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Advanced Composition

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### **Mr. Roten: The Oil King and Boiler Technician Extraordinaire**

Mr. William “Bill” F. Roten, born June 28th, 1959, in Elkton, Maryland, joined the United States Navy two years out of high school. He described his life before enlisting as “going absolutely nowhere in the hills of North Carolina. I was working dead-end jobs trying to get the next case of beer for the weekend.” After seeing the positive impact the United States Marine Corps had on his stepbrother, Mr. Roten knew he had to gain some upward traction in his life. After first trying to gain a spot from the United States Air Force to no avail, Mr. Roten would begin an eight-year relationship with the United States Navy after only a few drags of the pen and an oath to the United States Constitution.



After performing well in basic training, A School, and C School—required Naval training schools all enlisted and officer personnel must take to gain “qualification” in their rate to begin joining the Fleet—Mr. Roten was an E-3, placed on the USS Mullinnix DD944. He described it as a relentless experience because being thrust into the world of a boiler technician was far different than the training received in his previous naval schools. There’s only so much textbooks and the explanation of scenarios can do to prepare you for the event itself. There was no preparation for wearing cold rags for four hour shifts in a 155

degree room or the way a destroyer rolls as the waves churn underneath and around, and the importance of the work became immediately apparent to Mr. Roten.



He described his first lesson in leadership: The chief Mr. Roten was under demanded that he enter a filthy tank and clean it, purging it of ocean water. He immediately declined and was quickly met with a pipe wrench across the head. Mr. Roten said, “When I pulled myself up off the deck, he asked me to do it again, and I responded, ‘Yes Sir.’” Mr. Roten describes this as a key and initial moment in his leadership development, even as an E-3. He stated he had a style described by his chiefs as “quiet, but forceful.” Mr. Roten described the boiler technicians as the “unsung heroes” of the United States naval vessels, as their job was crucially important to the

vessel's functioning. It is also a difficult job, demanding a “mechanical mind,” as Mr. Roten put it: “A person in that job needs to understand oil, fluids, and how a boiler works. They need to be able to take it apart and put it back together, not in the literal sense, though. Those things are expensive.”

Mr. Roten shared with me his ability to work within a crew of unfamiliar individuals. He stated that he never prioritized rank and that “the work we were doing was important and I expected good work. It was too expensive to mess it up! I was proud of the work I did, and I expected the guys with me to feel the same.” He described his experiences on the USS William V. Pratt DDG44, a destroyer he was only underway on for an eight month period. Mr. Roten

stated, “When I got there, it [the crew] was a bunch of thugs. I wanted to turn that around, and by the eight month mark when we returned, we had totally flipped the way our guys acted.” He described the disparity between the naval culture today and naval culture then. He stated that he missed the idea of “taking someone behind the boiler and giving them a stern talking to,”

something that the United States Navy does not officially support. This was critically important in the evaluations given by the United

