

Editor's Note: I recently received the following note and story from Captain Al Atwell that contains a mix of Best Experiences While on Active Duty and Biography. No matter the genre, I believe you will find it as enjoyable to read as I did.

Steve,

My Destroyer Group asked me to write the enclosed Tin Can SWO story. As I told you, I had no special skills or training, but all my Unit Leaders had taught me to **"Always tell it like it is and do the right thing, regardless of the consequences."**

Cheers, Al

TIN CAN SWO – THE WAY TO GO!

Captain Al Atwell, USN (Ret.)

This is a story of how the crew of the USS John W. Weeks (DD701) trained an ex-Aviation Chief who thought he never wanted to serve on a destroyer to be a well-qualified and very proud SWO (Surface Warfare Officer).

Background: I was born and raised in Annapolis, the home of the Naval Academy. Just about every male in the Atwell clan was in the Navy and/or working or teaching at the academy. There was no question that I was going into the Navy – just a matter of when and how! I had my own boat and spent all my spare time on the waters of Chesapeake Bay and surrounding rivers and creeks. I could have gotten an appointment as an Annapolis midshipman, but didn't want to spend four more years in school after high school and wanted to go to sea ASAP. So, I quickly enlisted and after boot camp went to aviation fundamental school intending to be trained as an aircraft mechanic. The lead Aerographer there asked me if I ever experienced any bad weather at sea and I told him about several episodes where I wasn't sure if I was going to survive. He then convinced me that I should be an Aerographer's Mate. A few years later I was the lead weather forecaster on an Essex class aircraft carrier. Our flight deck was 57 feet above the water line and when it got too rough to fly, we would bring the tin cans alongside to provide urgently needed fuel. We would be taking swells over the bow and the tin cans would be almost under water and often a fuel line would break. I clearly remember saying to myself "I don't think I ever want to do that." [Be on a tin can that is.]

After two six month back-to-back combat tours off North Korea, I was transferred to the Navy Weather Research and Development Division in the Pentagon. One day I was going by the front desk area of the Pentagon and the CNO came out, saw me and said, "Hey sailor, I see you have been to Korea. Come in and tell me about it – and have a cup of coffee and donut." I told him that one of our biggest challenges was the weather, particularly when the sea state was going to be too rough to safely get our aircraft back aboard after their combat missions. Knowing he was also "31 KNOT BURKE" – I told him about the Tin Can fueling operations. He said I should get a tour on a destroyer to see the real navy, and let him know if I wanted a Tin Can tour! So after a couple of other research and development tours, I got orders to USS John W. Weeks DD-701. The Weeks was getting underway for a six-month MED tour in a couple of days, and I wanted to be aboard! I drove quickly to Norfolk, put my wife and two kids in a motel and reported aboard the next morning. As I reported aboard, the JOOD was a BM1 Williams. We looked at each other quickly recalling that we had gone to Boot Camp together 12 years earlier. The Weeks didn't have a Chief BOSN, and Williams, was the lead BOSN. Having seen him operate in boot camp, I knew he was up to the challenge. He was one of the more mature guys in our group and whenever an issue came up, he would never hesitate to get involved and tell it like it is, regardless of the circumstances. He told me I was going to be his division officer, and I said "OK, good - take me for a quick tour of the spaces that we control so I can meet the people in our division!" In several of the spaces I saw paint cans, rags, old paintbrushes, etc. I told him they look like fire hazards to me, and he needed to get that resolved. He replied, "Mr. Atwell, please don't try and tell me how to do my job. This is stuff I need to keep Weeks looking good – but anyhow, when we get underway you will probably be so seasick that I won't be seeing much of you!"



USS John W. Weeks conducting a highline transfer with the battleship USS Wisconsin

As we got underway the next day, we encountered a major storm that was one of the roughest that I had ever experienced. Both of our motor whale boats were washed away, our 5-inch 38-gun mount was pushed about 8 inches aft, and most of the bridge panels were damaged. We had to go into a repair facility at Gibraltar!

I quickly learned that getting seasick was a real challenge, but was determined not to let it embarrass me so every time I was about to up-chuck, I just swallowed it back down and by the time I got to the MED, I had adjusted to tin can motion.

On another occasion we were rigging the high line BOSN chair to exchange gear with one of the other destroyers in our division. The CO looked down and said, "How does it look Mr. Atwell?" I looked at Williams and he gave me a thumbs up and then I gave the CO a thumbs up. The CO replied, "OK Mr. Atwell, hop in and give my best regards to the CO." I got a quick ride to the other tin can and back.

