

The Power of Navy Leaders -- Especially Chiefs -- to Make or Break Sailors



A U.S. Marine salutes as he marches through the "sideboys" during a Chief Petty Officer Pinning Ceremony at Camp Pendleton, Calif., September 14, 2018. (U.S. Marine Corps Photo by Lance Cpl. Quentarius Johnson)

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Military.com | By [Konstantin Toropin](#)

Chief petty officers, the seasoned leaders tasked with leading enlisted members in the [Navy](#), have impressive power. Often operating as a kind of back channel between commands with chiefs quietly working together, they're known to cut through red tape to get things done.

That authority, that power, built on the bond of rank across the fleet, is the backbone of the service. But just as easily as they can solve problems, chief petty officers can hurt and drive sailors to the brink.

As the Navy continues to deal with the fallout of several major personnel crises, more attention is being focused on the leaders who deal directly with the junior sailors and have been [called "the most important rank in our Navy."](#)

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In an effort to better understand their role in shaping the service, Military.com spoke with five sailors and long-serving officers who painted a picture of a fleet that is held together by an often mythologized group of senior sailors who wield great power, albeit for both good and ill.

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Some sailors offered examples of chiefs who served as trusted counselors, therapists, career coaches and stand-in parental figures. Others described tyrannical reigns that seriously harmed their well-being, leading to thoughts of self-harm.

"They can make a phone call to some guy in Tennessee while you're underway in the middle of a [deployment](#) and change your life," Sean, a lieutenant stationed ashore on the West Coast, explained. Sean's name and those of all of the sailors who spoke to Military.com for this story have been changed or withheld to protect their identities out of fear of retribution for speaking publicly.

"But at the same time, on that same ship, they also have the power to work you

from 0600 to 2200 every day and sometimes not let you get sleep in the middle of the night," Sean, who has been in the Navy 21 years and spent 15 of them as an enlisted sailor -- including several as a chief, went on.

"They have so much f---ing power... so much power."

This year alone, the Navy has faced a wave of stories in which junior sailors endured hardship and struggles, a string of suicides on an aircraft carrier serving as a heartbreaking example.

The Navy's top officer has repeatedly told chiefs that he is relying on their strength to make the service successful and get the most out of junior sailors.

How the chiefs wield their power will dictate whether the Navy is able to come to terms with the personnel issues the service faces and live up to its promise to care for all of those who put on the uniform.

The Goat Locker

Chief petty officers are the senior enlisted who hold crews together. Strictly speaking, the title, often shortened to just chief, refers to enlisted sailors between the ranks of E-7 and E-9. The group, collectively known as the Chief's Mess, sees itself more as a fraternity (the vast majority of chiefs are men) charged with preserving the knowledge, traditions and spirit of the Navy -- the "backbone of the Navy."

An often-repeated adage is that "officers run the Navy, but chiefs make the Navy run."

Mark, a chief warrant officer stationed on a large ship on the East Coast, has been in the Navy 25 years and became a chief in 2006. He described the position as more than just a middle manager on a ship. Instead, he explained that, in addition to being an expert in their field, chiefs are expected "to mentor, train, assist, lead ... and then, of course, know the day-to-day pulse of the workload, the operational schedule, and what the sailors have going on in their personal lives."

"You have to know how to help someone navigate marital problems or, hey, my kid is in the hospital at home and I don't really know what to do," he explained, adding that chiefs "better know who you need to go talk to [to] get some answers from sailors."

Both Mark and Sean spoke of chiefs as having a positive role shaping their careers.

"My first chief was an old crusty son of a b---h that joined the Navy in the '70s ... but I never, ever doubted that that dude would go to war for me if I needed somebody to take care of me," Mark said.

Sean, who started his career as an enlisted damage controlman, recalled that early in his time with the Navy he was facing discharge because his job was overstaffed across the service. He wasn't sure what to do: He was torn between love for the job he had and a fear of being booted out of uniform.

He became despondent and unsure of a way forward for his life. Left alone with these concerns, he says he began to consider suicide. When a senior chief Sean worked with spotted the sullen sailor, he asked about the situation and immediately went to the ship's command master chief -- the senior most enlisted

sailor aboard -- to save his career.

The end result was a phone call the next day to the Navy's personnel management command and a new job for the young sailor.

"Two weeks later, I had a message saying that I was getting converted," Sean said. "That wasn't handled by officers, that wasn't handled by first classes -- I was handled by a bunch of chiefs."

"They saved my life. I didn't kill myself, and they helped me get to a job that I didn't know that I needed," Sean added.

Both officers explained that much of the power that the Chief's Mess wields comes from the fraternal aspect to becoming a chief petty officer in the Navy. Hints of this special relationship can be seen in things like [a ritualized induction into the rank](#) that occurs over six weeks or separate quarters on ships reserved just for chiefs and often called "The Goat Locker."

Being more experienced, even if lower in rank, than many of the officers they serve alongside also helps add to the chiefs' power to effect change.

"I tell my sailors point-blank: If someone needs to go stand on someone's desk, let me do that," Mark explained. "You don't do that, because then you end up having to go see the [command master chief] because you were disrespectful or whatever the case might be."

Yet for all the positive examples of chiefs in action, lately there has been a steady stream of incidents in which chains of command, and the Chief's Mess, have stood by while sailors struggled.

