Chiefs as a Resource on Fleet Staffs and Operational Planning Teams

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As the Navy has implemented its Maritime Operations Center (MOC) concept, a significant amount of resources have been allocated to train and educate commissioned officers to improve their ability to plan and execute on operational-level-of-war (OLW) staffs. However, while the workload around the fleets seems to be ever increasing, manning levels remain the same. One group that can ease the growing burden on fleet staffs is Chief Petty Officers. Throughout the Navy, Chiefs are an indispensable, valued resource. Unfortunately, to date, these talented men and women have not been fully utilized in support of either MOC processes or planning teams. Given the fiscally constrained environment that is expected to extend into the foreseeable future, the time is ripe for the Navy to explore the idea that Chiefs can add significant value to the MOCs over and above their current contributions.

The fact that this has not yet occurred is not the fault of individual staff “wardrooms” or “Chiefs’ messes” but rather is a result of numbered fleets shifting from staff structures dominated by rigid N-code hierarchies to more loosely executed, cross-functional teams without adequately considering the skills of all personnel assigned to the MOC. As the MOCs and the Navy Planning Process (NPP) evolve, and fleet staff manning levels remain stagnant or are reduced, it is imperative that the Navy take advantage of all untapped resources at the OLW. Specifically, the Navy needs to better utilize Chiefs within the MOC, to include integrating them into operational planning teams (OPTs). The Navy should view the men and women who work in the MOCs not as traditional staff officers but rather as staff operators who should be assigned duties based on talent and experience vice the traditional “rank appropriate” model.

As the Navy transitions from over a decade-long involvement in two ground-centric wars, its missions are expanding in every theater. The strategic pivot to the Pacific, the emergence of anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) threats, the establishment of Fourth and Tenth Fleet, and the Sixth Fleet requirement to support two combatant commanders, all demonstrate a tremendous growth in the scope and complexity of Navy missions. In order to meet these evolving missions the talents of all hands must be maximized. As the operational tempo continues to increase and manning levels remain at best static, the MOC leadership must re-think how to execute their increased mission set with the same or fewer personnel. Meeting this challenge can best be accomplished the way the Navy has so often done in the past - by relying on Chiefs and entrusting them with greater responsibilities.

Chiefs have long been the Navy’s “deck-plate” leaders and are respected for upholding standards and traditions as well as training both enlisted personnel and junior officers. The oft-heard phrase “Ask the Chief” is used because it is widely known that Chiefs can answer the most difficult questions, and not just in their own ratings. The Chiefs’ mess is well-
connected, with established relationships that combine hundreds of years of experience and subject matter expertise. This tight-knit group provides a support structure that helps individual Chiefs handle a myriad of problems and difficult questions. A Chief, always ready to help and lend expertise to any situation, can reach back to the Chiefs’ mess for guidance. Moreover, today’s Chiefs are more educated and skilled than ever. Thousands of them are pursuing formal education and many have professional civilian equivalency certificates and college degrees in fields such as business and project management that use processes similar to the NPP. This repository of talented, experienced, motivated, and educated Chief’s eagerly seeks to be challenged in a manner that will help integrate them into what have, in the past, been viewed as “commissioned officer-only” roles within the MOC and on OPTs.

Today’s Chiefs assigned to OLW staffs possess expertise in logistics, intelligence, law, manning, operations, information/knowledge management, medical planning, and most importantly, leadership. Chiefs are professional managers and leaders who can fulfill a wide range of roles throughout the MOC and possess the experience and specialized qualities that are often value added during detailed planning. For example, a Chief Hospital Corpsman assigned to an OPT planning a noncombatant evacuation is likely to bring both medical planning and Fleet Marine Forces experience to the team. That Chief will be able to provide medical planning expertise and communicate the concerns of the Marines and can easily assist in developing and coordinating a plan with subordinate forces.

There are many varied roles and responsibilities that Chiefs can fulfill at the OLW. Depending on experience and expertise, Chiefs can do many of the following:

- Act as an OPT assistant leader or manager
- Assist in formulation of courses of action
- Prepare support materials for briefings
- Assist in the formulation of briefings
- Draft orders
- Answer subordinate commands’ questions and concerns regarding plans, orders, and reports
- Act as knowledge manager for an OPT or directorate
- Develop and consolidate target lists
- Coordinate casualty evacuations
- Develop, coordinate, and consolidate deception plans
- Plan, coordinate, and supervise mobility and logistic support operations
- Assist in the development of fire support plans
- Coordinate intelligence support requirements
- Capture minutes, tasks and commander’s comments from briefings
- Man the “current ops” watch to include acting as Battle Watch Captain

The linchpin in properly employing fleet staff Chiefs in MOC planning and execution roles, and thus maximizing their contributions to the maritime OLW, is education. The Naval War College has developed several courses over the past 6-7 years that are aimed specifically at educating personnel assigned to fleet-level or other major warfighting staffs, including the Maritime Staff Operators Course (MSOC). MSOC has produced over 1700 graduates (E-7 to O-5) fully prepared to understand and function in various roles within the MOC construct of fleet staffs. Unfortunately, out of the 1700+ MSOC graduates to date, only about 20 have been senior enlisted (E-6 or above). While MSOC has become a requirement for most officers en route to staff tours, it is not so for senior enlisted. What is needed is for the fleet staffs to understand the increased capabilities that properly educated senior enlisted can bring to the MOC and recommend that they attend MSOC en route to their staff tours. MSOC has provided the Additional Qualification Designator (JOM) to officers for several years, and was accredited about a year ago to provide a Navy Enlisted Classification (9596, Joint Maritime Staff Operator) to enlisted graduates. Formal education of already experienced Chiefs can make them truly invaluable to fleet staffs.

Fleet staffs need to take rigorous look at the expertise already in their midst and must maximize the talents of everyone on their team. Assigning Chiefs who are properly educated in OLW functions and processes to the various cross-functional bureaus, boards
centers, cells and working groups by taking full advantage of their experience and proven ability to learn and adapt can help staffs better transition from routine to crisis operations. In short, empowering Chiefs to their maximum capabilities can expand staff capacity and enable fleet staffs to better support the commander.

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