



By Jack Curtis

I've held an incredible job for the past 15 months. Serving as the commanding officer of the finest jet squadron in the Navy has been nothing short of an absolute privilege. But, in a few days (and on schedule) I'll relinquish command to a good friend — my executive officer. It's not uncommon for officers in my position to get nostalgic as they near the end of their command tours, and typically these trips down memory lane focus on the good times, when things were easy and fun. But, the past few days I've been reflecting on a period of time that actually occurred prior to me assuming command, when I was the executive officer for yet another good friend who was in command ahead of me. It was decidedly not a good time, and it wasn't easy. It was one of the most difficult few weeks of my life.

It started on a Wednesday. A young Sailor knocked on my door and asked if we could talk. She went on to tell me that she had several young siblings that were living in a motel room with her mother. Her mother had too many drug and alcohol related troubles to find reliable work and they were effectively homeless. She told me that to help, she was sending half of her modest E-5 pay home every month. She went on to tell me that her 13 year old brother had recently put a knife to her 2 year old sister's neck and threatened to kill her because she wouldn't stop crying. She asked, "What should I do?"

The next day another young woman knocked on the door and asked if we could talk. She was relatively new to the Navy. She went on to tell me that she didn't enjoy the Navy

lifestyle, hated her job, hated where she lived, and cried every morning as she considered whether or not to end her life. She asked “What should I do?”

That same night a dear friend of mine who was serving as the commanding officer of another squadron on the flight line suddenly died of heart failure — he was a year older than me. I chose to lead the missing man formation fly-over because I was too scared to sit through his memorial and watch one of my best friends eulogize another. I sobbed into my mask as we flew over the memorial.

Monday afternoon there was a knock on my door. It was two of our senior enlisted leaders. One told me that a Sailor from another squadron had committed suicide that afternoon, and now his teenage daughter (who was friends with my guy’s son) was texting to say that her father’s death was her fault and she was going to do the same thing. Naturally, they asked, “What should we do?”

Not long after, the commanding officer got a phone call from a young woman near Seattle who told him she believed one of our Sailors had posted a private (and explicit) video of her to the internet without her knowledge or consent. She was distraught and, it seemed, on the verge of some very destructive choices. I sat in the Skipper’s office, we looked at each other and said, “What should we do?”

In some of these cases the answer to “what should we do?” wasn’t terribly difficult to figure out, but what was incredibly difficult was the rate at which these questions — these crises — were piling up. I wanted to have the perfect answer for each of them. I had a strong desire to be the person who could make their problems go away. Foolishly, I was trying to be everything for everyone — all the time. I was trying to be everything for my boss, trying to tackle the hard things so he could focus his efforts on the larger organizational priorities. I was trying to be everything for the seemingly endless stream of knocks on the door. All the while I was also trying to be a good pilot, a good husband, and a good father.

I’d gotten to a point where every knock on the office door would immediately stir a silent rage — “can I not just get five minutes to myself!” — but I always pushed it down and gave the knock all of me. This knock might be a problem that, when compared to the three before it, seemed trivial, but it was a crisis nonetheless for the person carrying it. They deserved the best of me — they deserved all of me. But, slowly, what I had left to offer each of them was deteriorating, and with it my health, confidence, and personal resiliency.

It finally came to a head a few weeks later when the squadron was about to embark on an aircraft carrier for a few days of training. The pressure had been piling up. I began to feel

aches and tightness in my chest. Having a close friend who'd very recently died only served to heighten my concern. I tried to push these sensations aside by telling myself it was all in my head, and that it was "just" the normal stress of the job. But I could only do that for so long. I finally confided in my Skipper and a doctor. In short order I was at a hospital going through an extensive cardio work-up. Thankfully, I was given a relatively clean bill of health, but I was spooked, and going out to the fly around an aircraft carrier seemed like a bad plan under the circumstances.

I took leave and came home from the training detachment. I tried to relax and focus as little of my attention on work as possible. And then, after a week or so at home, I went right back to it.

What I didn't know at the time, and I can only now speculate, is that I was dealing with chronic fatigue and stress-induced anxiety; not a great combination for a jet pilot. I say that I can only now speculate because I stubbornly never went to talk with a mental health professional — and I should have.

I went on to take command of the squadron, and successfully led the team through a greatly abbreviated pre-deployment training schedule, and then a record-breaking deployment that saw us at sea for 206 consecutive days. Every now and again I would feel some of those disconcerting sensations start to creep in and I would take myself off the flight schedule for a day or two. I confided in my boss (CAG), the senior medical officer onboard the ship, and eventually my own executive officer. But for reasons I still don't understand, I never sought the help of a mental health counselor — and I should have. In fact, the only reason why I'm writing about this now is because a young lieutenant in my squadron recently told me that he'd been "talking to someone." I told him I was proud of him for recognizing the need, and for doing something about it. I drove home that day feeling like an absolute hypocrite. So now, as I'm a few days away from turning over command and retiring from active duty I'm talking about it.

I got a lot of things right while in command. We completed a deployment the likes of which should never be attempted again. We brought all of our jets and Sailors home safely. My boss was happy with my performance and he had me on a "due course" career path. But I also failed. I failed to recognize that the combined toll that the personal and professional stresses of this job place upon us is real. I failed to recognize that in my effort to be "on" for everyone all the time I was wearing myself out and greatly diminishing my ability to be the best version of myself for the people I cared the most for. I failed to recognize the same need that one of my youngest lieutenants felt, and I failed to act with the same courage he did. When I ask myself "why," all I can muster is the worst possible answer — pride.

When officers are selected for command they are sent to myriad schools before reporting as the number two — the executive officer. Almost all of these courses deal with the administration, ethics, and legalities of the job. We deep dive into case studies and are asked to write essays about our philosophy of command. We spend the entirety of these courses looking outward at the people and process we'll be charged to lead. Regrettably I don't recall a single course, seminar, or discussion that focused on taking care of us. And I suppose I can't really fault the Navy for that.

As a 40-something senior officer with close to 20 years in the Navy I should have had an awareness of the stresses that were coming. But, to be honest, the jobs I'd done to get to where I was hadn't really been that hard. Sure there were tough days and challenging situations, but there was always someone else to shoulder the heaviest burdens. There was always the Skipper. When things got really hard I knew I could go to him and he'd know the answer to "What should I do?" But now I've been that guy, and I have an over-due appreciation for the toll it takes.

I don't write this to complain or to spin a "woe is me" yarn. Command at any level is a serious undertaking, but it's also an extreme privilege. Successfully finishing this tour is the highlight of my professional life, and I'll always be grateful for having had the opportunity to lead this team. But.... there's a side to it more of us need to consider and discuss.

I'm sharing this now because I don't think I'm the only one who's experienced it. I'm sharing this now because somewhere there's a lieutenant (or a commander) who needs to set aside their pride and find someone to talk to. I hope I can be that for someone — you know how to reach me.

Jack

*Post Script: Much of the commentary and discussion spurred along by this essay has focused on self-harm or suicide. I think it's important to clarify a point here: I've never considered hurting myself. There's a wide gap between struggling to be the best versions of ourselves and ending our lives — I was never there, but that doesn't mean the challenges I described above don't merit awareness, recognition, and attention.*

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