States Navy, something crucial for an

individual seeking to gain a higher

rank. Mr. Roten stated that he never

directly criticized the individual in the

evaluation, but subtly indicated that

they had underperformed. Mr. Roten

displayed some of his own

evaluations and read them, stating

that on his final underway, he

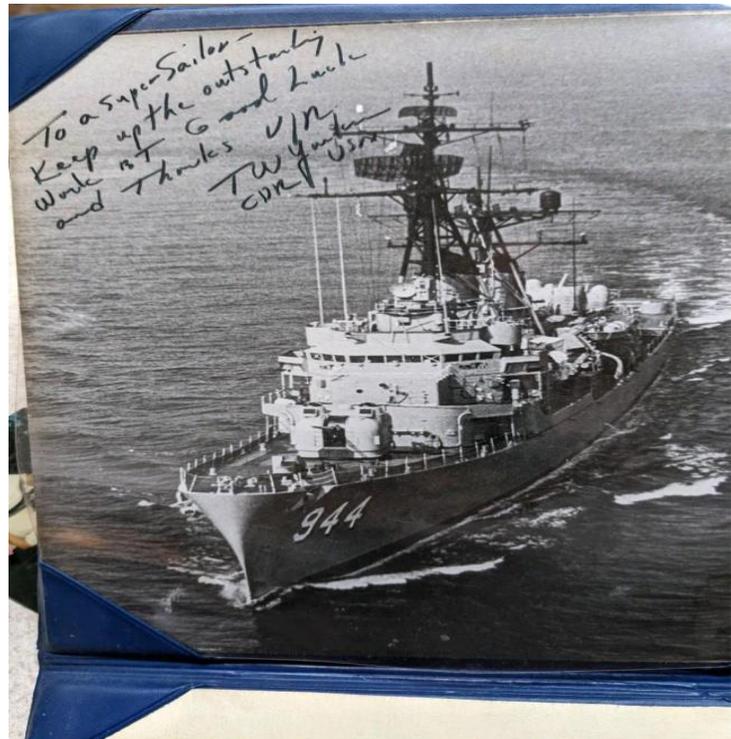
received nothing less than a “4,” the

highest possible score. He also expressed great pleasure in having received citations and a

personal letter from the Captain of the USS William V. Pratt DDG44, praising him for his

performance as an “Oil King,” the individual in charge of all the operations of the boiler room.

Mr. Roten truly takes pride in his work and enjoyed it, working for a shipyard only a weekend after his honorable discharge from the United States Navy. “I left the Navy on a Friday and started work on a Monday at a shipyard. I told the guy “I can TAC weld. It ain’t pretty, but I



can do it. can do it.” The man responded, “We’ll give you a try.” Mr. Roten explained, “In two years, I was the head welder. It was just about working hard.”

Mr. Roten described some of his more personable memories of the boiler technician life. He maintains contact with his fellow sailors with the reunions for the various ships he was on. He described their lives together and how close they were as a result of the conditions imparted onto the rate of a boiler technician. He told me, “The thing a lot of people didn’t know and that I didn’t know for a while was that it takes about 3 days to cool a boiler and 3 days to warm it up. One time, we were stationed in Italy for a week. Well, me and the other boiler technicians only had a day to go party. By the end of the day, one guy had ran over the hill (A term to describe having gone AWOL) and three of us had ran into trouble with the police. We earned quite the reputation. We didn’t party often, but oh man, we partied hard.”

Mr. Roten then smiled and laughed jovially, with the fondness apparent for his time with those men. He described their honesty, loyalty, and commitment to one another. “Sometimes, when getting paid, you would get paid in just cash. Boiler technician guys were the only guys I could trust. When I got my own quarters, I could leave a wad of cash on my bed, and it wouldn’t have moved. That’s how much I trusted them.” This is in stark contrast to the living conditions on the aircraft carrier, the USS Saratoga CV60, a place he described as, “having a 23-hour-a-day chow line, but the kind of place guys slept with pipe wrenches under their pillow.” Mr. Roten also expressed the lack of downtime as a boiler technician, as the work demanded constant attention. In the rare moments he had to himself, he would write a letter to the woman he describes as a “Belle I met in Charleston who never let me leave” or to his family, sending

money back to them. He stated it was enough that, “My dad could buy a car. I was awfully proud of that.”

Mr. Roten’s love and appreciation of the United States Navy and the impact on his life has not faded one moment since his departure in 1988. He stated that, if called right now to perform once again as a boiler technician, “assuming Lorrie wouldn’t kill me, I’d put on my old crackerjacks and get back in there without skipping a beat.” Mr. Roten described how proud he is of his son for having obtained the rank of E-8, something



that serves as a fodder for bragging rights between the two of them. Mr. Roten finished his story with the statement he would not change his time in the United States Navy and firmly believes it was one of the most influential factors within his life, giving him access to education, meeting the love of his life, and blessing him with a foundation for success.