In April, [Military.com reported](#) that the Navy didn't disclose a string of suicides aboard the aircraft carrier George Washington. Among the issues that sailors who spoke with Military.com noted was a chain of command that was just as wearied and disengaged as the crew.

One detail that emerged weeks after the news stories on the suicides was that the ship was missing a major portion of its Chief's Mess.

[Rear Adm. John Meier, commander of Naval Air Force Atlantic, told reporters in early May](#) that, while about 95% of the ship's junior sailors have been assigned, only about 65% of its senior enlisted sailors have been.

[Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va.](#), a former naval officer herself, remarked that "not having that senior enlisted leadership, but having a very large contingent of junior sailors ... I would certainly say that, anecdotally, that could very well be a contributing factor" to the ship's problems.

One enlisted sailor aboard the carrier told Military.com in an interview shortly after the report was published that they wished some leaders "would get fired already because we have seen them literally mistreat sailors or talk to them in such a demeaning manner, that it's almost impossible for us to correct them without us being insubordinate and then us getting in trouble too."

"It's not the CO," the sailor, who has 14 years in the Navy, explained before adding that "they need to take a good hard look at the Chiefs."

"Nobody really pays attention to the Chief's Mess, and 95% of the time they're the ones causing the problems," the sailor said.

Both Cause and Solution

The George Washington is not the first time the Mess has been accused of tolerating, if not actively participating in, abuse that led to suicide. In 2014, Seaman Yeshabel Villot-Carrasco aboard the destroyer James E. Williams took her own life [while the ship was deployed in the Red Sea](#). [A later Navy report found](#) that the ship's commander "enabled a culture that empowered [chiefs] to target, belittle and bully junior sailors."

In 2019, the Chiefs at Petty Officer Brandon Caserta's unit [did nothing to prevent the young sailor's lead petty officer from tormenting him](#) and actively prevented him from transferring out of the unit. Caserta killed himself.

The sailor on the George Washington also recalled being told by a chief amid the COVID-19 pandemic: "Oh, you're another single parent, like we have to deal with you too," which led her to wonder whether that chief was "telling this to junior sailors as well. Because if you are, that is the wrong stance and approach to take right now."

Stories of sailors alleging problems with chiefs don't end with the George Washington. An enlisted sailor with 17 years in the Navy and currently stationed on an amphibious assault ship told Military.com that the lack of support from his chief led him to try to kill himself.

The sailor, who was responsible for running a key aviation program aboard the ship, was struggling because the program had been poorly run prior to his time aboard. Once he arrived, he hoped that his chief would be a source of knowledge and support. Instead, "he told me, 'You need to do it or you f---ing do it.'" Ultimately, the sailor managed to turn the program around and pass the necessary inspections, thanks to "a bunch of good Marines that came on board." Yet the relationship between the sailor and his chief didn't improve. "I got 10 counseling chits in a four-month span," the sailor said. "I think I had three or four times as much as anybody else."

A [counseling chit](#), shorthand for Record of Enlisted Counseling, is [a formal document](#) used to document both positive and negative sailor behavior. Most frequently, it documents negative behavior so that it can be used as evidence in later disciplinary proceedings.

Ultimately, the sailor's command decided to initiate nonjudicial punishment proceedings against him for improper maintenance. Feeling alone, targeted by his superiors, and a 17-year career slipping away, the sailor said he tried to take his own life but was stopped by two other sailors on his ship.

"They sent me to the mental ward for two days," the sailor explained. "I talked to some people over there and told them that I'm not suicidal, I'm a rational man put in irrational situations."

When [Military.com reported on sailors struggling to find housing in Key West](#), Florida, after a barracks was shut down, a note posted by a sailor at the base to social media said, "My chief just shrugged at me and told me that's how it is, my [Command Master Chief] laughed at me at all hands when I asked about it, and the civilian department heads tell me their hands are tied."

Although some junior sailors shared stories about chiefs who have failed to support them -- especially in times of mental crisis -- [there are also anecdotes](#) of sailors getting the same kind of help that both Mark and Sean experienced in their careers.

One young sailor, stationed on an aircraft carrier, told Military.com that, when he tried to take his own life, his chain of command responded in an incredibly supportive manner.

"When I went to the psych ward, they let me not come into work for two weeks," the sailor said.

"They did things that were definitely not allowed for my mental health ... like whether it was letting me off for the day, or marking me as [sick] so that I could not come in to work that day."

"The fact they did that shows they care," the sailor noted.

And it's clear that Congress and Navy leadership are going to continue to rely on chiefs to try to help solve some of the issues facing the force.

"Our chief petty officers, our senior NCOs, need to do more to lean in and be that first care provider, to be that first compassionate shoulder that says what's going on," [Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Russell Smith told Congress in mid-May](#).

The stories told by Mark, Sean and some junior sailors in the fleet show that leaders and chiefs specifically are empowered to and, in fact, do solve problems to great effect.

"The chiefs have to understand it's the hardest job, probably, on the waterfront," Mark said. "You have to think every day about the benefit and well-being of your sailors."

It's less clear how the Navy will take all the good the Chief's Mess is capable of and make sure every sailor in the Navy is able to benefit from it.

"There's no doubt in my mind there's sh---y chains of command in the Navy right now, and they're making sailors' lives hell," Sean said. "But there's also really good chains of command out there that are doing really right by their sailors."