

The Simple Brilliance of
JOHN SCHUHMACHER

WWII in the Pacific was approaching its stormy conclusion. It was April 1945 off of Okinawa. Three Japanese kamikazes dove out of low cloud cover attacking the American destroyer, USS Hazelwood (DD531). The ship maneuvered to avoid two of the planes, but the third came in low and from astern. This plane was hit by Hazelwood's anti-aircraft fire, careened past the superstructure and hit #2 stack on the port side, smashed into the bridge and exploded. Flaming gasoline spilled over the decks and bulkheads as the mast toppled and the forward guns were put out of action. It was a devastating suicide attack. In the aftermath, it was determined that the ship had no bridge, no #1 and #2 5" mounts, no #1 stack, no torpedo tubes and many human casualties. Ten officers and 67 enlisted men were killed, including the Commanding Officer, and 36 were missing. Having lost almost all of her officers and most of her men, the Hazelwood needed help. As luck would have it, Hazelwood's sister ship, the destroyer USS Trathen (DD530) was nearby. From the Trathen, they selected their best helmsman and navigator to transfer to the Hazelwood. They selected John Schuhmacher ("Chief Shoe"), Trathen's 20-year veteran and Pearl Harbor survivor, Chief Quarter Master, BOSN, Assistant Navigator and CIC officer, to navigate the badly damaged ship and crew to the island of Ulithi, then Pearl Harbor and finally back to the States for repairs. Under normal conditions, navigating a ship at sea in those days before computers and satellite position locators was a laborious and painstaking process. But with the Hazelwood, the bridge didn't exist and most of the officers were missing. Chief Shoe was forced to navigate from a temporary command on the forward stack by magnetic compass and emergency "after steering". And all of this in enemy waters. He successfully brought this crippled ship back to the United States for permanent repairs. He adapted to his situation.

Adaptation in our business can best be explained by understanding "The Principle of Requisite Variety". The textbook definition of this principle is that, in any "closed-loop" system—electronics or human communications—the element with the most variables always controls the outcome. What this means in layman's terms is that you need to be "noted for your flexibility". When obstacles are thrown in your way, you need to evaluate the new situation and change your behavior accordingly. Unfortunately, it is a fact of life that when a human being learns a task and new circumstances present themselves so that alternative measures are indicated, the human being will take the path of least resistance and revert back to the task they have learned, even if it doesn't work, as opposed to learning a new task to handle the new situation. The superstars, however, have learned to adapt, have learned to be flexible and change with the new circumstances. Three thousand years ago the Asian philosopher, Sun Tzu, put it this way, "Those who are victorious plan effectively and change decisively. They are like a great river that maintains its course but adjusts its flow. They have form but are formless. They are skilled in both planning and adapting and need not fear the result of a thousand battles: for they win in advance defeating those that have already lost."

Years after the Hazelwood disaster, I spoke to Chief Shoe (then a Warrant Officer) about those days in WWII and how he adapted. He was a wealth of information. He taught me the value of being flexible. He taught me lots of things. Oh, I almost forgot to mention how I knew him. You see, I called Chief Shoe, Grandpa.

*“The Simple Brilliance of” is one in a series of articles focusing on ideas and techniques from some of the great thinkers, movers and shakers in the field of recruitment and human development who Bob Marshall has had the privilege of meeting and discussing various topics over the past 25 years.

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