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In My View

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LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Sir:

I read with interest the thoughtful article by Capt. Mark Light on “The Navy’s Moral Compass” (Naval War College Review, Summer 2012). Indeed it is a mystery to me why so many commanding officers, knowing what is at stake, hazard their careers by indulging in unprofessional behaviour.

It seems that one can be relieved for failure on two main tracks. One is the professional, where one loses the confidence of seniors through bad seamanship (groundings, collisions, etc.), bad leadership (writ large), or just general incompetence. As the tolerance for imperfection of any sort seems to be close to zero these days, people can lose their commands on a dime. We had a CO in the Royal Canadian Navy in the late 1950s who mistakenly let a couple of shells loose over Everett, Washington. He later rose to flag rank! I doubt this would happen today in either the RCN or the U.S. Navy. But professional mistakes can happen for a number of reasons, including simple bad luck.

The other track, of course, is personal. Here the tolerance for misbehaviour regarding alcohol abuse, sexual harassment, etc., is also nil. In fact, as Captain Light alludes, the USN sets the standard of behaviour for COs (and all its officers?) at a much higher level than society in general. This is not necessarily wrong but it might be slightly unrealistic. For example, I would differentiate between the CO who conducts an affair with one of his subordinates and another whose marriage has broken down who begins a relationship ashore that has nothing to do with his professional competence as a CO. If I understand the article correctly, both would be relieved pronto for conduct unbecoming.

What I don’t understand, and Captain Light can’t answer the question either, is why so many COs risk their commands by indulging in inappropriate behaviour. The USN officer corps is huge, so it must be an honour to be selected for command. I would have thought that the gene pool from which to choose COs is equally large. Is there a failure in the selection process? Don’t officers understand
not only the values and ethics of their profession, but also what society now expects of them? Or is human nature frail enough that a few will always do the wrong thing given the chance? One would hope that any character deficiencies would have been corrected by the time officers reach command. Captain Light notes that this is clearly not always the case.

A word of caution, though: if any profession demands a zero tolerance for mistakes of any sort in its people, it creates an environment of fear, caution, and an unwillingness to take reasonable risks for fear of failure (and therefore command or career termination). I understand the principle, but what we want in warfighters is officers who seize the initiative in battle and perform. So by all means let’s continue to educate on inappropriate behaviour whilst also allowing a long enough leash so that officers can learn from their mistakes and become the leaders we need.

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