

ARLEIGH ALBERT BURKE  
DOCUMENTS:

THE SAILOR AND THE NAVY  
1945-1955

PORTRAIT OF THE SAILOR AND  
COMMANDER IN HIS OWN WORDS

EXCERPT: RADM A.A. BURKE  
TO RADM W.F. BOONE,  
SUPERINTENDENT, U.S.N.A., 31 JULY 1954

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COMMANDER CRUISER DIVISION SIX  
UNITED STATES ATLANTIC FLEET

31 July 1954

RADM Walter F. Boone, USN  
Superintendent, U.S. Naval Academy  
Annapolis, Maryland

Dear Freddie:

This Midshipman Cruise has been a very pleasant occasion for me, and at the same time it has been just a little bit disturbing. There were many pleasant occasions at sea where it was fun to work with the midshipmen. The disturbing part was caused by the attitude of some of the midshipmen concerning the Navy as a whole.

I should like to pass on some of my observations to you for any action that you might find desirable. Before I get into that though, perhaps I should state that I haven't had very much to do on this cruise, and because of that, I have made it a point to have a discussion with a small group of midshipmen each day at sea. I have also had a few seminars with the first class NROTC and USNA men. The midshipmen are serving in many billets on the staff and are instructed by the officers of my staff. The purpose of the seminars and the small daily meetings was primarily to determine the degree of enthusiasm of midshipmen for the Navy, why midshipmen, educated and trained in a Navy school, would consider going into the Air Force instead of the Navy, and their general attitude about the Navy.

Some of the points below shook me, and they might shake you too, but here they are:

a. Both USNA and NROTC midshipmen remarked that quite a few of their officers at their schools did not show any enthusiasm and love of the Navy. These officers treated the Navy as a job and not a career. Some of the officers even stated that they didn't particularly like the Navy, but they had been in so long now they might as well stay. Some of the officers were merely apathetic, or had adopted a nonchalant "wise guy" pose.

This point came from so many people that I suspect that there is a basis for it. Suggestions were:

(1) Form discussion groups and informal gatherings with older officers at the Academy and the NROTC units. (Lieutenants do not have sufficient maturity – say the midshipmen).

(2) Establish a training program of lectures on the advantages and satisfactions of a naval career. These lectures, to be most effective, should be given by highly competent officers of senior rank.

(3) Employ fewer reserves, more career officers as instructors in the NROTC units and the Academy. The need is especially strong in the NROTC.

(4) A closer check by the more senior officers of the attitudes and type of influence emanating from the junior officers.

b. Midshipmen, both USNA and NROTC, stated that there was not available information as to what the Navy was all about. I remarked that there were many publications and books, and many pamphlets on the Navy. They said that may be so, but it is so hard to get them and there is no central place where a man can go to get the dope. Different midshipmen have suggested on several different occasions that it would be helpful if there were a central place with a senior knowledgeable officer available in each school to discuss the Navy with the midshipmen, including such things as types of duty, lengths of tours, what the Navy does, why a Navy, and other subjects they would like to know about. A "Navy Reading Room" maybe.

Similarly, movies such as "Victory at Sea" have proved to be very popular, but facilities are not adequate to allow all midshipmen to see them. It was suggested that a regular schedule be set up, after working hours if necessary, for the showing of such films repeatedly. Many people like to see them several times. It was also suggested that a good "Navy short" should be shown before each regular movie.

c. Many midshipmen, again both NROTC and USNA, stated that they would like to have somebody "shoot the breeze" with them about the Navy in an unofficial manner. This is different from paragraph b. above. I found this was a lack on the cruise, and made some of my staff available (in addition to ship's officers also made available) on the fantail periodically just to tell "sea stories" and discuss their own personal experiences and opinions and the Navy way of life. Many damaging misconceptions can be dispelled in this manner.

When I pointed out there was a great deal of social as well as official contact between the midshipmen and the officers, they agreed that was [true], but still on those occasions the Navy was not discussed. The Naval Academy was discussed, but not the Navy as a whole. They didn't feel free to ask questions, and sometimes they didn't know how to go about finding out about life in the Navy and what the Navy is for. In the NROTC units particularly they said they missed "bull sessions," but it was also stressed by the Naval Academy lads.

Some specific points brought up by midshipmen, first classmen, during "bull sessions" with my staff officers are as follows (and many of these and similar questions were asked after 3 years at the Naval Academy):

(1) Method of payment and mess bills in wardroom mess. Some midshipmen believed it was by number of meals eaten.

(2) Unawareness of the fact that an officer received a subsistence allowance.

(3) No knowledge of retirement benefits, service required for eligibility for retirement, statutory retirement age.

(4) Minimum service requirements in grade before being eligible for promotion.

(5) Sea/Shore rotation for general line officers. Length of time newly appointed officers usually serve at sea before eligible for shore duty. Some midshipmen were under the impression that only time served in a ship while actually away from a port would count towards sea duty and that time served while a ship was anchored or moored to a pier would not be counted as sea duty. When this point was explained remarks such as “well that’s not as bad as I thought” or “that’s not so bad after all” were made.

d. Prestige and respect. There were a surprisingly large number of midshipmen, both USNA and NROTC, who commented on lowered status of officers now-a-days. They remarked that I was talking about the “Old days” when I spoke of the prestige and honor to serve in the Navy. They talked about the gradual decrease of fringe benefits, but these didn’t worry them nearly so much as the gradual loss of naval officers’ prestige and respect. They want to belong to an outfit which is respected, which has vitality, and which is known to be “going places.”

e. The NROTC youngsters, as a general rule, have never even considered the Navy as a career. They stated that when they came into the NROTC Program the only thing that was discussed was the education they would get and the three years obligated service, and in most cases the advantages of a career in the Navy was [sic] not even mentioned. As a result most of them have entered the program with the expectation of serving only three years and were somewhat surprised that the Navy should expect any of them to volunteer for a naval career.

