

100 Great Chiefs Nomination: EMCM Herndon

When I came across the invite to submit a story of a great Chief, I had to nominate Master Chief Kenneth Herndon as one of the Top 100 Chiefs. I am proud to admit I have been greatly impacted by Master Chief Herndon. See, he is my dad!

Kenneth Herndon was born and raised in the small farming town of Dayton, Texas. Born in 1936, he recalls the end of the Great Depression and WWII. He went from that small town to the US Navy, to the US Coast Guard all the way to Master Chief. In the beginning he knew only this small world and seldom left this town, other than to go to his nearby grandparent's farm or his other grandparents' home in the small oil field area of Liberty, Texas. Being a motivated young man, he was willing to travel across the country to join the US Navy in 1955. Boot camp was in San Diego, California. He entered Electricians Mate "A" school straight out of boot camp. During EM school he was deemed to be doing so well, he was assigned to tutor other students in the night classes. This was the first sign that he was a natural leader and teacher.

After "A" school and achieving EM3, he was deployed to the USS Kearsarge (CVS 33) in Long Beach, California. During his duty on this Aircraft Carrier built in 1946, he saw and learned most of the electrical equipment used in the marine electrical industry at that time. He rewound hundreds of electric motors, then worked in the Power Distribution Department. While stationed on the USS Kearsarge he met a younger shipmate. This shipmate's family owned an electrical service company and convinced my dad how he could make good money as an electrician in the private sector. In 1957 he made EM2, and in 1959 was discharged from the US Navy.

We moved to Fresno, California in the San Joaquin valley. There, he often worked in the desert in rock crushing plants. This is an unusual area since everywhere you go are farms (due to irrigation) but the air is hot desert air. In fact, it is common to have humidifiers in the home to put moisture in the air. Due to a lack of work he again enlisted after 7 months in 1959. At that time in the US Navy, if you again enlisted within a year, you could retain your rate, and time in rank. He reentered as an EM2 and was assigned to the USS Coral Sea (CVA 43).

He made EM1 in 1961. In 1963 he was assigned to the USS Midway (CVA 41). While on the USS Midway he received his Security Clearance, to work in the Nuclear Weapons area. After 2 enlistments and eight years on Aircraft Carriers he again, did not re-enlist and was discharged from the US Navy. Since Carrier duty was 6-9 month deployments, it was hard on the family. He made many deployments to the Far East, including Vietnam.

Near the end of his second enlistment, while sitting in the EM Club enjoying a cool beverage he met a US Coast Guard recruiter. He was informed that because he was a Electricians Mate he could keep his rate and time in rank. So, in 1963 he enlisted in the US Coast Guard as an EM1. He was stationed on the USCGC Gresham (WHEC 387) in Alameda California. In 1966 he was promoted to EMC.

While stationed on the USCGC Gresham their normal patrol was Ocean Station November. This was half way between San Francisco, California and the Hawaiian Islands. Ocean Station November was made famous by the Cutter Pontchartrain, when in 1956 the Pontchartrain rescued all the passengers on Pan American Flight 6. Pan American Flight 6 had multiple engine failures and had to ditch in the point of no return.

The Cutter Gresham was built for the US Navy in 1943 as a Torpedo Boat Tender. When the Coast Guard acquired her, a weather station cabin was installed on the upper deck to launch and retrieve weather balloons. They also launched and maintained a new weather buoy that was developed by the Scripps Institute. The sea floor was three miles deep in the area of Ocean Station November. This caused an unusual launching procedure for the weather buoy.

The crew would fill a fifty-five gallon drum with cement and attach it to one end of a three mile line. The crew would then launch a small boat and lower the buoy into the water. The other end of this three mile long line would be attached to the buoy and the small boat would then tie off to the weather buoy. The small boat would then get underway and move out three miles from the Cutter Gresham. The Commander would give the word to have the small boat let go of the buoy. The order was then given to the deck crew to "let go" the pelican hook on the anchor end of the line. The fifty-five gallon drum sank to bottom of the Pacific Ocean. As the line pulled on the weather buoy it would start to move faster and faster toward the Gresham. Until the weather buoy was skipping across the water.

On top of the early version weather buoy, there were water temp gauges, wind speed/direction indicators and a clock. Inside a box on top of the weather buoy there was also a camera. The camera was aimed at a console inside that showed the gauges and clock. Once an hour a timer snapped a photo showing the gauge readings and the time. After each twenty-four hours a small boat was launched and spent film was removed and a new roll installed. On board the Gresham the Scripps Institute lab tech would develop the film from the previous day and radio in the recordings.

