

THOUGHTS FROM A 30-YEAR CAREER

By Rear Admiral James Hinkle, U.S. Navy (Retired)



When the chief engineer reports a casualty and gives you an estimated time for how long it will take to fix it, multiply by three.

The XO-to-CO fleet-up concept was sold on “continuity”—back to back 18-month tours for three years total in a ship—but what continuity gains, selectivity loses. There is some solace in having four XOs for every three CO billets, i.e., not every XO gets to be a CO. And one could argue that selectivity still falls to the CO, who can ding his or her XO; but that must create some daunting machinations to find a qualified replacement to fill the CO’s shoes in short order.

Aviators, submariners, and surface warfare officers have diverse careers and should not have to compete on the same unrestricted line selection boards for promotion. They should compete among themselves for the number of slots required for each year group in their own communities, thus ensuring the right number of officers for the right number of billets.

The Navy should do away with rank in the Chaplain Corps. The pay system can account for longevity and step raises to provide reasonable compensation. If an individual is selected to lead the Chaplain Corps, let him or her wear the stars. Currently, the system forces chaplains to retire at age 62 even though there is a stated shortage. Ostensibly, this forced retirement is to allow for upward mobility. Do away with rank and the need for upward mobility becomes less of a concern.

When an officer gets relieved for cause for personal, ethical, or moral issues, someone should go back and see who signed the fitness report that recommended them for command or flag. It seems to me whoever signed that fitrep is culpable as well.



XO-to-CO fleet-up has had a negative impact on the surface warfare career path. The time between finishing a department head tour and reporting as XO might be as long as five years—time enough to forget what saltwater smells like.



When I had the chance to review resignation letters from junior officers, no one ever said they were getting out because they received a bad fitness report, nor did anyone offer that their spouse made them get out.

I hear more and more reports about midshipmen summer cruises being a waste of time. I remember when entire squadrons of ships were designated as midshipmen summer cruise squadrons. Today, midshipmen might get only three to four weeks on a ship, may not get under way, and may spend the summer on the beach because the ship cannot find anything for them to do, as if they are in the way. This needs to be fixed.

A senior officer who games the system by ranking one officer over another for purposes of improving their chances for screening for executive officer or commanding officer, for example, does a huge disservice to the officer who through his or her professional performance *earned* the top spot.

The Office of Program Appraisal (OPA), Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA), and Chief of Information (CHINFO) should pool their resources. OPA oversees acquisition programs; OLA sells them to the Hill; and CHINFO sells them to the public. Working together they can create a powerful message of the need for a strong Navy and Marine Corps.

Finding flag officers to take command of carrier strike groups is not a problem. Finding qualified captains to fill chief of staff billets, on the other hand, has been problematic. Given that aviators who aspire to command a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier have a lengthy pipeline, they are not available for chief of staff billets. Carrier air wing commanders, however, have plenty of time, as do destroyer squadron commanders. Both these officers would be superb chiefs of staff. Some likely would then be selected for flag rank, and when that happens, people will be lining up to serve in these billets.

■ **REAR ADMIRAL HINKLE** is a retired surface warfare officer. While on active duty, he commanded a carrier strike group and the Navy Personnel Command and led the Navy’s efforts in the first Quadrennial Defense Review. He is currently a partner with The Spectrum Group, a consulting and lobbying firm in Alexandria, VA.