

From the Advisor's Desk
"In The Spotlight" with the Master Chief
Petty Officer of the Navy,
MCPON (SS/SW/AW) James L. Herdt



Master Chief Herdt enlisted in the US Navy in 1966 and presently serves as the Navy's senior enlisted Sailor. His vast experience and prior positions of leadership are too numerous to list. For his complete biography see:

<http://www.chinfo.navy.mil/navpalib/mcpon/mcponbio.html>.

In March of 1998, he was appointed as the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON). I recently spoke with MCPON Herdt on the state of Voluntary Education today.

Q: How important is the availability of Voluntary Education in meeting the Navy's retention and recruiting mission?

A: To be successful, one of the expectations of our society, in many people's minds, is the requirement of follow-on education after high school. And what we see with the new Sailor coming through our doors is someone who was either not ready for it or who could not afford it. So from the recruiting perspective, having a system that delivers Voluntary Education for their time while in service, whether that is four years or thirty years, is incredibly important. Likewise, most follow-on jobs out of high school offer some form of educational or tuition assistance for college study. So it's essential that we have a plan to offer higher education.

Q: What are your thoughts on the benefits of education?

A: There are many people who think that education makes you inherently smarter. I don't believe that. Exceptions are those professions such as medicine, law, etc., where you take what you learn and use it daily. From my perspective a much more important function of education is one; it teaches you how to learn, two; it changes your thinking patterns so you view things with a wider perspective, and probably most importantly; the self-confidence that education brings. This increased self-esteem is especially apparent in those persons pursuing a college education after attaining their GED. Education brings cognitive ability. And with cognitive ability comes self-esteem.

Q: How have educational demands changed for enlisted personnel since your early days as a junior Sailor?

A: I entered the Navy in 1966. At that time there were zero educational opportunities if you chose to remain

enlisted. There was no tuition assistance program. There were some officer education programs. But for the enlisted person, if you had educational aspirations, you were on your own. There were no educational opportunities other than what you could receive at an institution located in the area in which you were stationed. There were two schools of thought. One said that if we educated the enlisted force they wouldn't stay in the Navy. As tuition assistance and DANTES programs became available, what we discovered was that just the opposite was true. We now know that the more Voluntary Education people amass, the longer they stay in and the faster they are promoted. We now have PACE, PACE2 and DL capabilities. We've come light years and in my humble estimation, ten years from now, where we are now will seem like the stone age compared to where we'll be then.

Q: What role does distance learning play in meeting the off-duty educational needs of our Sailors?

A: As I look at distance learning in general, I think it's the wave of the future. Most colleges learned this pretty early on. The Navy College Program was made successful due in part to when it was introduced-- at a time when colleges were exploring distance learning. Distance learning is relatively inexpensive for an educational institution to offer since they don't need much brick and mortar. Our ability to deliver education is, more than any other service, dependent on distance learning. Our ships deploy for six months at a shot and it's just not possible for a Sailor to get off duty and go to college at the end of the day. I expect the quality of distance learning to continue to improve in the future. Distance learning is incredibly important to us.

Q: What do you think is the greatest obstacle a Sailor faces in pursuing a College Education?

A: We are a mobile force. The ability to link-up with a shore based institution has been difficult in the past. With the development of the Navy College Program, which is really a strategic approach to offering Voluntary Education, we've reduced a lot of the barriers and bureaucracy. Bandwidth is a problem for us as it relates to personal issues but mobility will always be our biggest obstacle. We've made great progress but this will always be the mountain that must be climbed.

Q: How important are the programs and services offered through DANTES such as Credit by Examination (CLEP, DSST and ECE) in supporting a Sailor's pursuit of a College Education?

A: As a Sailor decides that they want to pursue their education, they make their way to a Navy College Office, located throughout the Navy. The Education Counselor they'll meet will use a wide range of resources and options to help the Sailor reach the goal. The Navy College Counselor will use a combination approach considering; school and work experience within the Navy, the use of the Navy College Partnership Program, and frequently the DANTES programs and services are a very important part of these resources to help move

the Sailor forward. Sailors want to advance quickly. They don't want to sit around and wait for some bureaucratic process. DAN TES gives the Sailor the ability to move ahead quickly and achieve their goals by giving them the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge they possess in a particular subject through credit by examination. If every Sailor had to sit down and take every course in a degree plan, they would do that. But DAN TES provides an economical and efficient means to achieve their goals quickly.

