

A Tribute to “My Chief”

Senior Chief Petty Officer Cecil “Doc” Henson, USCG (Ret.) crossed the bar on 16 April 2016. Built through respect and mutual admiration, we had a unique professional and personal relationship that lasted more than three decades. Cecil was especially disciplined at keeping a diary of his life’s experiences. I had the irreplaceable opportunity to help with interpreting his writing, notes, scribbles, and whatever, and turning them into a short biography of his life. Entitled by Cecil as “An Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man,” the result is unique insights into Cecil’s character as a husband, father, grandfather, veteran, medical professional, mentor and friend. A few cites are especially noteworthy.

Cecil’s parents and grandpa shaped his personality and gave him a treasure that he cherished throughout his life -- the keen desire to help people and the quest to learn how to take care of their needs, emotionally and medically. He described these foundations as, “to KNOW and to DO the right thing.”

Cecil began his military service in the Florida National Guard, followed by the US Air Force where he received his first “taste” of administering health services by helping doctors in the flight surgeon’s office. After leaving the Air Force, he earned both his Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and Registered Nurse (RN) certifications. Cecil missed contributing to the greater good through military service and, thankfully for those of us in the United States Coast Guard, joined the Coast Guard Reserve in 1981 as a first class petty officer. The Coast Guard, a humanitarian service at its core, coupled with his chosen profession as a health care professional, helping others in need, were the ultimate great fit.

Cecil recalled that during the years after leaving the Air Force and before enlisting in the Coast Guard, he had observed how doctors “took care” of their patients. He was often disappointed in how they did their job and hoped that someday he would have a chance to do better, to be more caring in his work. Not long after he entered the Coast Guard, Cecil would get the chance to see if he could do better. He was qualified as an Independent Duty Corpsman and was transferred to Group Cape Hatteras in North Carolina where there was no practicing doctor for the entire island chain. He alone was the complete medical corps.

Cecil and his family were only there a few days when late one night, his phone rang. The caller had three young daughters and one had a fever. Cecil basically dispensed the “take two aspirins and I’ll see you in the morning” medical advice. He then returned to bed. His wife asked Cecil what the call was about. He told her and then she said, “What if this was one of our young boys?” Cecil promptly called the father back and had him bring all three girls over to the clinic immediately. From that point forward Cecil made a vow not to turn anyone away ever again. As Cecil stated, “I have always been proud of my wife and children for believing in my work and not complaining about ‘Where is Dad? Why isn’t he here?’ They understood what I was doing was important and were proud of it.”

His time on the Banks was filled with great stories helping Coast Guard personnel and civilian residents of the Banks. Cecil recalled the Coast Guard command getting a nice letter from one of many that he assisted and subsequently he was presented an award. In Cecil’s words, “My

biggest reward was just being lucky enough to have had the chance to use my skills to help people.”

After the Banks and a tour at the clinic at Cape May, NJ, the Coast Guard Recruit Training Center, he made Chief Petty Officer, joining a very special cadre of senior enlisted leaders in the Service, and was assigned as an Independent Duty Corpsman on a “big white ship.” This is where Cecil and I began our almost three decade mutual friendship.

In 1988, I reported on board the Coast Guard Cutter Morgenthau as the new Commanding Officer. From my previous shipboard experiences, I knew that understanding the needs and gaining the perspectives of my officers and crew was paramount to my commanding effectively. As I met with these 180 or so wonderful men and women, I quickly realized that my Chief Corpsman was the key to my insight into the morale and well-being of my command. Doc Henson, as he was affectionately called, placed service above self and nurtured extraordinary working and personal relationships with all members – from myself through the most junior Coastguardsman assigned to the ship.

Cecil always had the pulse of the crew. His Sickbay was open to all anytime to drop in and chat. He often sought me out so that I would know how my decisions were affecting the crew (especially those that were not very good). I quickly learned that a stop by Sickbay was crucial to find out what was actually going on. As my confidant, I would know how the Chiefs’ Mess was reacting, the heartbeat of all Coast Guard cutters. And when the mantle of command seemed to be a bit too heavy, Doc was always there to “administer” some wise counsel. A great deal of the success that I had as Commanding Officer was directly attributable to “my Chief.”

Cecil was especially in his element when we attended Navy refresher training in San Diego. Refresher training is where we were tested and graded in every shipboard evolution. One such drill is for man overboard response and recovery. Upon calling that drill, a Navy shiprider was hurrying up a ladder to see if we were performing it correctly and struck his head on a metal casing. He was immediately taken to Sickbay for Cecil to suture him up. He came too at about the fourth stitch and asked Cecil, “What is going on?” Cecil told him that he had just judged the man overboard drill. Cecil said, “Do you want these last two stitches in?” He said, “Yes,” so Cecil asked him if we performed the drill properly. He said, “Of course, you did it perfectly.”

