

TAKING COMMAND - THE McCAIN WAY - Fiery style was forged as a young Navy officer

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Turning Points

Second of two articles on critical periods in the lives of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. - Commander John McCain was throwing a big Navy bash at his beach house, but he needed an outdoor deck. So Ray Phillips, a Navy enlistee under his command, came out and helped him build one from cypress.

To return the favor, McCain invited Phillips and his wife to the party, though nearly all the guests would be officers, who rarely socialized with enlistees. As Phillips mingled, a commander from another unit objected to his being there.

Phillips's wife, in tears, wanted to leave. But McCain learned what had happened and chewed out the commander.

"He pitched a fit," Phillips said, recalling McCain's message to his fellow officers this way: "Never question who the guests are at my house."

It was a fleeting moment, but pure McCain - loyal, combative, disdainful of protocol. And it serves as a window into his first major experiment in leadership, a 27-month stint, from 1975 to 1977, as the second in command and then commanding officer of the Navy's largest air squadron. It was here, at Cecil Field in Jacksonville, that he tested his capacity to inspire, and to build a constructive Navy career after nearly 5 1/2 years of captivity in North Vietnam.

McCain led less by dry competence than by his outsize personality and the force of his reputation. Charismatic and combustible, McCain had a leadership style that was relatively unorthodox for the Navy, but he had never been one to stay within the lines. And while he initially hoped to rise through the Navy ranks, McCain, the son and grandson of admirals, was passed over for a higher command for reasons that remain unclear. His skills would lead him down another path.

Elements of the John McCain voters know today were evident during his command of the unit, a shore-based squadron known as VA-174 that trained pilots and maintained roughly 50 A-7 Corsair II attack jets. He answered to his own code of morality and justice. He showed empathy for people's hardships and personal failings. He was warm toward Navy men and women on his good side, and could explode at those who weren't.

In many cases, his creative approach to solving problems paid dividends; but his volatile personality, and his freewheeling social life, rubbed some people the wrong way.

In the end, McCain and his superiors both seemed to conclude that his skills were better suited to a politician than a Navy admiral. His command of VA-174 was his last assignment with a squadron or fleet, the beginning of the end of his Navy career.

The Navy turned down McCain's request for a higher command after VA-174, according to a former senior commander. And McCain had already tasted national politics, campaigning so actively for Ronald Reagan's 1976 presidential bid that he was reprimanded by the base commander for blurring the lines between politics and his Navy job, a fellow officer said.

A few years later, McCain, weighing his Navy options and taking stock of his own emerging political celebrity, made a difficult but natural choice: He folded his Navy whites for good and pointed his ship toward Washington.

Words of inspiration

On March 14, 1973, McCain walked off an Air Force jet in the Philippines a free man, his first taste of liberty since being

shot down over Hanoi in October 1967. McCain's sacrifice, underscored by his refusal to accept early release from his captors, was widely celebrated.

He was grateful for his freedom, grateful to be alive. But for all the fanfare - the front-page photo in the next day's New York Times, the honors, parades, and a visit to the White House - McCain, then 36 years old, was staring at a cloudy future.

Prior to Vietnam, McCain's Navy career was decidedly lackluster. He was nearly kicked out of the Naval Academy for bad behavior, finishing fifth from the bottom of his class. He became a pilot and later a flight instructor in Meridian, Miss. McCain's partying was legendary, but his aviation skills were not, according to many who served with him.

But another side of him was starting to show. He had been back in the United States a few weeks when he phoned a friend, Robert Musgrove, the second in command at VA-174, and made a request: Let me speak to the pilots.

At the time, McCain was barely mobile - his injuries from being shot down, and the torture he suffered, had taken their toll. Unable to mount the stairs to the squadron's second-floor quarters, he climbed onto the back of Musgrove, who carried him up the steps piggyback.

"He talked to the pilots and really told them how proud he was of them, what they were doing for their country," Musgrove said. "Here's a guy who just spent 5 1/2 years in the prison and he's trying to give a shot in the arm to the pilots who were ready to go."

That impromptu address, in the spring of 1973, signified a major change in McCain. An immature and indifferent Navy aviator earlier in his career, he now wanted to use the lessons of his captivity to inspire others, to dedicate himself to a larger good.

