**History Episode 5: Super Chiefs**

**INFORMATION:** Super Chiefs

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References:

Websites:

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\*\*\*Explain references, links in description and that much was pulled directly from the book…\*\*\*

**I. Introduction**

A. Attention (There’s nothing super about ‘super chiefs’. It was just a logical progression in the modernization of our military rank structure.).

B. Motivation (‘Super Chief’ is simply a euphemism for Senior and Master Chief Petty Officers, who serve in unique rolls Navy wide since their establishment in 1958.)

C. Overview (It seems timely, with results looming, to tackle this topic as not only an exploration of our heritage, but also as an analysis of their relevance and use in today’s Navy. So to begin, I’ll cover the establishment and history of the ‘super chief’, and will then progress into an analysis of how and why they are utilized the way they are, and attempt to posit a way forward from here).

**II. Body**

A. Main Point 1 (Background)

1. Sub-point (Navy Chiefs) – Established April 1st, 1893, Navy Chiefs became the pinnacle of enlisted leadership for the better part of the next century.

2. Sub-point (The Post WWII Quandry) – The issue that arose following World War II was the scaling down of the enlisted ranks. The service had a glut of Chiefs and nothing for them to do. This led to a watering down of their authority and responsibility but also a disillusionment with the organization and their role in it. In his 1948 Proceedings Magazine article titled “The Post War Chief Petty Officer: A Closer Look”, Machinist Mate’s Chief Richard McKenna distilled it down to two main problems, though I will focus on the second as the primary:

“These may be defined as (1) the subjection to an apparently endless series of transfers, and (2) the difficulty of obtaining a duty assignment commensurate with training and ability”.

3. Sub-point (Need for Super Chiefs) – This top heavy overmanning is one reason that could be cited for the perceived need for more enlisted paygrades, but also simply an evolution of our understanding of enlisted leadership (as other branches already had these senior enlisted NCO positions in their ranks).

B. Main Point (Establishment and Usage) –

1. Sub-point (Creation) – The pay grades of E-8 and E-9, Senior Chief and Master Chief, were created effective June 1, 1958, under a 1958 Amendment to the Career Compensation Act of 1949. Eligibility for promotion to E-8, the Senior Chief level, was restricted to Chiefs (Permanent Appointment) with a minimum of four years in grade and a total of ten years of service. For elevation from E- 7 to Master Chief, E-9, a minimum of six years service as a Chief Petty Officer with a total of 13 years service was required. The E-5 through E-9 levels included all ratings except Teleman and Printer which at the time were being phased out of the naval rating structure. People holding those ratings were absorbed or converted to Yeoman or Radioman from Teleman and primarily to Lithographer from Printer. Service-wide examinations for outstanding Chiefs were held on August 5, 1958, with the first promotions becoming effective on November 16, 1958. A few months later, a second group of Chiefs from the February 1959 examinations were elevated to E-8 and E-9 effective on May 16, 1959. The names of the first two groups of selectees are listed in Bureau of Naval Personnel Notices 1430 of October 17, 1958, and May 20, 1959. It is noted that after the May 1959 elevations, promotions to E-9 were through Senior Chief only.

On July 1, 1965, compression of several ratings at the two top grades was enforced. Six new rating titles were created: Master Chief Steam Propulsionman, Master Chief Aircraft Maintenanceman, Master Chief Avionics Technician, Master Chief Precision Instrumentman, Master Chief Constructionman, and Master Chief Equipmentman.

Conversely, about four years later, on February 15, 1969, some expansion at the Senior and Master Chief grades eliminated Master Chief Steam Propulsionman. Expanded rates included Master and Senior Chief Torpedoman's Mate, Quartermaster, and Storekeeper. Seven ratings were reestablished at the E-8 and E-9 grades, presenting the opportunity for Chiefs to again advance within their specialty to E-9. The seven affected ratings were Signalman, Mineman, Aircrew Survival Equipmentman, Aviation Storekeeper, Aviation Maintenance Administrationman, and Boiler Technician.

2. Sub-point (Role of Super Chiefs) – The 2nd edition of the Chief Petty Officer’s Guide explains the aftermath of the establishment, which for a time was largely symbolic. Not until the mid-1978 did MCPON Tom Crow convince the Chief of Naval Operations to define the actual roles of Senior and Master Chief Petty Officers.

CPOs would be expected to be the top technical authorities within a rating, while SCPOs would be the senior technical supervisors within a rating and occupational field, and MCPOs would provide administrative and managerial leadership on broader Navy, fleet, and force policies and processes. This basic construct remains in place today, but most of the SCPO and MCPO billets are advisory in nature, often “assisting” or “providing advice.” Rather than look for where increased technical authorities could be assigned, the Navy expanded “advisory positions.” No formal definition in any known policy document.

With two new paygrades, however, there came opportunity. The Williams Board, convened in 1959 to study the programs and the new rates, recommended the limited duty officer (LDO) program be expanded because of a junior officer shortage and the warrant officer program  be phased out. Instead, senior and master chief petty officers would take on some of the warrant officer duties. The issue again was analyzed in October 1963 by the Settle Board, which found that the expected functional overlapping of the duties of warrant officers and the new senior enlisted grades had not been demonstrated. The phase-out of warrants had created a void not effectively filled by LDOs and master chiefs—a void incompatible with the Navy’s needs for more, not fewer, officer technical specialists. Accordingly, the warrant officer program was revitalized with a corresponding reduction in the LDO program.