Shortly thereafter I was assigned a collateral duty as mess caterer for the officer's mess and most of the officers were not satisfied with the meals. At our first port call, I checked with one of my OCS shipmates on another tin can and found out that there was a company that provided really good meals at a reasonable price. We tried it and were very happy with the results.

There was no lack of leadership on the John W. Weeks and as I turn 95 years old in a couple of weeks, I just can't remember all their names except for some of the ones that I worked very closely with. CDR Lovejoy was the CO and was a very personable and friendly guy who just let his department heads do their jobs. LT Charlie Wilson was the Gunnery Officer who was later famous for his role in helping Afghanistan drive out the Soviets from their country. There is a book and a movie called "Charlie Wilson's War" that details this significant accomplishment. BT1 Vaughn had been on the Weeks 7 years and when I was Main Propulsion Assistant for a while he asked me to not come below into his workspaces and that he would notify me if he ever needed any help. CDR Tippie relieved CDR Lovejoy as CO. He had been in Washington a long time and liked to take the CONN. He tended to drive the ship too fast and often had to "back down full" to correct his fast maneuvering. I will say more about him later. The QMC Chief Quartermaster and I became a good team after some initial differences. He did a great job in getting all the maps and corrections for the island sea cruise.

After Gibraltar, we went into all the major ports in the MED wherever the action was and then through the Suez Canal on the way to Karachi, Pakistan, where we took part in SEATO Exercises. Knowing that the waters in the harbors were contaminated, we shut down our evaporators about 50 miles out. We tied up just aft of the Pakistan Navy Ship (PNS) Jahangir (D168). There was camel poop on the pier and all sorts of debris in the water. As the most junior officer onboard the Weeks, I was volunteered to go as an

exchange officer during the exercises. I packed a small bag and reported aboard Jahangir. Noticing that they were pumping water out of the contaminated harbor, I had considerable concern. The Pakistan crew treated me well, but is probably still talking about me drinking so much of the whiskey in their wardroom bar to treat my upset stomach, diarrhea, etc. On one occasion I was standing a JOOD watch and had the CONN. Someone sighted a whale and the CO quickly took the CONN, set battle condition and fired a hedgehog missile to disable the whale. They then towed it into port to sell their catch. The exercises ended and I was really glad to get back aboard the John W. Weeks where our chief Pharmacist Mate fed me lots of antibiotics to resolve my medical situation.

By the time the new CO came aboard I was a well-qualified OOD, but one of my concerns was the navigation situation! Whenever the weather or cloud cover permitted, the navigator was required to shoot morning and evening star shots and noon sun lines. This meant that the navigator would often not be able to eat meals at the normal times. I had noted that the XO navigator had never seemed to miss a meal! That meant to me that the chief quartermaster was doing most of the navigator's work. So whenever I had my OOD watch I went up 30 minutes early to check on the position information and I would tell the QMC I wanted to see the last fix, where the nearest possible obstructions to safe ship navigation for the next 6 hours were, and how he knew. He had all the latest information! I also told him I wanted to pass on this essential navigation information to my relief OOD.

As a teenager, I had worked in several shipyards in Annapolis, mostly chipping paint and removing barnacles off vessels damaged because of navigation errors, and one of my retired Navy uncles ran a fish factory boat on Chesapeake Bay that I often visited. He had shown me how to use a navigation sextant and while going through the navigation course at OCS, I had several QMC friends I often questioned to make sure I really understood what I was doing. So, I guess you can say that I was a navigation nut, but to this day I can't imagine any OOD standing watch without knowing exactly where he is. After the new CO took over, I told Charlie Wilson, my department head, that I wanted to be a navigator. He agreed and convinced the XO that it would be a good move. The XO was pleased to be relieved, and I wasn't worried about missing meals because as the officer's mess caterer the cooks and bakers worked for me, and I could get a meal anytime I needed one.

Later in the summer of 1959, the Navy was ordered to participate in the inland sea cruise on the Saint Lawrence Sea Way and we were going to go from Norfolk to Chicago, through all five Great Lakes and return. We had to obtain all the NAV charts to carefully plan safe passage as there were some areas where our hull was only a few feet from the bottom and numerous strong currents were prevalent in the narrow water way. We would have a civilian pilot aboard as an advisor, but safe navigation was clearly our responsibility!

