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CHIEF STOWS SEABAG AFTER 40 YEARS

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Source: By Jack Dorsey, Staff writer

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His swagger has that cockiness that a salty master chief with nine hash marks on his left sleeve is supposed to have.

When he barks orders, it's the way a tattooed chief should: in the most threatening tone ever to come from a human voice. But he also winks, or forms the tiniest smile in the corner of his mouth, letting his men know when he approves.

As he eyes the 370 sailors in his crew, Command Master Chief Petty Officer **Bobby L. Scott** looks for clues about their confidence, readiness, and their attitude about his Navy. And no one would dispute that Scott has a claim to calling it his Navy.

With 40 years of naval service under his feet - nearly 30 of them aboard the steel, sometimes wooden decks of eight ships - Scott is the Navy's last 40-year sailor.

And today, aboard the guided missile cruiser Thomas S. Gates, **Bobby Scott**, after reaching the highest rank an enlisted person can attain, will pack his seabag for the last time. Scott's retirement will end an era in the active service that may never be repeated.

"I have had a good time, but I know it's time to leave," he says. "There's really no room for me anymore."

Scott, 58, has more time on active duty than any one of the more than half a million personnel in the Navy today. But the days when good sailors could stay afloat seemingly forever, giving their country 40 or more years of service, are likely to go the way of the teak-decked battleship. With the military getting smaller, no one in the enlisted ranks will be allowed to stay longer than 30 years.

Scott was 18 when he enlisted in 1952 after graduating from

high school in Union City, Tenn. The Korean War was on, and it was only a matter of time before the draft snatched him.

“Besides, I would have done anything to get out of Tennessee,” he recalls.

The Navy grabbed Scott by both shoulders, gave him ship after ship, three meals a day, a canvas bunk in a 10-high stack, and a lifetime of adventure that included Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. It sent him to nearly every port in the world, including the once-closed city of Sevastopol in the former Soviet Union, and on at least 15 overseas deployments, some of which lasted a year.

Those early days aboard ship consisted of hot stuffy quarters, where air conditioning didn't exist, where a trough with sea water flowing through served as a toilet. Mealtime meant chili served at breakfast, lunch and dinner - three different ways. But Scott loved the assignments, as long as they were at sea.

“I never had a bad ship. I didn't particularly care for some when I got on, but once I got off it was all right,” said Scott, who is a father and grandfather today. “I always just had a ball. I was a young kid, pulling liberty and getting three square meals a day. I didn't have any problems or worries.”

From his first ship, the amphibious communications ship Eldorado where he spent 5 1/2 years, to his last, the Gates, where he has served for four, Scott learned to love the sea for all its fury and beauty.

There was only one time when he thought he probably wouldn't make it back. He was a petty officer first class assigned to the 165-foot wood hull mine sweeper Prime in the 1960s, cruising the South China Sea with 65 other men for 12 1/2 months.

“We hit a typhoon and lost one engine and 96 boards from that boat. I wasn't sure we would ever see land again. We were going backwards farther than we were going forwards, with water pouring through the decks, into the vents and on the bunks. It was terrible.”

In 1973, Scott was back home in the States for just 17 days when his feet tired of the land. He volunteered for his first tour in Vietnam with the Riverine Forces, serving as a boat captain on a mine sweeper. A year later he came ashore for 18 months, then volunteered to return to Vietnam for a second tour.

“I didn't care much about shore duty,” he said.

A four-year tour aboard the destroyer Yosemite was next, followed by three years at the Naval Academy as an enlisted instructor; three years aboard the ammunition ship Santa Barbara; four years as Force Master Chief for the Atlantic Fleet Surface Force; then 5 1/2 years aboard the granddaddy of all his ships, the battleship Iowa, where he would serve as command master chief.

Scott left before the Iowa's tragic gun turret explosion that killed 47 sailors in April 1989. "I had been off Iowa about seven months when it exploded. I lost a lot of friends, a lot of guys."

As a chief petty officer for more than 25 years, Scott has been a tutor and mentor to thousands of young bluejackets - as well as officers - who sought a life at sea.

"If an officer is going to be a success, he needs to listen to his CPO until he finds out what he is doing," he said. "That is part of being a chief petty officer: training young officers."

"Sometimes it required an abrupt manner, and sometimes you need to pat a kid on the back. I probably used that first one more than the others."

If there is any secret to his success, Scott says, it's that he never forgot where his career began - beneath the deck plates.

"I don't think a man can ever forget where he came from. As long as he can remember to put himself in that seaman's place, where he was at one time, I think a guy can do all right. I've never forgotten I was a seaman, or a third class."

Petty Officer 3rd Class Kevin Grough, who served with Scott on the cruiser Gates, appreciates such a philosophy. Grough had been planning for a year to be married on Aug. 18, 1990. But a week before his wedding the Gates crew was told to be prepared to sail for the Middle East on Aug. 15.

Scott, after listening to the sailor's plight, arranged to leave Grough behind so he could make the wedding. Grough was married on schedule and joined his ship at sea Aug. 20.

"The master chief of the ship is supposed to be the oldest-looking and ugliest guy on board," Grough said. "But (Scott) doesn't fit that description. I have nothing but fond memories and respect for Master Chief Scott. They broke the mold with him."

Scott would say the same about today's sailors.

``I've never seen a lot of bad sailors. There are some. But most can be helped and saved. I've enjoyed working with professional, dedicated individuals, and through the years it has gotten better. There is a dignity in the enlisted ranks today that wasn't there when I was a young apprentice."

Scott credits a former chief of naval operations, Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, for his farsightedness in making dramatic changes that allowed sailors more freedom. The changes, made in the 1970s, allow sailors to wear civilian clothes off the ship, have somewhat longer hair and a few more comforts.

``A lot of people said he ruined it, but I think Admiral Zumwalt was a turning point. He was the first guy who started us thinking about our people."

If there is anything Scott could change about his career, it would be to have spent his entire 40-year career at sea.

But for a while at least, he'll have to be content rowing his small fishing boat around the man-made lake near his Greenbrier home.

His wife, Katie, however, has an idea that might keep his sea-going dreams alive.

``I thought about building him a room with a gimbaled chair and putting a captain's wheel and port hole in it, then let the water run all over it," she says with a wry smile, like the one Scott might give one of his men. ``That way I could lock him in the room, and he'd think he was in a ship somewhere."

Description of illustration(s):

Color photo by PAUL BATES

Command Master Chief Petty Officer Bobby L. Scott regrets only that he could not spend more of his career at sea.

Photo

Bobby L. Scott

``I never had a bad ship."

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