

“We’ve got to TAKE the WHOLE CREW!”

Captain Mike Lambert, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Our class, designated 82003, reported to the Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, in early February 1982 for 16 weeks of training before being commissioned as ensigns in June. It was a group of mixed potential—perhaps some captains and admirals would be borne of this group. Only time would tell.

More than 24 years later, I can’t remember a single instructor, except one—CWO3 Wallace Louis Exum. A distinguished, white-haired gentleman who still wore the old Navy blue-black CPO flannel shirt, even though the Navy had phased them out years earlier. He was an old salt. He joined the Navy in 1943 at 16 and had seen combat in World War II, earning a Purple Heart while landing Marines at Iwo Jima. He also served during the wars in Korea and Vietnam. His 18 years of sea duty were more than anyone in our class would experience. As a former signalman and quartermaster, he knew navigation better than the back of his hand.

By 1982, CWO3 Exum was an accomplished author. He had written *Battleship: Pearl Harbor, 1941* (New York: Vantage Press, 1974) some years earlier. Like nearly every other officer candidate in his class, I bought the book and brought it to class to have it autographed and perhaps curry some favor with him. I was the third-ranked officer candidate in the regiment at the time and too full of myself when I approached this grizzled instructor intent on getting that autograph.

“CWO3 Exum,” I said, “would you sign my book, sir?”

He stepped toward me, put his arm around my shoulder, pulled me in close and spoke quietly. He said, “Mr. Lambert, you’ve been here a couple of weeks now. You seem like a decent young man to me. You do. I tell you what I want you to do. I’d like for you to come back in 13 weeks. You come back in 13 weeks and I think by then, maybe I’ll have something good to say about you.”

With that, he handed me the book and a lesson in life. For him, words have meaning. He did not plan to fill my

book with meaningless words. He would wait for the right time and circumstance, and I would wait with him.

The First Lesson

Each of his class sessions was filled with life’s lessons. Lessons he had learned in his 40 years in the Navy. Lessons the old salt would share with impressionable young officer candidates. Lessons that stuck.

We didn’t make it through the first day of class before he imparted the first lesson. He began, “I was sent here to help you ladies and gentlemen become good naval officers. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, that is what I am here for. I don’t know a one of you yet. You’re here to become naval officers. Now, I won’t allow any baby talk in my classroom. It is ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, sir.’ It’s ‘no, ma’am’ and ‘yes, ma’am.’ I don’t want to hear any ‘unh huh,’ ‘okay,’ ‘yeh.’ That is baby talk. I can’t allow it. We just don’t do that in my classroom. You are all ladies and gentlemen. Don’t you forget that.”

With 25 or so officer candidates in the class, we had the normal mix of brainpower, but celestial navigation was new to all of us. Classes were filled with lecture, demonstration of navigation principles, and then questioning by CWO3 Exum to make sure we got it. Over the course of several weeks, he came to understand who was getting it and who wasn’t. Each time he asked a question, the same hands went up. He could see that some officer candidates needed more coaching. After a round of questions, officer candidate Rob Henry still didn’t get it. Rob’s frustration was beginning to show and he had begun to sink into the baby talk, which the warrant officer simply would not allow. CWO3 Exum was able to bring him back into the group through a series of questions and coaching. “Well, Mr. Henry, you’re in the ballpark, you’re in the ballpark.

As a CWO4, Wallace Louis Exum shoots the sun aboard ship with his sextant.

*It is all too easy to overlook the **power** and **impact** that an individual **can have** on others, especially a soft-spoken man with **simple messages**. Take a look at Wallace Louis Exum.*

We don't always need a homerun. Sometimes, in the ballpark is good enough. You don't always have to have the answer—but I want you to keep swinging that bat. Cause, Mr. Henry, you're in the ballpark."

Shoot the Stars, But . . .

