

**ENG 180: First Place**

## Reflections from the Navy

by Brandon Oleson

Over time, I have had many different experiences with writing. These experiences occurred mostly in my academic career. During my time at school, I learned the basics of writing and how to write in different styles. I learned how to write informative and persuasive essays. I even learned how to write creatively through poems and stories. One would think that the experience that most impacted my writing would come from school. Instead, the thing that most impacted me as a writer came from an experience I had while serving in the Navy.

After high school, I joined the United States Navy and served for four years. I had a lot of good memories and a lot of bad memories during my time in the Navy. When it came time for me to get out of the Navy, I was mostly focused on the bad memories, so I couldn't wait to be done. Everyone in my department knew that I was sick of being in the Navy and was ready to go back home. I wasn't shy about voicing this to everyone that I was working with at the time. One person who took notice of this was the chief of my department. He was technically my bosses' boss.

About a week before I was supposed to leave my ship, the chief called me into his office. He told me that he was giving me one last assignment before I left. I figured that it had something to do with painting the anchor or splicing some line, but it had to do with something completely different. He asked me, "Are you happy that you are getting out of the Navy?" To which I replied, "Yes, of course." He then asked, "When you look back on your Navy experience, is it a positive one or a negative one?" I hesitated for a second. I didn't want to give

him an honest answer because I was afraid it was going to get me in trouble. I finally replied, "To be honest, chief, it's been a negative one."

He didn't look angry or even disappointed. He simply replied, "I figured that was the case. I want you to write down all of your positive experiences and negative experiences that you've had in the Navy with as much detail as possible. Then, write down all of the people who were involved in those experiences and the impact that they had on you. I think that this might help you truly reflect on your time in the Navy."

I told him that I would do it and would let him know how it went. It seemed like a pretty useless exercise to me at the time, but I decided to give it a shot. We didn't have much work going on that day, so I grabbed a notepad and pen and started writing. I started with the first major negative experience that I had while in the Navy.

My first duty station was located in Monterey, California at the Defense Language Institute. It was a prestigious military school where military members learned different languages in extremely accelerated courses. I went through a grueling nine-month course there to learn Russian. It was the most difficult experience that I had had up to that point in my life. After completing the course, I had to be tested on my reading, speaking, and listening abilities in Russian. I passed everything but the listening portion. This meant that I couldn't continue on and I couldn't pursue the job that I wanted in the Navy. I felt like a total failure. I just wanted to leave the Navy and go home. To make matters worse, I was told that I couldn't choose another job because I had been at my current school for too long. My next job was undesignated, which I viewed as the worst job you could have in the Navy. I made sure to write this down as a negative in my notepad.

I then started to think about the people that I had met at the Defense Language Institute and the impact they had on me. My teachers were all from Russia and had taught me quite a bit about the world. They shared experiences from their country that completely changed my views of Russia. They also made me realize that just because they came from somewhere else, it didn't mean that they were that much different. I also thought about my fellow classmates at school. They came from all around the country from all walks of life. It really helped me gain more perspective on other people's views and culture. By writing this down, I started to realize that the negative experience of failing at school was worth it because of the people I got to meet.

The next major experience in my Naval career was going out to the fleet as an undesignated sailor on an aircraft carrier. When I had first arrived, I was extremely bitter due to my previous experience of failing school. The job I was given made it even worse. All day I chipped paint, handled line, and painted again. It was all manual labor and I did not like it one bit. I then had to go on a deployment for nine months. The whole thing seemed like Groundhog Day because all we did was work, eat, and stand watch with little to no sleep. I decided to write this down as a negative in my notepad as well.

Again, I thought about the people that I served alongside while on my ship. I had the honor of serving next to people from all walks of life and all different kinds of places. They had experiences that they shared with me that opened my eyes to things that I never could have imagined. They ended up being some of my best friends, and more than that it became almost a type of family. I even ended up meeting my future wife while on that ship. We were able to visit different countries together while on deployment. Even though I thought that my time on that ship was terrible and negative, and my time at school was a terrible experience, by writing down

the effects that my fellow sailors had on me, I realized that overall it was a positive experience. If I hadn't failed out of school and been stationed on that ship that I hated so much, I would have never met my wife. I didn't realize it until I wrote it down and that fact alone made it all worth it.

I went back to my chief with my notepad ready to share with him what I had written down. Before I could say anything, he stopped me. He said, "I don't want to know about the experiences you wrote down. I just want to ask you the same question again. Has your Navy experience been a positive one or a negative one?" He had caught me off guard. I waited for a second, smiled, and then replied, "Chief, it's been a positive one."

By writing down all of my experiences, I was able to reflect back and realize that an entire part of my life that I thought was negative was actually a huge positive. The reflection that I was given from writing out my experiences completely changed my outlook. Now, instead of looking back on my time in the Navy with anger and hatred, I look back with pride and accomplishment. This writing experience impacted me the most as a writer because it taught me that writing is a great tool for reflection. It encouraged me to try out other forms of writing, like poetry, that have also helped me to reflect on my experiences. Because of this, I now keep a journal filled with poems and small pieces of writing that I use for reflection on experiences that occur in my life.