Ocean Station November was a ten mile by ten-mile plot of the Pacific Ocean. Standard procedure was to sail to the center of the Station and shut down all engines, except one generator. They would then drift until they reached the edge of the Station. After firing up the engines again they would sail to the center and shut down. Just imagine the rolling the cutter and crew experienced doing this in fifteen-foot seas and no propulsion and thus no steering.

In 1966 my dad made Chief Electricians Mate. The Chief Electricians Mate on the CGC Comanche heard that the Comanche was being transferred to Corpus Christi, Texas. The Comanche chief knew my dad was from Texas and they agreed to a Mutual Exchange of Station Transfer. Sometime after the transfer was official, the other Chief heard the Cutter Gresham was going to Vietnam. He asked my dad to re-transfer, but after ten years of being stationed on the west coast and having already been to Vietnam, he was not ready to re-transfer. In 1961 the United States began sending helicopters and other military aircraft to Vietnam. Most of these military aircraft were sent on Aircraft Carriers and my dad had made a couple of these trips while in the US Navy.

My dad served on the Cutter Comanche (WMEC-202) from 1966 to 1969. While the Comanche was still stationed in Alameda, California the normal duty was to patrol the northern California and lower Oregon coast. The patrol was lightship and lighthouse refurbishment as well as Search and Rescue. The Cutter Comanche was a 143-foot ocean going tug built for the US Navy. It served time in the Pacific during WWII and towed US Navy ships out of the combat area to be repaired and returned to the fleet. She became a Coast Guard Cutter in 1959.

Supplying the lighthouses was quite a trick since you had to enter the beginning of the port, many of which had a sand bar across the channel. He said the process was for the Commander to watch the seas and when a good wave came along, they would gun the engines

to full speed ahead and surf across the sand bar. Getting the supplies to the lighthouse crew was just as harrowing. They would launch a small boat, lower the supplies to the small boat using a large cargo net. Then the crew would approach the lighthouse. There, the lighthouse crew would use a wrench to lower a cable down to the small boat. Since this was done in ten to fifteen foot seas it was nerve wrenching to the small boat crew. Once the cable was lowered they would quickly hook the cargo net, signal the lighthouse crew to raise the net and put the small boat in full reverse.

In 1967, the Comanche was transferred to Corpus Christi, Texas. The trip was 4,825 nautical miles VIA Panama Canal and it took over 20 days. Once there, they performed law enforcement patrols to protect our fishing fleet. They patrolled along the South American and Cuban coasts. There were many Search and Rescue missions but the ones that stood out were to get fishing vessels. At times there would be up to three rescued vessels at a time. The Comanche would make up a towing line from the stern to the bow of the fishing vessel. The next would be made from the stern of the first vessel to the bow of the second fishing vessel and the third from the stern of the second to the bow of the third. It was a shrimp boat train.

After these rescues became commonplace, it was suspected that the shrimp boats would only purchase enough fuel to get to the fishing site and not enough to get back. They would often request to be towed to their home port but the Commander would inform them they would be towed to the nearest US port, which was often Brownsville, Texas. One day, the Comanche was ordered to a Search and Rescue mission in which a shrimp boat had hailed a distress call of shipboard fire. The shrimp boat reported her current location and, that the crew was abandoning ship in life jackets lashed together with a line. The Comanche got underway and reached the search area at night. As we know, searching at night is very difficult, especially before the advent of night vision equipment. The crew located the vessel, it was burned down to the water line.

They continued the search for the five crew members that were in the water. They searched through the night and it was thanks to a First Class Quartermaster they were able to find them. The Quartermaster, who had chronic sea sickness and needed to heave over the side, almost vomited on the shrimp boat crew that was right below the ships bridge. The crew rescued the shrimp boat survivors, who were blue from being in the water for hours. After getting the shrimp boat crew warm and medical care they put out the fire and ensured the shrimp boat sank as to not leave a danger to navigation. The shrimp boat crew was so grateful they went to a nearby bar and bought a case of whiskey. They informed the crew of the Comanche that the entire crew was invited and the drinks were free. Needless to say, the Comanche crew spent their liberty celebrating with the shrimp boat crew!

My dad received his first re-enlistment pay when he re-upped with twelve years of service as a EMC. The ship over pay was \$8,862. This was the largest ship overpay ever paid to a crew member on the Comanche at the time. It was even reported in the local Corpus Christi newspaper. That was a lot of money in 1967!

In 1969, the Comanche was again transferred back to the west coast. They once again made the 4,825 nautical mile trip via the Panama Canal to Eureka, California. Later in 1969, my dad was transferred to the Cutter Iris (WLB-395) in Galveston, Texas. The Cutter Iris was built in 1944.