Q: How does Troops to Teachers fit into the Navy picture?

A: Troops to Teachers is a win/win situation and certainly a great way to transition and utilize much of the leadership skills learned in the Navy. Students in grade school and high school win too. They want some boundaries and structure. Troops who become teachers bring that structure.

Q: What is the best advice you could give that young first term Sailor?

A: When you get to your first Command, everything you do is earning you College credit. There is nothing more important at that time than becoming mission knowledgeable and mission capable. Your job, first and foremost, is to become a good Sailor and a good crewmember of any unit you join. The next step is to get started on Voluntary Education early. Sit down with a Navy College Program Counselor and plot your educational path. Take a steady approach. Don't try to be a graduate tomorrow. Set realistic goals. Keep in mind that your first job is to be a Sailor. And while keeping these priorities you'll have the opportunity to pursue a college education. Balance is Key. There must be balance between your job as a Sailor, your family, and Voluntary Education.

Q: What advice do you have for that senior enlisted person, not far from retirement, who has procrastinated by not pursuing Voluntary Education?

A: First, the world won't end tomorrow. You still have time. However, get yourself to the Navy College Office and get your SMART assessed. Most senior personnel will be amazed at how close they are to a degree. Most are within a few courses. By the time someone spends twenty years in the Navy, they've accumulated significant college credit. They're closer than they think. And with the opportunities that DAN TES provides, this process is accelerated.

Q: What is the best way to retain good Sailors?

A: First, we must challenge them with the opportunities we can offer and with the fulfilling job of protecting this nation. Secondly, we must treat our people in uniform, in all services, with the respect they deserve as human beings. These are people who have sworn to defend the constitution and chosen to live a life of service. We should understand this and value it. Third, we should take an active part in making them better than they are. Sometimes other people are in a better position to look

at us and say, you know, you can be better than you are and here's how. And I think Voluntary Education is a great way to drive that home. When people leave us, whether in four years or thirty, we want to return them to the communities from which they came better than we found them- able to contribute as they did while in the Navy. When we fail, we return failures. There are not enough recruiting dollars in the world to overcome an expressed bad experience. I don't think people join the Navy to fail. They don't say, I think I'll join the Navy and screw-up my Chief's life for the next four years. They all want to be successful. And the job of leadership is to accomplish the mission and to grow our most important resource-- our people.

Q: How does the Navy Partnership Program assist Sailors in furthering their Educational Goals?

A: While designing the Navy Partnership Program, we knew that we had occupational specialties that would link-up nicely with related degree paths in most ratings. It was, however, essential that we didn't limit people to a particular degree path. For instance, if we had an Electronics technician that wanted to major in animal husbandry, we wanted to make sure they had that opportunity. These career paths tied to Navy ratings enables Sailors to maximize the credit for the non-traditional piece of a Sailor's education. I think that most Sailors will see the benefit and take advantage of the increased credits their Navy training and experience brings.

Q: On the subject of retention, How do you see today's young men and women when considering their expectation of the Navy experience and what the Navy expects of them?

A: These two aspects are not mutually exclusive. Most young people today are interested in being a part of something bigger than themselves- to make a difference. They want responsibility as fast as they can get it. They are also concerned that they do not get left behind as they come out the other end of the Navy experience. And that's what draws them toward Voluntary Education. They want to be more competitive. They understand, perhaps more so than previous generations, that hard work will get you ahead. They are ready to work hard. A curse of youth, however, is 'I want it now.' They first need to be able to contribute to the Navy mission. We, as leaders, have the challenge of helping to align their priorities and put it all into perspective.

Q: From your own Education, what skills do you use the most?

A: From my Masters Degree, which is an MBA with a concentration of Human Resource Management, I use all of it. I use it every day. I use organizational dynamics. I use communications skills. I use organizational psychology. I'm a student of human behavior. I use it to try to see how it translates into what we can do better. We are presently involved in an initiative to better prepare the Chief's Mess for the future. In the senior enlisted ranks, if I had to assign any one

title to what we do as leaders in our particular Services, I think I'd have to call us human resources managers. As leaders, we develop and apply human resources to meet the tasks that take us to mission accomplishment. As luck would have it, I think that my degree path has taken me to where I am today.

Education is worth the effort. I tell Sailors. If it wasn't hard, anyone could do it. And not just anyone can do this job [Navy]. It is the hardest things in life that we remember and treasure the longest. Achieving your educational goals while at the same time building a career is something you'll always remember.