CWO3 Exum insisted that every officer candidate have the same level of understanding of the principles of navigation. He would not leave anyone at the pier. He always insisted, "We've got to take the whole crew. We aren't ready to get underway until we've got everyone on board. It's got to be the whole crew. So, let's go over this problem again. When we've got everyone on board, we can cast off all lines." With that he would patiently and persistently go through the entire

lesson until he was certain each one of us understood the concept and could employ it in solving a real-world navigation problem.

There were nights when we needed time away from our barracks. CWO3 Exum gave us that. He would enter King Hall's third deck, gather Echo Company and take us out on the lawn on the bay. He always wore a leather Navy flight jacket and pulled his brass sextant from its soft cloth case. He taught each of us individually how to use it. Invariably his corny sense of humor would kick in toward the end of the evening. "Ladies and gentlemen," he would say, "you can shoot the stars, but don't shoot the moon." There would be a chorus of laughter and our lesson would be over.

We then would follow him to his car hanging onto every word he said. He would get behind the wheel of his convertible Cadillac and tell us the same story every night. "This Cadillac, my lovely wife gave this to me. I think she loves me. Bless her heart. Aren't I the luckiest man in the world?" he would ask. Before we could answer, he would. "My lovely Joyce gave me this car. But you know, she gave me our little Marilyn, too, and there's nothing more precious than that. Those two girls, they are the loves of my life. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I am the luckiest man alive."



MIKE LAMBERT

Critical Suggestion

It was late in May and we could see our commissioning much more clearly than we could during the bitter Newport winter. Few obstacles stood in our way, it was on the horizon.

During the final examination—this would be the last class period with him—I had my dividers, parallel rulers, and pencils carefully placed on my charts. CWO3 Exum explained the test with his usual thoroughness and ended by telling us to do our very best. Fail the test and there would be no commissioning. In a few days, as he had promised 15 weeks ago, we would all be commissioned officers. We had “taken the whole crew.” Or had we?

The navigation problem was not intended to be complicated. It was designed to ensure our understanding of the concepts and test our attention to detail. Could we follow the instructions? Could we remember to factor in drift, speed of the currents, check to ensure we had the correct waypoints? I was moving along confidently when I felt Chief Warrant Officer Exum’s eyes on the back of my head. Then I sensed that he was moving closer to speak to me, quietly, as he always did.

“Mr. Lambert, you’ve been doing this navigation thing for several months now,” he said as he firmly placed his arm around my shoulder. “And you’re getting pretty good at it. But, I would check that last plot.”

That last plot segment was wrong. If he hadn’t interrupted my very confident navigation from segment to segment at that moment, I would not have had the opportunity or the time to recover and pass the exam. I would not have been commissioned the following week. But I did recover and went on to eventually make captain.

None of it would have been possible without CWO3 Exum’s help.

I recently had a chance to call him and tell him what a great guy he is and how he influenced my life in the Navy. CWO4 Exum retired in September 1985 after 42 years of devotion to the Navy. His highest award was a Navy/Marine Corps Achievement Medal—earned on his last tour in port operations at San Francisco. He and his crew saved an oil tanker from burning and sinking in San Francisco Bay. In 42 years of service—an achievement medal—can you believe that? At 79-years-young, he still has his lovely Joyce



CWO3 Exum, top right, discusses a navigation problem with an officer candidate. Bottom: The regimental staff of Class 82003 includes, from left, officer candidates Nancy Manwiler, Mike Lambert, regimental commander Perry VanHooser, “Lou” Rawls, and Jeff Limburner.

and daughter, Marilyn, and written two more books—*Murder at Hogans Corner, Washington* (Ocean Shores, WA: Chart House, 1992) and *The Golden Ring—More Than a Half-Century True American Adventure* (Ocean Shores, WA: Snohomish Publishing Company, 1995).

After my commissioning ceremony, I introduced him to my wife Lynn. And, you know what? He signed that book for me “To Ensign & Mrs. Mike Lambert” and he said some very nice things—just as he promised.

Captain Lambert served in the Navy for more than 30 years, retiring in May 2006. He is the assistant director of government markets for Oshkosh Truck Corporation.