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NAS Kingsville Command Master Chief closes out highly successful Navy career

By Fifi Kieschnick, NAS Kingsville Public Affairs

Leaders almost never need to exercise power. They lead in ways that creates a vision and motivates people. That description defines now-retired Master Chief Petty Officer Charlie Ratliff. For the past three years, Ratliff had served as the Command Master Chief for NAS Kingsville, the senior enlisted leader for the air station. He was known throughout the base as leader, first and foremost, a mentor to junior Sailors, and an example of what Navy Chief Petty Officers should strive to become.

Ratliff retired from active duty on April 20 at a ceremony held at the NAS Kingsville Captain's Club. Nearly 300 people attended the ceremony – a tribute to Ratliff's popularity and professionalism.

Ratliff spent the past 30 years of his life in the Navy. A native of Fort Worth, he enlisted in the Navy shortly after graduation from high school, choosing the Hospital Corpsman rating. He contemplated going to college – but chose the Navy in hopes of seeing the world. Over the next 30 years he would accomplish both goals – advancing up the ladder in the Hospital Corpsman field to the top, and take advantage of the Navy's off-duty education program to earn both a bachelor's and master's degree.



Ratliff spent 20 years as a corpsman, five of which were spent as a master chief serving as the senior enlisted advisor at two Naval Hospitals prior to entering the Navy's Command Master Chief program. He entered the program because he wanted a new challenge -- and an opportunity to return to sea "as the senior enlisted person on a Navy warship."

Ratliff admits he realized his achievements – including becoming an independent duty corpsman, achieving the rank of master chief, and getting his degrees -- because of sound advice he had received while a junior enlisted corpsman. One piece of advice was from his leading chief petty officer with the 3rd Medical Battalion in Okinawa, Japan, Chief Hospital Corpsman Gary Nicholson, when Ratliff was a second class petty officer. "He challenged his Sailors and he challenged me to outpace my peers, so to speak,"

Ratliff said.

Another piece of advice that Ratliff credits with his success was from his officer-in-charge while on a deployment to Korea. "Lt. Gary Waters convinced me to become an independent duty corpsman because he had been one before he became a Limited Duty Officer (LDO)," Ratliff said. "It was good advice and turned out to be the best move of my career."

Throughout his 30 years U.S. Navy service Ratliff admits he tried to choose assignments that "made him uncomfortable," that challenged him, in billets that most people wouldn't want to be assigned to. And, he's quick to recommend that approach to Sailors looking for a rewarding career.

Ratliff adds he believes the characteristics of a good command master chief are being approachable, trustworthy and, number one, committed to the success of his Sailors. Chief Petty Officers and Sailors who worked for him agree that those characteristics also describe Ratliff.



Senior Chief Kirk Hurst, leading chief of the Ground Electronics Division at NAS Kingsville, says that if you were to ask any Sailor aboard NAS Kingsville to describe the CMC the consistent answer would be "respected" or words to that effect.

"We all know everyone respects the command master chief," Hurst says, "but Master Chief Ratliff had the kind of respect throughout the command that does not come from simply putting on two stars and the cookie (the Command Master Chief badge). The Sailors at NAS Kingsville knew that he was consistent, fair and that he truly cared about their success."

Hurst added that Ratliff would also be quick to put his Sailor's concerns ahead of his own.

"I know of many occasions he has put aside important issues and dealt with last-minute administrative issues that were critical to a Sailor's career," Hurst said. "On countless occasions he has immediately cleared his schedule just to listen to a Sailor's personal concerns."



Hurst admits that he has also seen Ratliff in action when a Sailor has failed to meet the standard. "Now one might think these are common actions for a command master chief," Hurst stated, "but there is a critical variable – and it's the 'care factor.' It gets discussed on the deckplates, around in scuttlebutt and on the smoke decks. And Master Chief Ratliff has a reputation in these areas -- he is known as a common-sense approachable Sailor with high standards that just happens to also be the command master chief. That kind of respect is hard to come by and is only earned by firm, fair, consistent leadership and an honest concern for Sailors."