Carl Smith, a former officer at VA-174 who is still close to McCain, said: "He was highly motivated and he had a real sense of direction. It was a determination to ... spend the rest of his life like his father and grandfather had, committed to the country and making it a better place."

Skipper takes charge

McCain arrived at Cecil Field a mythic figure, with a fighter pilot's swagger, tales of toughness and honor in Vietnam, rough-hewn good looks, and a magnetic personality.

"We were in kind of awe of him," said Bonita Duncan, who worked in the personnel office.

The squadron's members called themselves the Hellrazors. They had a menacing, Walt Disney-designed logo to match. VA-174's primary responsibility was training pilots, but it was also a repair shop for the A-7 jets.

Though the squadron's significance diminished with the war's end, McCain, by most accounts, was an effective and admired leader. He drew on his POW experience, charm, cowboy reputation, and sometimes explosive temper to bring the unit to distinction, according to interviews with more than five dozen former unit members, friends, and associates.

In McCain's telling, he turned around what had been an underperforming unit. He told supporters in Jacksonville earlier this year that when he arrived at Cecil Field, "the state of military readiness in the United States was very low, and my squadron's readiness was no exception."

Some former officers and enlisted personnel who worked for him echoed that assessment.

"Everything was really quite a mess and things changed very quickly and very positively," Duncan said. "He's got a charisma about him that, I don't know, he makes you stand a little taller and move a little faster. It's like a fever."

Others, including the two prior skippers of VA-174, say he appears to be exaggerating his impact. Jerry "Possum" Terrell, the commanding officer whom McCain apprenticed under, said he respects McCain but rejects the characterization that the squadron was suffering.

"That's absolutely untrue," Terrell said. "But I don't take umbrage at it, because politicians have to make political statements."

It is difficult to assess McCain's tenure quantitatively, in part because he took over VA-174 at the end of the war. Military priorities, demands, and spending all changed.

Under McCain's leadership, according to Navy records, the unit had fewer flight hours than it did on average during the decade from 1970 to 1980. And in 1976, McCain's only full calendar year in the senior leadership, the squadron graduated fewer pilots than average. But the unit's percentage of flight-ready aircraft improved under him, which McCain and his supporters attribute to a maintenance regimen he instituted.

McCain says he sought and received permission to break a restrictive Navy rule against using some grounded planes for parts. With the new maintenance regimen, he promised that by the end of his tour he would get almost every plane in the air at least once.

A day or two before McCain's command ended in 1977, Carl Smith took off triumphantly in the last repaired A-7, according to McCain and Smith.

"The accomplishment was shared by everyone, whereas failure would have landed just on McCain," Smith said.

VA-174 had a stellar safety record under McCain. It helped earn him a service medal and the squadron its first-ever Meritorious Unit Commendation from the Navy, which praised the squadron's "exceptional professional performance and selfless dedication to duty."

But why that record did not result in a promotion up the command chain remains something of a mystery. The full picture of McCain's stewardship of VA-174 is unavailable, because his campaign declined to authorize the release of his Navy service records to the Globe.

Wrath, wisdom, partying

McCain was an omnipresent skipper – chatting up maintenance crews, out on the runways, sitting in the bleachers at base softball games. After missing so much in Vietnam, his appetite for knowledge and human contact was voracious.

"He was trying to catch up with the world," said Jim Lichtenwalter, an officer from the squadron.

Those who served under him say he never felt bound by the Navy caste system, often treating even the lowest-ranked as equals. He had high standards, little tolerance for incompetence, even less for willful disobedience. Nearly everyone from VA-174 seems to have a story about him exploding at somebody.

"If you earned his wrath, you got it," said Bob Pergler, a lieutenant commander under McCain.

McCain sometimes used that wrath as a management technique. One officer, Gordon Law, recalled a case in which two young sailors had to face McCain after being caught stealing wood from a construction site for a baby cradle. Law said he told McCain beforehand that they were good guys, and that he needed only to scare them a little. So McCain unloaded on them.

"It scared me – I flinched," Law said. "I was trying to get out the door, afraid these gents were going to have heart attacks. He grabbed me and he winked, and he said, 'Hey, Gordy, how'd I do?'"

For all the growing up McCain was doing professionally, he still loved a good party. At their beach house in Ponte Vedra and their home in the suburb of Orange Park, McCain and his then-wife Carol hosted clambakes, luaus, and cookouts. Pilots recalled that they would schedule training flights to Key West or Brunswick, Maine, just to pick up lobsters and other seafood, which they would keep cold in the planes' unused external fuel tanks.

