



At some point in your career, you reach what is called “terminal paygrade.” For most officers, it is O-6. That may be because there are no more promotion boards for your designator, or you don’t want to make the tremendous time and energy commitment to compete effectively for further promotion, or simply that you’ve made your career goal and it’s time to coast. I want you to strike “terminal paygrade” from your mindset and vocabulary and never mention it again.

You should be at the top of your game, not the end of it. Agreed, the flag promotion opportunity for line captains is 0.5%; but it is your obligation to complete all of your “qualifications” for promotion, regardless of the odds (see my November 2005 article, “Running up the Flagpole”). Do it — not because you want to be an admiral, but because that’s the level of performance you’re getting paid for as a captain.

Finish your Joint Professional Military Education (JPME), even if you don’t get paid for the time invested. It is some of the best learning you will ever experience as an adult.

Seek out command billets at every APPLY board, or demanding jobs if you’re out of command tenure. Venture forth from “safe” assignments. If you’ve orchestrated your career to avoid tough peer groups and embellish your record, I won’t trust you in combat. You will pick up some dents and dings; but it’s not how clean you keep your record, but what you accomplish on your career journey. Get muddy. There is no escalator to the top of San Juan Hill.

Make Your Eagles Soar

By

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Serve on selection boards. It’s not easy work, but it can be mastered. Get really good at it so you can mentor others.

Speaking of mentoring, you should have an active cadre of protégés with whom you interact regularly. Share the wisdom of experience and help groom the next generation of leadership. Does this describe you so far?

Okay, here’s one: volunteer for mobilization. The Navy needs 8,796 mobilized Reservists in FY07. About 27,000 SELRES have not yet been recalled — that’s about 1 in 3.07. Don’t leave this duty to our younger, junior Sailors. Get out there and LEAD and help get our kids back home safely. I know of captains who have “chickened out” and submitted retirement packets to dodge the possibility of recall. If you’re even thinking of this, what kind of message are you sending about your character?

Take a set of ADSW orders. Depending on your career, they may pay less than your civilian job; but if you see a job description that matches your background, step up to the plate. You’ll likely add more value to the Navy than anything you do on a weekend at a NOSC. Most requirement writers ask for O-4s or O-5s, because they figure that reserve O-6s won’t work as hard. Are you happy being considered a second-class resource? Get in there and prove them wrong.

As a captain, you can afford to be fearless. If you expect no more promotions, you can consistently do what’s right, regardless of politics. “Bulletproof” is the word that often comes to mind. Your risk tolerance should increase, as there is less fallout from a failed career gamble. Finally, there is the confidence to step out boldly and lead, as there are statistically fewer seniors who are able to challenge your decisions.

To paraphrase David Farragut, “Damn the odds, full speed ahead.” Always play the game to win. Never give up. I remember the 1993 NFL playoff game between Buffalo and Houston. Down by 32 points early in the second half, backup quarterback Frank Reich persisted and led Buffalo to a 41-38 overtime win. (He also set an NCAA record for a 31-point comeback at Maryland.) Who’s your hero? More importantly, who thinks of you as their hero?

Eventually, you must transition from active status. The “hard stop” requiring O-6s to retire at 30 years is based on 10 USC §14507(b); the Secretary of the Navy grants very few exceptions. However, if you have broken service or significant enlisted time, know that Congress amended 10 USC §1251(a) extending mandatory retirement to age 62 instead of 60. If you can, stay in the game; keep contributing. Worried about the economics? For every 1,000 points you have, by postponing retirement and serving 15 days of duty at age 60 or 61, you’ll break even over a lifetime.

Your reserve career does not end with retirement, nor does your opportunity to contribute to the Navy. Retirement is when you should be stepping up your involvement in organizations such as the Naval Reserve Association. Keep that momentum going, and continue to serve in a meaningful way. Our longtime shipmates, LCDR Lorna Bridenstine and CAPT John C. Rice, Jr., who just passed away in February, stayed active in our Association until their last days. By their measure, I still have another 40 years of Naval service to go. I hope you enjoy the same privilege to serve as they did. Thank you for all that you do for our Sailors, our Navy, and our country. 🇺🇸