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KEELHAULED BY COMMAND: HOW THE NAVY SANK MY CAREER FOR STAYING SILENT





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Keelhauled by Command: How the Navy Sank My Career for Staying Silent

Twenty-seven years in the United States Navy taught me many lessons. Yet, among them, one stood apart—unexpected, bitter, and instructive. I learned that, in the eyes of senior leadership, exercising my right to remain silent could be construed as an admission of guilt.

I served as a legal officer and security manager. I believed in the military justice system, in due process, in the principles that distinguish disciplined forces from mere instruments of power. I was mistaken.

When courts and Boards of Inquiry rule in favor of an accused, one might assume justice prevails. But in our system, convening authorities—often admirals—retain the power to dismiss their findings. In my case, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jay Richardson, recommended to the Secretary of the Navy that my promotion be withdrawn, despite a Board clearing me of any wrongdoing.

On December 15, 2011, five days after my commissioning, I underwent surgery for a hernia sustained aboard the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76). Months later, while fireman-carrying a 245-pound Guamanian Chief during command physical training, I aggravated the injury. In severe pain, I sought medical care and was prescribed Percocet. The pain eventually subsided, and I thought no more of it—until the morning of June 16, 2013.

I woke up to a stabbing pain. I reached for relief and found the prescription bottle in my medicine cabinet, with four pills remaining. I took one. The next morning, I reported for an unscheduled urinalysis. Predictably, I tested positive.



Called before the acting Executive Officer, I was told, “Angel, we’re going to get you help.” I was baffled. “Help? What kind of help? A lawyer? Someone from the drug lab to correct this oversight? I had surgery, and I was in pain.”

His reply was chilling: “No, help for your addiction to painkillers. It’s widespread—even Rush Limbaugh battled it. But your career is over.”

I stood there, stunned. “You think I have a drug problem because I took one pill—for its prescribed purpose?” It defied reason.

The machine was set in motion. My duties were stripped. My security clearance was suspended. My automatic promotion to Chief Warrant Officer Three was withheld. I was ordered to appear before a Board of Inquiry (BOI) to determine whether my use was wrongful.

At Marine Corps Base Miramar, my attorney gave me simple advice: “Shut up. You have the right to remain silent. If you want to stay in the Navy, exercise it.” I followed that counsel. I had no idea silence would be my undoing. I had faith in the system. I believed due process protected service members from injustice. I was naïve.

Offered Non-Judicial Punishment (NJP), I declined and requested a court-martial. [None was convened.](#) Instead, Vice Admiral Robert Burke—[now facing bribery charges](#)—ordered me to stand before a BOI.

Fourteen months later, the BOI convened. Three officers deliberated. Their verdict: unanimous. I was cleared. My former Commanding Officer, in a letter of support, wrote:

“When I was Angel’s CO and received word that he tested positive, I could not believe it. He was one of my most trusted advisors. I never saw him incapacitated, and his judgment was always steady.”

The new CO, upon learning I had been cleared, recommended my immediate reinstatement to CWO3. His superior overruled him, awaiting a decision from the Chief of Naval Personnel—Vice Admiral Burke. Burke recommended against my promotion. The Chief of Naval Operations endorsed the decision. The Secretary of the Navy agreed.



Thus, despite exoneration, I was penalized. No crime had been committed, but punishment was delivered all the same.

I was devastated. How could the Navy, which I had served with honor for 24 years, brand me a drug addict? How could they say they no longer trusted me? In his letter, the CNO stated:

"Even though you have the support of your chain of command, I do not have confidence in you or your judgment."

He further noted that I had sufficient time to retire.

It was the darkest period of my career. But hardship forces introspection. Rather than surrender to bitterness, I resolved to rebuild. I focused on three things: preparing for life beyond the military, clearing my name, and embracing a life of service after service.

I would not let them win.

Determined to grow, I applied to one of the nation's top business schools. A wise scholar once told me, *"If you feel helpless, help others."* So, I tutored immigrants in English, preparing them for their citizenship exams. I found purpose. I led. I volunteered for veterans' organizations.

There are things beyond one's control. But one always retains the power to choose how to respond.

Am I still bitter after two [denied requests for correction to Naval Records](#)? Perhaps. But the sting lessens when I consider all the good that has come from adversity. I endured injustice. And because of that, I stand ready to help those who now face it.

For that, I am grateful.



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- ▶ Find your Representative here: <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>
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Feel free to reach out privately at francescagraham@walkthetalkfoundation.org or in the comments.

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