Part I: Starting over.

Chapter 1: Pain

1989. The Irish Sea.

8000 tons of steel moved silently, hidden in the depths of the Irish Sea. In the control room of the USS Will Rogers, the Officer of the Deck ordered the ship toward the deeper wider expanses of the Northern Atlantic. Glancing at the missile control panel, he could see the status of the 16 Poseidon missiles, each capable of carrying 14 multiple nuclear-armed reentry vehicles. These missiles were the sole reason for the existence of the ballistic missile submarine – SSBN for short. We called them "boomers." There was one thing that mattered above all else for a boomer – and that was to be at sea and be in a condition that would enable her to execute a strike if called upon. They were a vital component of America's strategic deterrence.

The control room was the nerve center of the ship. So important were her 16 missiles, invulnerable to attack once underway and submerged, that boomers had 2 crews that swapped out to maximize the time the submarine could spend at sea on strategic deterrent patrol. The crews lived around New London, Connecticut and Will Rogers was operated out of a forward base at Holy Loch, Scotland. Every three months, the crews would swap with a 3 day turn over period. After assuming the boat from the other crew, we'd spend four weeks doing the necessary corrective and preventive maintenance before going to sea. In order for the United States to have a credible strategic deterrent, our missiles needed to be ready to go. If we couldn't make it on time another submarine would have to cover for us.

There were 41 of these submarines built between 1958 and 1965 in response to the Soviet threat, an impressive industrial accomplishment. While those original submarines were being replaced by the newer and more capable Ohio class, Will Rogers still had important operational tasking. She was the last of the original 41 and had operated nearly continuously since her commissioning. After 33 years she was a tired ship. Worse, in the patrol before I reported, Will Rogers collided with a trawler and failed an important certification.

300 feet aft of the control room, behind the missile compartment and the reactor compartment, I inspected the Engine Room. As engineer, I was responsible the nuclear reactor and important auxiliary equipment and the 60 men who maintained and operated it. There was a constant tension between doing things right and meeting the deadline which was felt by every member of the crew. The job was grueling and I wasn't particularly happy with how things were going.

The officer I relieved was very involved in details. He was always reviewing technical documents and directing maintenance and other operations. I was determined to change that – by giving the department more control of their work, more decision making authority, and fewer lists of tasks, I hoped to bring the passion I'd experienced on Sunfish to Will Rogers. In this, I was going against the tide.

Just previously, I'd had the chance to ride another submarine, a sister ship to Will Rogers for several days. This ship was undergoing an underway tactical inspection.

They were tasked with different missions that required significant internal coordination. I followed the captain around to see what he did. He was everywhere – dashing to the engine room, then back to control, to sonar, to the torpedo room. I was exhausted before 24 hours were over. I'm not sure he slept in 3 days.
That ship did well on her inspection and the inspection team specifically cited the involvement of the captain. I had a sense of unease because I knew that wasn't how I wanted to run a submarine. Even if it were, I knew I could not physically do what he did.
Even though it seemed the navy encouraged this kind of top-down leadership, I pressed forward with my plan. Rather than giving specific lists of tasks to the division officers and chiefs I gave broader guidance and told them to prepare the task lists and present them to me. Rather than telling everyone what we needed to do, I would ask questions about how they thought we should approach a problem. Rather than being the central hub coordinating maintenance between two divisions, I told the division chiefs to talk to each other directly.
Things did not go well. During the maintenance period we'd made several errors in maintenance that required us to redo work. We got behind schedule. We also had several jobs that didn't start on time because the mid level management had not assembled all the parts, permission, or plant conditions necessary. I overheard people wishing for the old engineer back, who would just "tell them what to do." It would have been much faster just to tell people what to do and I frequently found myself barking out a list of orders just to get the work done. I wasn't happy with myself but no one else seemed to mind much.
It was touch and go but as the maintenance period came toward an end, it seemed like my efforts to empower others was working. There was a budding sense of optimism; we'd make it on time.
In a moment, I realized we wouldn't.
I dropped down the ladder into Engine Room Lower Level. I stopped and stared in disbelief at the end of a large sea-water cooler. It was subjected to full submergence pressure. Even a small leak would cause seawater to spray into the ship with tremendous force. Failure would be catastrophic. The nuts holding the bolts for the end bell were improperly installed. They weren't sufficiently grabbing the threads on the bolt. They were close but I was sure they didn't meet the technical specification. Someone had taken a short cut.
My heart sank. The ship was already underway and we were going to be doing a deep dive soon. I needed to cancel that immediately. Not only would we need to reassemble this cooler, we would need to inspect all the other coolers to make sure the mistake hadn't been repeated. We would need to figure out how it happened. I called the officer of the deck and told him we'd need to postpone the deep dive and started the long walk forward to tell the captain. Walking past the 16 tubes in the missile compartment, I felt quite alone. The reputation of the ship and my department would suffer. My efforts at empowering my team had failed. As expected he had a fit. It didn't help. This should never have happened.