Cecil built a unique rapport with the Navy shipriders, most also being Chief Petty Officers, which included keeping them well-fed. Hence, our ship had a distinct advantage. So much so that on the day of the final massive conflagration drill, our final exam, the senior shiprider gave Cecil a few “helpful hints.” At the completion of that most arduous day and our “clean sweep” of all training awards, Cecil and I were standing on the ship’s fantail, dressed out in our battle gear, recounting the activities. Cecil asked if he could take my picture. I said only if he was in it too. That’s the iconic picture of the two of us that both Cecil and I have cherished all these years. I learned later that he kept that picture in his wallet throughout the remainder of his life.

There is more to the ship story. Military service is more than the service member. It is a family affair. In this case I was also privileged to have his wife “Sam” as our volunteer Ombudsman. In that role, she was the communication conduit between the Command and our families. This is

an important role, but normally fairly “routine” in preparing families for deployment, “passing the word” during deployment, and arranging a hearty welcoming on the pier upon return from sea. Sam certainly didn’t know what she was actually getting into when she signed up. We experienced two major events that severely challenged her to help our families get through some extremely difficult times. The first was the March 1989 grounding of the Exxon Valdez tanker in Alaska and subsequent massive oil spill. Our three month Alaskan fisheries patrol stretched to four and one-half months with command and control responsibilities for the oil containment and cleanup efforts. And during that time, no one knew when we would be released to return home. Subsequently that year, the Loma Prieta earthquake struck San Francisco just three hours after we departed our Alameda homeport in October. Many of the families that came into Alameda that day to see the ship off traveled through the Cypress Viaduct just hours before it collapsed. In both instances, managing the situations as they were evolving in real time, and counseling distraught families, became paramount to enable us to successfully carry out our mission. And at the same time, the other half of the team, Cecil, administered to our crew members while we were deployed. For Sam’s and Cecil’s superb support throughout these ordeals, I and every member of our crew and their families will be forever grateful.

I must confess that I made a serious mistake with my change of command remarks. Invariably, if you try to recognize everyone who contributed to the success of your unit, you are bound to leave someone out. As I was relieved at the end of my tour, I did that with Cecil. To this day I don’t understand how I overlooked calling him out. Cecil never mentioned it to me, but others came up and rightfully pointed out my grievous error. I know he was heartbroken. However, as things turned out, I was later given opportunities to make this right. Cecil was subsequently assigned as clinic supervisor in Kodiak, Alaska. As the flag officer in Pacific Area responsible for our support infrastructure, I officiated at Base Kodiak’s change of command. To begin my remarks, I recalled my inadvertent, but inexcusable, slight of the Senior Chief. I publically apologized to him and included those remarks that I should have done years ago. I know that Cecil stood ten feet tall that day in the eyes of his fellow shipmates. And I later presided at his retirement ceremony, where I was able to all the more highlight his unique character and praise his unselfish service.

For the remainder of my active duty career and thereafter, Cecil and I remained great friends. I could continue to call on him anytime for good counsel. In fact, he would routinely call me up and no matter how difficult a situation that I might be in, a few good old sea stories of our times together would make all the difference to me.

Of many remarkable things about Cecil’s life, he was a friend and mentor to all who worked for him. A clinic supervisor multiple times, he helped many Hospital Corpsmen (now Health Services Technicians) progress to Chief Petty Officer or above. He gave them the opportunity to accomplish their goals and made sure that nothing stood in their way. As Cecil recounted, “they all turned out well and others wanted them to work for them because of what they had accomplished.”

Subsequently they would come by to see Cecil and thank him for letting them have the chance to do better. Some that made Senior Chief refused to advance any further. They wanted to have that “one star” that made them just like him, a Senior Chief in the Coast Guard.

As Cecil said, “All they wanted was a chance to do well – and they did it.” This echoes my guiding leadership principle that “the most humble job, done well, merits respect.” Cecil certainly embodied this in his career and his life of “service above self.”

“An Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man.” Never one to tout his own accomplishments, this is how he framed his life. Frankly, I would do otherwise. All who knew Cecil, or “Doc” -- family, friends, and shipmates – would agree with me that the title falls well short. I would retitle it as the “Extraordinary Life of an Extraordinary Man.” This extraordinary man profoundly touched the lives of many of us ordinary people. He was a leader of character and set an example for us all.

Shipmates build a distinct bond that endures with time. The Senior and I had the bond. We use the saying in the sea services to wish good fortune, “may you have fair winds and following seas.” Senior Chief Cecil Henson left us with his fair winds and following seas in our hearts. He will be forever missed.