ship.

Do you have any final thoughts for *Fathom* readers?

We have to get out of the "zero defects" mentality while still maintaining high standards. The zero-defects mentality is a people killer. We have to stamp out this fear Sailors have. They shouldn't be afraid to tell their seniors there's something wrong, and seniors can't be afraid to listen. We need a little



less “career-ism,” and we need a little bit more caring about our Sailors. Sailors will perform miracles. They’re like flowers in the desert. If you sprinkle a little water on them, “poof!” they bloom and flower. We saw that here in *Kennedy*. The Sailors had rarely been praised before. You build on little victories. Somebody does some little thing right, and you make a big deal out of it. Suddenly, they realize that somebody cares about them. If you think about it, Sailors don’t ask for much. Look at what we put them through. We put them in cramped little quarters, stack them like cordwood with no privacy or storage space. Tight conditions, long hours, relatively low pay (but getting better!), hazardous working conditions, sometimes unsanitary working conditions, and they do it gladly, even when we take them away from their families. They will do it gladly only if we recognize them for what they do, thank them a lot, pat them on the back now and then, explain to them why they’re doing it—other than “because I told you so”—then tie it into the big picture of service to our nation and challenge them to be even better. I don’t think any of these [*John F. Kennedy*] Sailors want to be failures. They all want to be successful, they all want to be proud of the ship, and (almost) all of them want to work hard. There are exceptions, not everybody is willing to make success happen. Like Vince Lombardi said, “Everybody wants to win, but not everybody is willing to do what it takes to win.”

That’s one of my jobs [*as commanding officer*]: to motivate and inspire them and to lead them so they’ll do what it takes to win. We as leaders don’t always do that. We don’t always enable them. So often we ask a Sailor to “plow a 40-acre field with his fingernails” and then we yell at him because his fingernails are dirty.

Look at my Sailors walking around the ship covered with paint. Are we on them because their coveralls are dirty? In fact, what we are doing is getting them some clean coveralls, and no Sailor should have to buy them because you ordered him to “paint that space.” Every Sailor on this ship is going to get a new set of coveralls after this availability. It’s like shedding the hard hats, it’s a sign that ship repair is over and ship operations and training are now the priorities.

To summarize, I believe that we should hold our Sailors to the highest possible standards while taking the best possible care of them. An important aspect of this care for our Sailors is our safety philosophy, which is an open, frank and critical look at continual process improvement. This has served us well and kept us out of danger in completing the *JFK* overhaul. We’ll be done soon. Look for *John F. Kennedy* and her Sailors underway, training to meet the nation’s needs and serve when and where the President may direct. ☺