After this, things got worse. I wanted to give my team more authority and control but my heart wasn't in it anymore. I reverted to what I'd been taught. I personally briefed every event. I made all decisions myself. I set up systems where reports came to me all day and all night. I never slept well because messengers were waking me so I could make decisions. I was exhausted and miserable and the

men in the department weren't happy either. I prevented any more major problems but everything hinged on me. Numerous times I found errors. Far from being proud of catching these mistakes, I lamented my indispensability and worried what would happen when I was tired, asleep, or wrong.

I assessed my chance of screening for Executive Officer as low. None of the other department heads screened. None of the department heads on the opposite crew screened either. Neither Executive Officer screened for captain. The Will Rogers was a cemetery for careers. Finally, on my third evaluation I received word I had been selected. Somehow I managed to make it out.

Over the next couple years I was assigned to the On-Site Inspection Agency to conduct treaty inspections in the former Soviet Union. I had time to contemplate what happened on Will Rogers. I vowed never to go through the pain of that again. I started reading everything I could about leadership, management, psychology, communication, motivation, and human behavior. I thought deeply about what motivated me and how I wanted to be treated.

I remembered the joy of running my own watch team on Sunfish. I was motivated not to avoid the pain, frustration, and emptiness of my three years on Will Rogers – being directed and directing others.

At the end of my study, I remained troubled by three contradictions in our leadership approach.

First, though I liked the idea of empowerment, I didn't understand why empowerment was needed. It seemed to me that a 2 year old was empowered. Where did it go? Additionally, it didn't seem likely that a race that was naturally passive could have taken over the planet. Finally, it seemed contradictory to have an empowerment program whereby I would empower my subordinates and my boss would empower me. I felt my power came from within and attempts to empower me felt like cheap manipulation.

Secondly, there was a huge disconnect between how I was told to manage others and the way that I wanted to be managed. I felt I was at my best when given specific goals but broad latitude on how to accomplish them. I didn't respond well to executing a bunch of tasks. In fact, being treated that way just irritated me and caused me to shutdown. That was intellectually wasteful and unfulfilling.

Thirdly, I was disturbed by the coupling between the technical competence of the leader and the performance of the organization. Ships with "good" CO's did well like the sister ship I rode. Ships that didn't have "good" CO's didn't do well. But a good ship could become a bad ship overnight when a new CO came aboard. And there was a further twist, every so often there would be a mishap that caused people to shake their heads – it happened on such a good ship, we'd say. It seems the captain had just made a mistake, and the crew, lemming-like, just followed him. I concluded that competence could not rest just with the leader. It had run through the entire organization.

One of the things that limits our learning is our belief that we already know something. My experience on Will Rogers convinced me that there was something fundamentally wrong with our approach. It was only after Will Rogers that I opened myself up to new ideas about leadership. I began to seriously question the image of sea captain as "Master and Commander."

<u>Questions to consider</u>

What kind of leadership training have you received?

What was the relationship between the leader and others?
When you think of movies images depicting leadership, what comes to mind?
How do these images influence how you think about leadership?
To what extent do these images limit your growth as a leader?
Are you able to question everything?
What assumptions are embedded in those images?