

I received this message from a guest writer last week and wanted to bring the points brought up in the discussion to a larger audience. Food for thought and thought to inform our actions.....

What is the NOAA Corps?

Have you ever answered the question “What’s the NOAA Corps?” What did you say? Have you ever really thought about the answer? Have you thought about the impact of your reply? A while ago I heard an answer to that question that was so embarrassing, as much as for the content as for the audience and their reaction, that I felt compelled to vent my frustrations on paper.

I know we’ve all made jokes about our organization – NOAA Corps and NOAA. Using our favorite sayings among peers is a common way to relieve frustration from the various annoyances we can’t control, yet are forced to deal with on a regular basis. We’ve all heard them, from the clever; what does NOAA stand for? No Organization At All, National Organization for the Advancement of Acronyms. To the pernicious, such as the quote from a NOAA Corps officer printed in “Stars and Stripes” not-so-long ago where the NOAA Corps was described as “military light” and the “military for geeks.”

I have an answer. The answer is tweaked depending on the audience, but generally uses the words “elite,” “first Federal scientific agency,” “environmental intelligence,” “operational,” “natural security,” and “commissioned officers.” “The Seventh Service” is not in my answer. First of all, chronologically it’s incorrect. Secondly, it implies a value ranking. Who wants to be seventh? I’d much rather be first. My answer sounds something like this: “the NOAA Commissioned Corps is an elite group of commissioned officers with unique capabilities in aviation, maritime, and scientific operational specialties, highly qualified to provide environmental intelligence to the Nation’s premier ocean and atmospheric science agency to advance our Nation’s natural security. Feel free to use it as your own, if you’re so inclined.

Having served quite some time in the NOAA Corps, I know that we don’t boast about our accomplishments. Sometimes we don’t even claim credit. We rarely get to see the value of what we do for NOAA and our stakeholders until we are “forced” to get our first HQ assignment. Even then, depending on where your HQ assignment takes you, we frequently don’t get the necessary perspective or exposure to truly appreciate the value of the NOAA Corps or NOAA, to the Nation. I wish I could bottle and distribute the sense of pride I get on a regular basis from seeing my Corps and NOAA from the perspective of the Coast Guard and other external partners and stakeholders. We are trusted and highly valued partners. What we do is significant and important. We don’t boast, but in the eyes of our partners and stakeholders, we certainly have the record of accomplishment and credentials to do so.

It’s OK to be humble and confident about what we do, no one likes a braggart. It’s acceptable to vent frustrations with your closest peers. It’s unacceptable to disparage our service down the chain or outside of our service through feeble attempts at humor. When we make damaging remarks, even in jest, about our service to others who don’t know who we are and have an honest curiosity, I assert it is dishonorable conduct. Using your favorite quip in response to “What is the NOAA Corps?” results in negative perceptions and is toxic. The self-inflicted verbal wounds have to stop. If we don’t see our value and don’t take ourselves a little more seriously, who will?

When we make such slights we are withering the proud legacy of those who have come before us. Such comments do not **honor** their service and accomplishments, **respect** our commissions, or demonstrate **commitment** to our service, other services, or the Nation. When we answer the question with one-liners like “the Navy’s basketball league,” we’re planting pernicious seeds of doubt which can grow in to the bad “why” question - “Why is there a NOAA Corps?” In the past we struggled to answer this question when the stakes were really high.

I'm annoyed and I want to solve this problem, but I don't see a quick and easy fix. The recent integration of our BOTC with Coast Guard OCS is a great start, but how do we shift the rest of our organizational culture? How do we end the self-inflicted verbal wounds? How do we develop a culture of pride in our service, our history, and our future? How do we reverse an apparent feeling of inferiority to other services? Where does it come from? Is it caused by a lack of recent service in a combat zone? Is it because we feel the sacrifices we make are less worthy than those made by members of other services? Could it be a relic of the hiring freeze in the late 1990's? How do we inspire confidence in those who ask the "what" question? How do we plant seeds of fervent support in these inquiring minds that will bear the fruit of positive recognition for our Corps? If we can change our culture of self-deprecation, then maybe we can convey and excite others about who we are as a service, what we do, and why we do it, and maybe we can better inspire those who we're responsible for leading. I believe that before you can answer these questions, we each need to first answer a fundamental question: Why am I a NOAA Corps Officer?

Before attempting to give your answer, I recommend you make a 30-minute investment. There's a TED talk ([www.ted.org](http://www.ted.org)) by Simon Sinek entitled "How Great Leaders Inspire Action." Take 20 minutes and watch the video. Then take 10 minutes, do some introspection and soul searching, and answer "why?" Some people call this type of exercise "reflection," others may call it "touchy-feely" or worse. I call it something simple – purpose. What's your purpose? Why do you show up to work? Why did you decide to pursue a commission in the NOAA Corps? At some point you made a conscious choice to voluntarily accept a commission. It probably wasn't the pay, and it shouldn't be the rank. These are things that are results of our hard work, not the things in which you would find meaning. At the root of the answer should be something much stronger and simpler – what is it that you believe in? My answer is easy. I like to catch seafood, I like to eat seafood, and I like to surf and drive boats. I believe healthy oceans and coasts are critical to providing the things I like to do. The work I do for NOAA contributes to preserving the health of the oceans and coasts. This is why I voluntarily spend time away from family and friends, why I endure beatings from foul weather, and put up with seemingly endless and frequently asinine bureaucratic requirements in order to collect the Nation's oceanographic data while accepting responsibility for the safety of lives and ships at sea. My contributions help protect the oceans so my kids can go clamming and crabbing, or catch an unpolluted wave on the coast long after I'm gone.

In conclusion, I assert that the NOAA Corps doesn't exist by dumb luck. It's not because we're small and can fly under the RADAR in our massive Federal government. We exist because we fill a National requirement for environmental data. We exist because we have answered the call of duty and have delivered critical services to NOAA and our Nation in times of need. We don't need to apologize for our existence and we certainly shouldn't make disparaging remarks, even as an attempt at humor. We can be our best advocates or our own worst enemies. We need to accept the challenge to improve our organizational self-image. We need to create a sea-change in our culture to recognize and take pride in who we are and what we do. Recognize the things we do for NOAA are important. Find your purpose and align yourself with the mission, or move on.

Find your answer to why you're in the NOAA Corps. I suspect you'll find a lot to be proud of, but be careful; you may feel the need to pen a minor tirade when someone refers to your service as the Navy's basketball league. I know your next Ensign will.