Chief Minerva Verley, command career counselor, echoes what Hurst had to say, adding, "Master Chief Ratliff let us run our programs. Yet, we knew we could always approach him when something came up. He was easy to talk to and really did care about the Sailors and their success."

Ratliff adds that the job of a command master chief entails representing the crew to the commanding officer on all issues, as well as affecting the morale and welfare of Sailors and their performance, growth and development.

Senior Chief Lee Thomason is one Sailor who has been shaped so much by Ratliff that he has made a career of following in Ratliff's footsteps. "I can still remember the first time we met," Thomason said. "I had just returned from deployment, and Master Chief Ratliff was walking down the passageway near his office and I heard him say, 'Hey Thomason, come here for a minute.'"

Thomason said that was how most of his conversations with Ratliff began, but they usually lasted much longer than a minute.



"He challenged me every time our paths crossed," Thomason recalled. "He was always asking me what I was studying, or what classes I had completed. If my answers weren't what they needed to be, he would quickly provide me with course-correcting advice and direction. He is in a league of his own when it comes to inspiring Sailors to reach their maximum potential. Not only is he approachable, he makes it his business to seek out ways to talk with Sailors and help them in any way that he can."

Ratliff's wife of 26 years, Pam, agrees that he has always cared about his Sailors.

"He challenges them to be the best that they can be because that's the outlook he has always had," Pam said. "So many Sailors have come up to me over the years and told me what a great person Charlie is, how he has helped them, spent time with them, and inspired them to be the best Sailors they can be.

"I remember one day a Sailor told me that her master chief (Charlie) had made her cry. I said 'oh no,' and asked what happened. She said that he had told her he was disappointed in her, and she said that was something she never wanted to hear. And she vowed to make sure he never had to say that to her again.

"That shows the respect his Sailors had for him," Pam said.



Ratliff met Pam when he was a corpsman assigned to Branch Health Clinic Kingsville in the mid 1980s and she worked as a secretary of the Officers' Club. "We met at a Christmas party," Pam said. "Since then we have been on a big adventure with the Navy!"

She adds that they have always tried to instill in their daughters the same values that Charlie passed on to his Sailors -- "about being approachable, and that we are here for them. About being trustworthy, and that if they make a mistake it's okay, and as long as they were honest with us we would will help and support them.



"We also stressed education and being committed to success; we've always been involved in their education. We feel that a good education will help them succeed and we have encouraged them to study hard and attend college," Pam said.

Master Chief says, "The best part of my job is seeing Sailors succeed. You know they have it in them and then you see them achieve it."

Leaders determine the effectiveness of the organization. The character and skills that leaders bring determine the way problems are solved and tasks are accomplished and

CMDCM Ratliff brings what it takes to develop Sailors into leaders, challenging them to fulfill their potential.

As he retires, Ratliff says what he'll miss the most is talking to the crew, like his tour aboard USS John Paul Jones (DDG-32) as command master chief when he would sit in his office and talk to crew members who were waiting in the chow line while the ship was underway, or asking Sailors about their future plans for success, or tasking Sailors to reach for higher goals.

That's the guidance he has given to the Navy for the past 30 years. As he retires from active duty, thousands of Sailors will remember his concern for them and how he has inspired them to reach their maximum potential.



*Left, NAS Kingsville
Command Master
Chief Charlie Ratliff
salutes the sideboys
as he goes ashore ...
right, the Ratliff
family goes ashore
at the conclusion of
the ceremony*



Above, Capt Mark McLaughlin presents Master Chief Ratliff a Meritorious Service Medal for his performance as Command Master Chief for the past three years. Above right, Chief Minnie Verley presents Master Chief Ratliff with a shotgun on behalf the Chief Petty Officers Mess.



Above, Sailors pass the flag during the 'Old Glory' ceremony. Above right, more than 200 people attended the ceremony including family members seated in the front row. Below, Chief Petty Officers render a salute during the reading of the CPO Retirement Creed.





Master Chief Ratliff renders a salute to the Skipper and requests "Permission to go ashore."



Active duty and retired Chief Petty Officers pose for a group photo with Master Chief Ratliff following his retirement ceremony in the Captain's Club ballroom.