The Cutter Iris' main duty was Aids to Navigation in the Houston ship channel. The ship channel and surrounding waterways and tributaries have over 600 buoys and piling markers. The crew of the Cutter Iris was underway most days replacing pilings from markers that were either knocked down by erratic ships or wave action. The crew also had to refurbish buoys.

The buoys would be raised by the twenty-ton boom crane. This boom was needed for the various types of buoys including the large BL-826 buoy that were used in the ship channel. The buoy would be serviced, replacing the large battery bank and all lights, cleaned and painted as needed, then reset in the water. Then the Iris would get under way to the next marker.

One day the crew had to replace a large 5 pile marker that was hit. They removed and replaced all pilings and markers. After finishing this marker they traveled further into the channel to work another marker. As they were returning to base, the new 5 pile marker was knocked down and had to be replaced again.

One day a push boat with a string of barges attached to the bow, was blown off course due to heavy winds. The boat knocked down thirteen markers that all had to be replaced at once due to the ongoing traffic. So, you never knew when you would get back to port.

One day an oilfield work boat called in a distress call of shipboard fire. The crew of Iris got under way to conduct Search and Rescue. The crew of the work boat was able to abandon ship in their life boat. As the Iris approached the scene, they recovered the crew and began firefighting. The fire was so advanced the workboat burned to the water line and sank. Unfortunately, no liquid reward this time.

In 1970 he was promoted to Senior Chief.

In 1972, he was transferred to the Cutter Taney (WHEC-37). The Taney was stationed in Alameda, California but was being transferred to Norfolk, Virginia. He boarded the Taney in Alameda and traveled the 5,066 nautical miles through the Panama Canal to Norfolk. The Taney was built in 1936. It was a steamship using steam turbines for propulsion. My dad was only on the Taney for about a year, then he requested and was granted a hardship transfer. My mother's health was starting to get bad, much later we found out she had MS.

1972 was my dad's sixteenth year of sea duty and was transferred to Base New Orleans in December 1972. At base New Orleans, the duties involved servicing all the smaller duty station in Louisiana, as well as, other stations from Brownsville, Texas to Pensacola, Florida. All the stations with smaller craft like 41 footers, 95 footers did not have dedicated Electrician Mates. This required many road trips to all these stations.

In 1975 he was promoted to Master Chief and was transferred to the Cutter Acushnet (WMEC-167). The Acushnet at that time was working closely with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration which was formed in 1970, and the NOAA Data Buoy Office was created. The NOAA Data Buoy Office was located in Mississippi and the Acushnet was based in Gulfport, Mississippi. The Cutter would tow and set the large discus buoy which was about 36 foot across and weighed over 100 tons.

These weather buoys were far more advanced than the weather buoy from Scripps Institute on the Cutter Gresham in 1964. These new NDBC discus buoys had solid state electronic

controls, two diesel generators, various sensors and radio transmitted their data. The generators were automated and would shut and perform maintenance on themselves. After approximately two hundred hours, the control would start the offline generator, shift the electrical load to the standby generator. Once the first generator was shut down, the controls would open certain valves, flush the old engine oil and refill the generator with new clean oil. The generator would then be put in standby.

One day a call was received from the Mexican Government that a large buoy was on their beach, so the Acushnet got underway. When they arrived at the scene they saw a NDBC buoy was washed ashore. The Acushnet set a small boat over the side and towed a mile-long line to the shore. After shackling the line to the buoy, the Acushnet started pulling on the buoy. After some time they re-floated the buoy. They hauled in the line and attached it to the aft towing hitch. They towed the buoy back to New Orleans for repairs. The Acushnet set these weather buoys in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as, up the Atlantic coast of the United States. The Acushnet did the survey of the ocean floor in preparation for the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port. The LOOP is a deep water port for super tankers to load and unload oil products.

After seventeen and a half years of sea duty, in November 1977 Master Chief Herndon retired. At that time I was stationed on the Cutter Diligence as, of course, EM3. He truly had a great impact on me and my life.

Throughout his career, all the adults that came to our house worked for my dad. They called him Chief with a respectful but easy going tone. Often this work was on one of our cars, pulling the engine, transmission, etc. They worked very well together, with no slacking off. I recall asking tons of questions about what was this for, and can I help.

To me, this is how men work best together. To this day my dad and I work on everything together. I spend a couple of days a week at his house and we fix everything. And, of course tell sea stories! After the Coast Guard, my dad worked for fourteen years as an oil Rig Electrician in the Gulf of Mexico. Later he had to go back to the Coast Guard to get his Rig Chief Engineer License. When not working on things, we go fishing as much as possible. Every time we end a fishing trip we say, Red, Right, Returning!

Written and Submitted by John Herndon