3. Sub-point (An Idea Before It’s Time) – For a time, chiefs were filling division officer roles in a pilot program on board USS DECATUR (DDG 73), and while the chiefs did well in the roles, the program was shuttered when a new regime relieved the CNO/MCPON roles.

MCPON Scott referred to this as “recognition that our senior enlisted personnel are truly capable of taking on additional responsibilities. In many instances, they have been underutilized for a good period of time.” Because it was now clear that CPOs could run divisions, the best-qualified SCPOs and MCPOs could be commissioned as lieutenants (O-3s) and lieutenant commanders (O-4s) as required to fill roles as ships’ department heads.

C. Main Point (Evolution) –

1. Sub-point (How are they assigned now?) –

Senior Enlisted Marketplace:

This NAVADMIN announces the Navy\*s new Senior Enlisted Marketplace

(SEM) for Active Component (AC) Sailor advancement to master chief. This is

the first phase in a process that will ultimately include all chief petty

officers and is a fundamental change in how the Navy advances senior enlisted

leaders. In this first phase, all eligible E-8s, with the exception of those

listed in paragraph 2, will be screened (not selected) by an E-9 board.

Those who successfully screen will not be automatically advanced, but will be

given the opportunity to apply for an E-9 position. To advance to E-9,

successfully screened E-8s must be matched to an E-9 position via MyNavy

Assignment (MNA), obligate to serve the prescribed tour length, complete any

in-route training, and actually report to the E-9 billet. In line with

reference (a), candidates must have their commanding officer\*s recommendation

to advance and must meet normal time in rate requirements.

1. Sub-point (What should their role be?) – The actual role of a Chief Petty

Officer is hard to quantify. One of the most frustrating things about BEING a Chief for over a decade was all of the unwritten rules, cultural expectations, and to be honest – bullshit, involved. And this is separate, though a logical progression from, a mission statement (who we are and what we do) organizationally – which I also think is largely lacking. So, without a foundational statement for what a Chief does, how does one arrive at a definition of the roles of Senior and Master Chiefs? Great question. I have no fucking clue.

BUT, in the marvelous traditions of our naval service, I will attempt to use my anecdotal experience, hearsay, tribal knowledge, and unofficial correspondence to cobble together a pseudo analysis and call it good.

I’ve been consistently frustrated by the listless nature of enlisted assignments for my entire career, largely, all the way to the end when I watched a Chief with zero relevant platform experience get assigned to be the ISIC for a squadron. It made no sense, likely did harm to the support of those ships and crews, and happened when there was a logical place to put him where his expertise and experience was extremely relevant. But we’re throwing darts in the dark. I am encouraged by what seems to be an attempt to remedy some of the blindly grouping through detailing processes, such as the Senior Enlisted Marketplace, Advance 2 Position, etc. But the cynic in me assumes their doing that to satisfy bean counters or make a spreadsheet green, not actually make us a more efficient and lethal organization.

I think, properly utilized, the senior enlisted roles could do a lot more good Navy-wide. Admitting that we are NOT, in fact, the backbone of the Navy nor the pinnacle of technical expertise at the Senior and Master Chief levels would be a great start (arguably applicable to CPOs as well). A high level of technical expertise combined with a similar level of experience and the network that is the Mess could create a technical manager, planner, and advisor that I believe we were trying to accomplish with Warrant Officers (modernly). I think Senior and Master Chiefs can and should fill a scope of responsibility more in the realm of a CWO or Div-O than an LCPO. These roles don’t need to replace those, or even take much from them outside of erroneous responsibilities. There are roles to be pulled from those, and added to a Department LCPO role that would make us far more competent organizationally and make much better use of the Chiefs put in those roles. At the Master Chief level, we should be looking at them replacing certain CWO designators and Div-O roles (but not all), as well as accepting that certain roles require that level of attention. They should be intimately involved in all rate and community specific policy creation and revision, guiding not just how we do business but how we train, for both initial accession/and follow on training. There should be no role for an old retired guy like me as a SME to be hired by a government contractor to develop training for active duty Sailors in my source rating, but there is, and I signed an offer letter for that job after retiring (it fell through due to contracting issues). That should be an active duty Master Chief, they’re literally a stake holder AND the best person for the job.

**III. Conclusion**

A. Summary (We talked about…)

1. What a “Super Chief” is, the history, and why they were created

2. What they do now, why, and what they should be doing (in my analysis)

B. Re-motivation (Senior and Master Chiefs have inherent value and a wide breadth and deep depth of potential value the I feel is untapped. We should do far better in how we utilize them).

C. Closing – The analysis may be a bit cart before horse, in that the potential value may not be reachable given the current status of leadership development and education. But I think there is still plenty of unrecognized and/or untapped potential value, though room for growth, that I hope is made accessible through mechanisms like the Senior Enlisted Marketplace and other programs aimed on realigning where they are and what they’re doing.

\* Talk about how I can be simultaneously proud to be one and super critical of the organization.

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