The environment at Cecil Field in those days reflected the times: Officers and enlistees felt pride in their service as they struggled with post-Vietnam hostility toward the military; some dabbled in drugs and took advantage of the shifting social mores regarding sexuality; they wondered about America's place in the world.

As McCain took over VA-174, women were just beginning to arrive in the unit. During his command, a pilot named Rosemary Conatser became the first Navy woman to fly the A-7 Corsair II.

Most former officers and enlisted women say McCain treated women with respect. Kathryn Sumrall Harrington, who was a legal officer, recalled a meeting in which a male officer referred to her disrespectfully.

McCain "stopped that man immediately, and he said, 'You are talking to an officer in the United States Navy, and I do not care what your disagreement with Lieutenant J.G. Sumrall is, you will always speak to her with respect, whether she's a woman, whether she's a man, or whether she's black or whether she's pink.'"

While at Cecil Field, McCain's marriage to Carol was beginning to unravel, and he has acknowledged that his

extramarital affairs contributed to their divorce in 1980.

Several former Navy colleagues recalled seeing McCain with other women in social settings, and his active dating life was no secret to the officers with whom he worked. On account of his Vietnam experience, many say they forgave McCain for his womanizing, or they felt obligated to keep quiet because he was their boss.

But some were upset by it.

"Many of us didn't like it, and the more I've grown I've had to step back and say, well, it was there, it was inappropriate," said Susan Moose, a legal officer in the squadron who said she and a colleague approached the base chaplain about McCain's behavior.

Venture into politics

On its face, McCain's assignment after VA-174, as a Senate liaison in the Navy's Office of Legislative Affairs in Washington - a Navy lobbyist, in essence - seems the perfect way for a politically minded officer to gain entree into Beltway politics.

But that job was not his first choice, according to Howard Greer, who was commander of Naval Air Forces Atlantic and Europe and knew McCain's family. As McCain's tenure at VA-174 was ending in 1977, he requested a more senior wing commander's job, Greer said.

McCain "wanted that job very badly," Greer said. "I was at a party, and his mother came up and said, 'John really wants that job.' I said, 'Well, he will get due consideration.'"

McCain's immediate superiors denied the request, Greer said, though he said he cannot recall why.

In an interview, McCain said of Greer's account, "I don't think that's right," adding that he did not think he was eligible for the post. In fact, the Navy had assigned McCain to a desk job with the Naval Air Systems Command until James L. Holloway III, the chief of Navy operations at the time who had known McCain's father, changed McCain's orders to the Office of Legislative Affairs, according to Holloway's book, "Aircraft Carriers at War."

Ultimately, the Senate job proved a good fit anyway. McCain, trading on his wit and knowledge of the world, got to know senators who became political mentors.

The roots of McCain's own political ambitions are difficult to trace. Some friends and associates believe he had hoped to advance in the Navy and turned to politics after chafing at the slow pace of his advancement. Others say he has long considered elective office.

Ann Bergo, whose husband, Dennis, was an officer with McCain, recalled a lunch at which McCain mentioned that friends and family wanted him to enter politics.

"And I said, 'Wow, that would be neat,'" Bergo said. "And he said, 'Yeah, I think my dad has always kind of hoped that I would.'"

Whatever his aims, McCain's professional maturation at VA-174 has been a key ingredient in his career arc. It gave him more than just leadership experience. It showed him he had something to give.

McCain said in the interview, "It was in many ways, if not a turning point, certainly an affirmation that I had learned the lessons of life and leadership and duty and honor and country, and was able to put into practice all the things I had learned and believed in and learned from my father and grandfather."

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THE COMMANDER

For a video on John McCain's leadership in the Navy go to boston.com/globe. (THIS LINK MAY EXPIRE WITHIN 6 MONTHS OF PUBLICATION)

Credit: Scott Helman Globe Staff. Donna Richter photos by Yoon S. Byun/Globe Staff

Illustration

Caption: John McCain, signing a reenlisting document in January 1977, commanded the Navy squadron VA-174 for 27

months in the 1970s. John McCain used the Cecil Field hangar (above) in Jacksonville, Fla., during his command of the VA-174 squadron in the 1970s.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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