We left Norfolk and headed up to Annapolis to pick up some midshipmen and were going to anchor off Greenberry Point near the Naval Communications station. There are about 8 large radio towers that one could use to get a good fix. As we approached our anchor site in the darkness, all the lights on the towers went off and I had no information to get a reliable fix. But knowing the area and that I was far enough offshore, I used my DR position to safely anchor about 7:00 PM. We got in our whale boat and were heading up the Severn River to the boat landing at the Naval Academy pier when Charlie Wilson said "Hey, Al knows the way. Let's land at city dock and we won't have to walk but about a mile to get out in town for a drink and some chow." As we approached the landing site, which was only about 40 feet from Charlie's favorite bar and grill, our boat ran aground and came to a stop. The dock water had silted up a bit and was now a little shallower than anticipated. Not to be detoured, Charlie said "let's all move quickly from side to side and back down with full power, and then come in with full power at a better angle." We did as Charlie said and landed at the pier, then walked across the street to Charlie's favorite bar and grill where we had some booze and chow. Shortly after midnight we boarded the boat, backed out with full power and went back to the Weeks to get ready for a most interesting trip. The next day we headed south to get out to the Atlantic then northeast to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, then southwest past Quebec, Montreal, and into Lake

Ontario, then to Lake Erie, Lake Huron, Lake Michigan and Chicago. From there it was up to Lake Superior and Sault Ste. Marie, Toledo, Montreal, and finally back to Annapolis and Norfolk, Virginia. The CO, I as OOD/Navigator, the QMC and the pilot were on watch the whole time to ensure we were keeping it safe. The pilot was totally familiar with all the navigation challenges and an example of his advice came when he said, "when you go around the next bend you will see a large barn on your right with an advertisement that says **Mail Pouch Tobacco**. There is a strong cross river current, and you need some right rudder to stay mid-stream." We only had one minor problem on the trip when the CO had the Conn and was approaching one of the locks to get from one lake to another and he was drifting right and had to back down full as our starboard bow hit the lock entrance. The minor impact knocked our fire and flushing pump off its mounts which our engineering gang promptly fixed as we continued. It was a remarkable trip, and we had some good liberty in Chicago, Sault Ste. Marie, Toledo, Montreal and Annapolis.

An important duty we assumed when CDR Tippie became the CO was Division Commander as he was the senior CO of the four tin cans that included USS Ault DD-698, USS Waldron DD-699, USS Haynsworth DD-700 and USS John W. Weeks DD-701. As Division Commander the OOD had to maintain contact with the aircraft carrier and ensure that the tin can screen was properly carried out to provide effective ASW and Air Defense Coverage. This required evaluating communication inputs from the carrier's CIC, our radar contacts and ship lookout reports. This was particularly challenging at night when the weather was bad or if the carrier was required to change course and speed to get 30 knots of wind over the deck to be able to safely launch or recover aircraft. This and refueling from an aircraft carrier in heavy seas were the most challenging OOD duties I had aboard the Weeks.

Looking back at my 44 years of active duty, I must admit that when I completed my tour on the USS John W. Weeks, as Admiral 31 Knot Burke had said, I felt like I had seen and experienced the real Navy. When I completed OCS, I had a choice to be commissioned as a Warrant, LDO or Unrestricted Line. I chose Line because it provided an opportunity to qualify for the five-term college degree program and as promised when I left John W. Weeks, I was transferred to George Washington University to get a bachelor's degree. I then got transferred to NAS Pensacola for flight training and assignment to a fleet squadron. My next assignment was to the US Naval Academy to teach celestial navigation, piloting and ship handling. While there I found out that they were sending officers to sea without any requirement to complete any course in meteorology and oceanography. I was pleased to take part in changing the curriculum to require this essential training. Ironically, while teaching at the Academy, I got a phone call from BUPERS one Friday night telling me to be at NAS Jacksonville by 0800 Monday morning to get my orders. They were forming a new squadron to fly the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam to cut off supplies to the North Vietnamese Military. We had to go to the boneyard in Litchfield Park, Arizona, to get some retired P2V Neptune Patrol Bombers to rework to have this capability. Apparently, the XO of the Fleet Squadron that had gotten me sent to the Academy was going to be the CO of the new squadron. A couple of months later the Naval Academy decided they needed me back there to continue teaching the new marine environmental course.

I had a most interesting and challenging career but can honestly say that the first time I felt like a real sea going sailor was when I completed my tour on the USS John W. Weeks where I was surrounded by leaders and shipmates that kept me going in the right directions.

GO NAVY! GOD BLESS AMERICA!

Sincerely,
Al Atwell