



JOHN AC CARTNER

Leadership lesson that hits home

Lewd video shows the naval service needs a refresher course in effective management

WE RECALL that poet Robert Service (1874-1958) observed in 'The Cremation of Sam McGee': "There are strange things done 'neath the midnight sun. . ." and one can say that there are equally strange things done by the commanding officers of US aircraft carriers.

There has been much chatter in our business recently about leadership, and the case of Owen Honors, who was relieved of his duties by the US Navy.

In 2006 and 2007, Capt Honors was second in command of aircraft carrier *USS Enterprise*. During that time he made a number of video 'skits' for crew that contained gay-baiting and foul-mouthed rants, many of which were laden with sexual expression and commentary more akin to fraternity house culture than the US Navy.

Those videos were aired on closed circuit television onboard the *Enterprise*. However, copies also made their way to the newsroom of *The Virginian-Pilot*, which promptly broadcast them amid a media furore.

The navy was rightly embarrassed by Capt Honors' behaviour. Any right-thinking person would be. He was relieved of his duty not by prudish sentiments in the admiralty but by the correct recognition that the navy had a fool in the shop to whom was entrusted a warship. In the commercial service two years would not have passed before addressing Capt Honors' sins. He would have been made redundant straightaway and paid his own ticket home.

The merchant service gave much to the junior Royal and United States naval services when each sprang from it. We as a commercial service have had our share of blackguards and odd ones in command. It takes no American or English fictional literature to invent them.

Naval commanders see themselves, however, as exemplary leaders for Constitution or Queen and Country. We, on the other hand, are contracted to ensure that Nintendos are delivered efficiently and with no fuss. We know fuss is costly. The US Navy is slow in understanding that. Capt Honors had no clue. We are concerned with profit and control our costs. The naval services use tax money and guidelines and hubris and view profit askance. With no real incentive to do otherwise, one can see how Capt Honors slipped within his system of operation.

Each sea service has shared triumphs and failures as well as mutinies, piracies, fires, shots and shells and heroics. We have dealt with the restraint of kings and princes, strikes, lockouts, currency fluctuations and recently the pesky meddling of uninformed coastguards and naval forces keeping us safe from their self-perceived threats. However, none of our shipmasters has chosen to lead his people by showing self-produced movies which were not only tasteless and unseemly but may be accurately described



Capt Honors: his attitude would have had no place in the commercial service.

AP

as childishly crude. We simply do not have the time for that.

Capt Honors' humour seems to have run to all sorts and conditions of crudity with a special emphasis on same-sex behaviours. This observer thinks that the US Navy officer corps needs to return to the civility and polity and fair treatment for which it was at one time known. Bravery, valour and facing the enemy is one thing. Showing self-produced videos passing for mean-spirited humour in the guise of leadership is another.

Contrary to Churchill's harrumphing that naval tradition was "rum, sodomy and the lash" such sentiments have NO place in enlightened society or on a modern ship, naval or commercial. We manage the rum. The lash has gone overboard. Sodomy is a personal matter and no one else's business between consenting adults in private. Sexual harassment of Capt Honors' stripe is more than tasteless, it is likely skirting on unlawfulness.

On the commercial side of the matter, in Virginia on December 23, 2010, a male seafarer, whose name is unpublished under US privacy laws, won a \$25m judgment against a Maersk company. He reported to the master of the *Maersk Rhode Island* that he had been sexually assaulted by South Korean police officers ashore. Fearing for his charter, the master called the claims manager before acting against independent medical advice and refusing to have the seafarer examined

Naval commanders see themselves as exemplary leaders for Constitution or Queen and Country. We, on the other hand, are contracted to ensure that Nintendos are delivered efficiently

immediately. Under a charge of malingering, the seafarer's employment was then terminated. In each case there was an egregious failure of command judgment and leadership.

These cases illustrate that each service needs to come of age as to sexual matters and crew. The naval service, as an exponent of government policy, should lead and not follow.

No service has a patent on valour or honour. We seemed to have learned in five millennia that the strange things done on the *USS Enterprise* are not the things we do to command our ships. Each person having command holds a special licence from a sovereign. It is an honour and privilege for any person to hold a command at sea. We cannot and should not forget that Capt Honors was the duly appointed commanding officer of a capital ship of the US Navy and holds the commission of the president of the United States. He should thereby be held at least to the standards of behaviour of flag state warrantees.

It is easy to gloat at Capt Honors' discomfort. We should not. Capt Honors was merely following a great American tradition in violating the Washington Post Rule: do nothing you would not want to see on the front page of the Post tomorrow morning. Realistically, except for a vaguely sour taste on the mention of his name, he will not be remembered by most in a year. As a matter of lessons to be learned from this sordid mess, we should think that the naval service needs a revision and refresher in proper leading to avoid idiosyncratic theatrical baseness which seems to pass for the quite expensive and ineffective leadership in that service, fully exhibited by Capt Honors. ■

John AC Cartner is a maritime lawyer and solicitor practising in Washington DC. He holds the US Coast Guard's unrestricted master mariner certification and is the principal author of *The International Law of the Shipmaster* (2009) Informa/Lloyd's. jacc@shipmasterlaw.com