

“BRAVO ZULU”

It was a bit of a shock when William phoned us from college last Fall and announced that he had enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He told us that he was planning to leave school and begin training to qualify for a special operations assignment. As you may imagine, Nancy was not overly impressed with this news. I don't know of many mothers that are overjoyed when their only son makes such a decision, especially in a time of war. Let's face it – Nancy was a bit upset about the matter. William, the U.S. Navy recruiting officers, the fleet and the entire chain of command all the way up to the Commander-in-Chief were targets of her ire. Although clearly a non-belligerent in this fray, even I was assigned fault in the matter, supposedly this impulsive manner of decision making is hereditary.

It's a free country, and though a man be married, he is still entitled to his own free choice. **“He can choose to be right, or he can choose to be happy.”** I chose to keep my thoughts and opinions to myself. With hindsight, I believe that I chose well.

In my heart, it was a different matter. Following my sophomore year in college, I too wanted to embark on a naval career. I wanted to sign up for ROTC program, go through officer's training, and serve my “hitch” in the U.S. Navy. I shared these thoughts with friends and family members who successfully talked me out of it. Of all the things that I have done over the years, of the many impulsive mistakes I have made in life, I regret most that I did not take that opportunity to serve my country. Thus, in my heart, I am glad that William enlisted. In my heart, I wished that I could sign up with him.

William remained at home following the Christmas break and spent the Spring semester intensely conditioning. He read books and watched numerous DVDs about special operations training. William would talk of being a Navy “SEAL,” and I would joke that I had signed up as a “WALRUS.”

“While the SEALs are an elite special operations force,” I explained, “A WALRUS is a uniquely trained, highly-educated combatant. Although they may move a bit slower and not have the “cut” physique of the SEALs, they are the ultimate warriors.” William didn't really appreciate my sense of humor, and frankly told me that I was annoying. By June, he was ready to go ... and I wished that I could go with him.



“My old man's a sailor, and what do you think about that? He wears a sailor's collar, he wears a sailor's hat ...”

I can remember singing that ditty riding through the shipyards in Norfolk with my father. My old man was a sailor indeed, he was a Navy chaplain then assigned to the destroyer 701 – the John W. Weeks. I vividly recall those gray ships with their bold numbers, the sailors in their white uniforms, and the smell of the fuel along the docks. At age three, I could salute properly and knew all the words to “Anchors Aweigh.”

Dad volunteered for service when I was a toddler. He was on a “Mediterranean Cruise” when my sister was born and on a 13-month tour of duty with the Marines in Vietnam when my younger brother made his debut. My father spent seven years in the Navy, crossing the equator and circling the world on a ship, achieving rank as a Lt. Commander, before returning to civilian life as a pastor. The Navy gave my father an opportunity to “See the World,” and provided him with volumes of stories and sermon illustrations. But, as I weighed my decision to enlist back in 1981, he chose to keep his thoughts and opinions to himself. With hindsight, I believe that he chose well.



DD 701 John W. Weeks

Every young person should be afforded the freedom to make their own decisions, to follow the leading of their heart and their head as they choose their paths in life. While there is wisdom in a multitude of counsel, in the end a person has to determine their own course. My father – an athlete, a sailor, and a minister – never pressured me to follow in any of those endeavors. He taught me, he coached me, he advised me and influenced me. But, in the end it was always my choice to make. Regardless of my decision, Dad was on my side ... still is today.

We travelled to the Great Lakes Training Station in August to attend William's graduation ceremony. Words cannot adequately describe my feelings as groups of sailors marched in to the tune of “Anchors Aweigh” and stood at attention before us. As the band played the “Star Spangled Banner,” I was felt honored that my son was numbered among this group of young men and women that have volunteered to serve their country. Our eyes were moist with joy. It was a special time, a special ceremony. I am glad we were there with him.

Nancy and I were proud as we queued up with the other parents in the gift shop to purchase our Navy memorabilia. In addition to photographs and the requisite “NAVY” t-shirts and bumper stickers, I picked up a couple of books – “The Bluejacket's Manual” and “A Sailor's History of the U.S. Navy.” I went ahead and bought a copy for my dad, too.

“Bravo Zulu.”

Thomas J. Cutler in his book, “A Sailor's History of the U.S. Navy.” informs us that the origin of this term can be found in the codes used to convey information and orders at sea in the days before radio was invented. A set of signal flags representing letters and numbers were hoisted to relay coded messages. The two and three letter codes remained in effect after voice radio was invented.

Although radio allowed the signal codes to be transmitted a greater distance, using letters that sound alike (b, p, d, and e) could cause confusion, especially in the heat of battle. A commodore intending to tell his ships to “engage the enemy” (DCV) might be misinterpreted, and understood to order the ships to “return to port” (TCE). A phonetic alphabet (alpha, bravo, charlie, delta ...) was developed for administrative and tactical messages to reduce potential for miscommunication.

During World War II, a commander would use “TVG” to signal the message “well done.” The signal code was later revised to “TVC” (tango, victor, charlie). After NATO was formed in 1949, the phonetic alphabet and signals were standardized so that ships of different navies could readily communicate with each other. Two-flag administrative signals were grouped as “B” signals and the last signal on the administrative page was “BZ” (bravo zulu) – “Well Done.”

Nancy and I are proud of our son's decision and wish the best to him and to the other young men and women that have made a commitment to serve our country. You have chosen well.



Bravo Zulu! Well Done!