The first class NROTC midshipmen had considered the problem a little bit more, but very few of them were seriously considering the Navy as a career. Many of those stated that they wouldn’t be able to make up their minds until they had served as officers for a while, and then only if they could get into the branch they wanted, such as Civil Engineers, Submarines, Destroyers, Naval Aviation, or some other duty they particularly liked. They didn’t know much about the Navy as a whole.

It was suggested that the quality of NROTC Midshipmen could be improved by more intensive advertising of the career program, thus providing a larger reservoir of men from which to draw regular commissioned officers. The idea of a so-called “good deal” or “free ride” in the NROTC should be suppressed. It is too apparent today, say the midshipmen, and I certainly agree.

In this connection, there were quite a few first classmen who were positively anti-Navy as a career. They usually sounded off to some of our petty officers. These lads usually stated that the Navy was inconsiderate of its people, the midshipmen want security, they wanted to be home, the Navy was uninteresting, all they wanted out of the program in the first place was an education, let somebody else do the fighting, they

wanted a happy, routine life, etc. it struck me that our education slipped badly because they entered either pro-Navy or at least favorably inclined. Somehow they have picked up positive anti-Navy views. I hope the views of some of them were changed, but there are quite a few men who had made up their minds on this basis.

f. Some of the NROTC midshipmen were concerned about their chances in the Regular Navy in competition with USNA lads. Frankly, the good NROTC ones, of whom there were many, were undistinguishable from the good USNA lads. The USNA people had a little more confidence and a little better leadership, but the good NROTC people were so close on their heels that any advantages which the USNA lads might have could be wiped out with a little enthusiasm and application.

g. A few of them spoke of money. They thought they could make more on the outside than they could in the Navy and that was important to them. Nothing I could say about that.

h. Many of them were talking about families. A large percentage of them expect to get married shortly after graduation, both NROTC and USNA. They did not like the long periods of separation from their families. They asked about raising children when papa was not home very much.

In this connection, a surprisingly large number of them stated that what they would do would depend upon the views of their girl. If she liked the Navy, fine. If she didn't, they would, of course, not stay in. It was suggested that in the Naval Academy and in NROTC units there be a "school for prospective wives." It would be the job of this school to instruct these young girls on what the Navy held for them and their future husbands, and what they could expect of the Navy. This might be a good idea. They pointed out that this is being done by the Air Force who, they suspect, is more alert to the problems of their personnel than the Navy.

i. It was stated that there was not enough contact between the NROTC and Naval Academy midshipmen during the academic year. To meet this lack the midshipmen suggested a National Naval Fraternity on the midshipman level be established. Include as members both Academy and NROTC midshipmen. A yearly convention for the purpose of binding these men more closely together, as well as affording the opportunity for the exchange of ideas between the Academy and NROTC units would be desirable. Delegates would disseminate the material and information thus received to their classmates at school. Financing of this organization, particularly the proposed convention, would be the stumbling block.

j. Some of the midshipmen felt that they had not been sufficiently well grounded in the fundamentals of simple naval equipment. Many of the NROTC people stated that the equipment in their units would not operate properly, and they were not instructed in the need for really knowing about that material. Consequently, when they met with a director or a gun at sea they felt they didn't know as much as they could have known.

k. Some of the NROTC midshipmen believed there should be special engineering courses set up for those NROTC students who were not majoring in engineering.

l. Many of the Naval Academy midshipmen believed that there was insufficient incentive in the Naval Academy due to too many of the poorer people graduating and maybe too much standardization. Perhaps our standards have slipped and when the good midshipmen see the unfitted get by, sometimes without much effort, the good ones feel the whole outfit is mediocre. For example, they said quite a few had completed some courses in college which were repeated in the Naval Academy. During the period these courses were being conducted there was no challenge for the midshipmen and they got into the bad habit of riding, and later when they had new courses they couldn't get over their lazy habits. This question of "challenge" came up repeatedly in general discussions of the Navy.

m. Midshipmen believe they should be encouraged to evaluate their instructions, their courses taken during the academic year, and the various facts of the summer cruises such as the watches stood and the midshipmen drill periods and lectures. In this way, sub-standard material and instruction could be discovered and improved or eliminated.

The most important points seem to be:

a. That the officers with whom the midshipmen have contact are sometimes not sufficiently interested in the Navy and are not enthusiastic, energetic, and sometimes even do not have the pride of the Navy which is so essential for a naval officer.

b. The midshipmen feel they do not have sufficient opportunities to gain knowledge of the future of the Navy and their future in the Navy.

c. There is a need for a campaign to "sell the Navy" as a career to midshipmen.

I know that you will have a most interesting time at the Naval Academy, and that the Naval Academy will benefit greatly from your tour of duty. I know of no other job in the Navy where such great and lasting benefits to the Navy can be accomplished as the one you are now holding. It is a challenging job, and one which will require a great deal of effort, tact, enthusiasm, and hard work. I know you will enjoy it as you – with the help of Polly – do it well.

Spare copies of this letter are enclosed in case you want to inform BUPERS of the NROTC aspects, or for any other purpose you may desire.

Sincerely yours,

ARLEIGH BURKE