REMIND THEM: IT’S MORE THAN JUST A JOB

by Senior Chief Electronics Warfare Technician

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Drawdown or right-sizing – no matter which term you prefer, the result is the same. Today, there are not enough sailors to man our ships at sea. Competition for top enlistees among the armed services is more heated than ever for a dwindling number of qualified 17- to 22-hyear-old prospects. Our Navy’s latest attempt to patch the open wound call “recruiting” is to introduce sacrificial third-class petty officers into the melee. As I learned on a three-year recruiting tour, more is not necessarily better. For three years I watched (usually with unsympathetic glee) as our Army brethren beat the streets en masse, more often than not competing with one another instead of rival services. The Army recruiting philosophy discouraged teamwork, destroyed esprit de corps, and drove young people toward the other services, or – worse-away from the military altogether. For similar reasons, this latest brainstorm from the Navy’s recruiting brass has little to no chance of success. There certainly are competent E-4s who could do an outstanding job recruiting. It’s just that simply throwing more bodies into the fray is not the answer to our recruiting woes. We first must diagnose the causes of the problem – not just treat the symptoms.

Recruiting was difficult during Desert Shield, but as soon as Desert Storm began in 1991 our soldiers, sailors airmen, and Marines became heroic figures, and recruiters were getting as many calls as they could handle. This show of pride used to be common in our society. But the constant barrage of negative attacks on our armed forces has eaten away at the heart and soul of our forces by portraying our service members as arrogant, prejudiced, and insensitive. Today, the moral and emotional support from the general populace, so vital to our success, is dwindling just when we need it most. One still can serve 20 years and receive the paycheck we received in the past, but that income – along with most other retirement benefits – steadily buys less. Pay continues to lag well behind that of comparable civilian occupations (despite the figures in the annual “see-how-fortunate-you-really-are” issue of Navy Times).

Over the past ten years, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of Desert Storm have clouded our mission focus. Despite ongoing operations in Bosnia and the Persian Gulf, the images of
sailors that potential recruits likely will see in the media come from incidents such as Tailhook, rapes and murders in Japan, Naval Academy cheating, drug and car-theft scandals, and allegations of wrongdoing against high-ranking officers. No longer can the citizens of our country relax, comfortably in the knowledge that strong, experienced warriors are charting the course of our national defense. Instead, our current generation of leaders has been groomed with a focus on developing social and political skills not war fighting tactics.

So how do we address these issues to ensure the future success of the world’s most powerful navy? First, to increase national pride in oru Navy, we must work the media on a national scale to increase awareness of the stunning daily sacrifices made by our sailors and their families. In acknowledging their “routine” efforts during peacetime, Americans would become more appreciative of the men and women who maintain freedom of the seas. We can ill afford to use our public-affairs personnel only as shade-tree mechanics, tasked with applying grease to the proverbial “squeaky wheel” when required. In the media wars, the maxim, “the best defense is a god offense,” certainly applies. Next, retirement benefits must be improved and protected, and an easy-to-understand, consistent retirement-pay schedule must be adopted in lieu of the current smorgasbord of compensation plans.

Finally, to sell our Navy to young people, we must have a clearly defined sense of mission, free of society-induced encumbrances. To find an example of how to accomplish this, we need look no further than our Marine Corp brethren. Their leaders have stood their ground against the watering-down of the Corps. When General Charles Krulak, former Commandant of the Marine Corps, called a Naval Academy ethics course “short on straight talk, responsibility, accountability, and example,” he also provided a list of fundamental characteristics that have contributed to the success of the Marine Corps in resisting unwholesome change and enabling them to maintain mission focus.

Young men and women join our armed services to separate themselves from society; to answer a call to service; to become part of an elite organization that will hold them to a higher standard and challenge them to realize their full potential. Rejecting the permissive culture in which they were raised, they yearn for discipline, consistent direction, and a clearly defined sense of right and wrong. To provide them anything less is to shortchange our sailors, our Navy, and our country.

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