



U.S. Coast Guard Academy Institute for Leadership

BROADENING HORIZONS: LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP AND SEAMANSHIP

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So there I was aboard the mighty yacht *Shearwater*, a 44' Luder sailing vessel attached to the United States Coast Guard Academy, wondering if everything I learned in Nautical Science, Rules of the Road classes, Swab Summer sailing, and 3/c summer would culminate in my ability, as Watch Captain, to safely sail the Superintendent of the Academy, RADM Scott Burhoe, to Mystic, CT. Considering I have minimal experience in practical sailing other than a semester with the offshore sailing team Fourth Class year, this task seemed quite daunting. I was still pretty shaky on my navigation and sailing skills, and yet here I was leading a team of five cadets in the safe operation of a vessel with the Superintendent aboard. *Shearwater* slipped away from the pier and glided smoothly onto the brackish water of the Thames River and set sail. As we passed under the Gold Star Bridge and began to set sail, the tension I felt melted away. I could do this. After all, I am a cadet at one of the nation's finest maritime institutions and had learned the basics of sailing in classes. Now I needed to apply them. Leading *Shearwater*, as part of the Academy's Coastal Sailing Training Program (CSTP), turned out to be pivotal in my ability to internalize and practically apply the lessons in maritime navigation and safety I learned over the last two years.

Shearwater made it to Mystic, CT, with its crew and company safe and sound, including RADM Burhoe. We debriefed the day's trip and I reflected on the day's events. It was the first day of my CSTP experience. CSTP takes place over two weeks of Second Class summer, during which five or six cadets and a safety officer navigate a Luder 44' sailing vessel to various ports in Southern New England. The challenges faced by cadets over these two weeks are a great contrast to the environment of Chase Hall. CSTP requires Second Class cadets to fill various positions on board the 44' sailing vessel such as Deckhand, Helmsman, Navigator, Cook, and Watch Captain. Every cadet fills every position at least once, if not multiple times, depending on the length of the cruise. Since the positions rotate daily it was important for all crewmembers to be briefed and ready to fulfill all positions if necessary. To be successful in such an unfamiliar environment, I had to bring to the table everything I had learned thus far as a cadet. As my peers, 2/c Ryan Newmeyer, 2/c Brian Michka, 2/c Roy Cromer, 2/c Ryan McCue and the safety officer, LT Jamie Smith, gave me advice on how to improve as Watch Captain, I internalized it and knew that the next two weeks were going to be full of learning, fun, and long days of sailing.

Watch Captain is the most difficult position on board the Luder because it requires the cadet to function as an Officer of the Deck would on a cutter. He or she is in charge of the overall safety and navigation of the yacht with minimal advice and oversight from the Safety Officer. The watch captain must be aware of all that is going on aboard the vessel, make decisions regarding the safe navigation of the vessel, give helm and engine commands, and simultaneously retain situational awareness. This was no easy feat as my classmates and I learned. Over the next four days, I got to watch my classmates struggle with different challenges while they were Watch Captains. We spent time talking about everything that happened and internalizing the lessons we learned from them. By the time my second day as Watch

Captain rolled around, I had developed a leadership style that I was comfortable with and my performance was leagues ahead of where it was when I started.

One of the most important leadership lessons I learned was that to make decisions you must maintain your perspective and situational awareness. One of the most harrowing experiences my classmates and I encountered was on an outbound evolution from Newport, RI. The winds were upwards of 25 knots all morning and we delayed setting sail due to the bad weather. The seas were only three to four feet but in a Luder sailing vessel that can make for quite the choppy ride. As we were traveling outbound in the channel we became so engaged in attempting to get the sails correctly set without fouling lines and ensuring the correct trim that my classmates and I failed to acknowledge the importance of the large car carrier overtaking us from astern. Luckily LT Smith, as a seasoned Deck Watch Officer, alerted us that a potentially unsafe situation was developing and assumed command of *Shearwater*. We powered up our engines and motored out of the way of the oncoming vessel. This was a critical learning experience for everyone on board *Shearwater* and was thoroughly discussed in our evening debrief.

Our development as leaders progressed during our two weeks on Luder. Along with enjoying numerous barbecues during our port calls, we had a lobster dinner on Cuttyhunk Island, sponsored by the Institute for Leadership during which we discussed different leadership styles and philosophies — including the Institute's *Architecture for Leadership* — with the safety officers. We learned that much of finding one's leadership style is trial and error and that everyone has a different method.

As my classmates and I worked together we learned how to function as a team. We plotted fixes, practically applied the Rules of the Road, learned to communicate, and get the job done all the while taking pleasure in the sailing opportunity we were afforded. I will never forget my last day onboard *Shearwater*. We decided to set the spinnaker. It was one of the most exhilarating and beautiful things to witness when the wind caught the spinnaker and we felt that surge of speed.

As I sit here reminiscing about my summer days spent on *Shearwater*, I realize that overcoming the challenges placed before me during CSTP required me to apply everything I had learned over the last two years as a means to develop myself as a mariner and a leader. It was my first real chance to lead people in complex evolutions. It was also my first real chance to apply my navigation skills with direct consequences and to develop my seaman's eye. While I will not say that it was my first chance to think of the what type of leader I want to be — after all the Coast Guard Academy's professional development centers on leadership — I will say that it challenged me to step outside my comfort zone and broaden my horizons as a leader. I was exposed to new experiences, new places, and new challenges every day. The Coastal Sailing Training Program was a worthwhile experience and was a valuable step in my transition from a follower to a leader over 2/c summer. I know that this experience will help me with my future cadet career and with my first position as a Junior Officer in the Coast Guard.