

Sea Story

Getting Schooled by a Three-Year-Old at the Hat Parade

When I was a lieutenant, I was stationed on a ship in Norfolk, Virginia. I was responsible for the networks and communications services the staff used to conduct operations. My daughter was about three and a half years old at the time and was enrolled in the Child Development Center, a day care facility about five miles away from the ship. I would drop her off in the morning and pick her up at night. She spent a lot of time there, because my normal days on the ship were about ten hours long when there was nothing operationally significant going on; if there was, the days were longer. One time, when I went to pick her up early, she said, “Mommy, what are you doing here? It is not dark yet.” Ouch.

I had a lot of mom guilt and felt like I could never get the balance right. I used to try to go to events at the day care when I could break free, like having lunch in her classroom. One day, they were having a hat parade in the morning. The kids each made a goofy-looking hat, usually out of newspapers or papier-mâché, only loosely held together, as most of the glue was eaten instead of applied to the hat. The kids loved it though and took pride in their hats, which they thought looked like some priceless piece of art but more often resembled a dog’s breakfast. The level of creativity, intentional or not, on the hats was unmatched even at major art colleges. They resembled everything from a hot dog to something Queen Elizabeth would wear on coronation day without batting an eye. Then there was the one kid with the unintentional Salvador Dali or Picasso hat—the face with the errant eyeball and out-of-proportion nose that looked like it just got run over by a UPS truck. They would wear the hat on

their head and march proudly around the parking lot as a group of impressed parents watched, enthusiastically cheering them on and snapping photos. Normally, the entire event lasted like ten minutes—which, in a three-and-a-half-year-old’s mind, made it an all-day event.

So, this one beautiful fall day, my daughter announced on the way into work that it was hat parade day, and she was jazzed. She had the hat of all hats to present at school, clearly a masterpiece, which I had not yet seen. I told her I would be there.

I knew it was going to be a busy day at work, as we had a military exercise starting the following day. The ship was going to be getting underway early the next morning for two weeks, and we were going to have about three hundred extra people joining the staff and all trying to get onto the network accounts to prepare for the exercise. The tricky part about those extra people was that they were not going to be Navy folks accustomed to living and working on the ship. They were going to be people from the other services like the Army and the Air Force. So, there were going to be additional challenges to the normal “help me, my tongue is stuck in the keyboard” type problems the network officer routinely faces. We were going to have a lot of “What’s a port? What’s a starboard? How do I find my stateroom? Where are the lifeboats? What are all the bells and whistles about? How do I find the ship’s list? Whose pants am I wearing?” Anyway, you get the picture. Although I knew we were going to be very busy, I thought I would be able to get out for a few minutes to attend the hat parade without drama.

I dropped her off with a cheery “See you in a few hours,” and went to the ship, where I quickly found network chaos reigned—lots of outages and frustrated operators who could not get access to their information on the network and new users who couldn’t get their initial

access turned on. I kept an eye on the clock, knowing I had to leave about 9:45 a.m. to get to the hat parade on time.

As the clock ticked closer, I got more stressed out. I finally left the ship about 9:55 a.m. and got over to the day care about five minutes after 10:00. The parking lot was empty. I thought maybe they had not started yet and I was still good to go, but no. The kids were on the playground now, wearing their hats and doing that crazy kid run where kids, for no apparent reason, run full throttle in one direction then shift to another direction aimlessly but still at full speed like they are on some special mission.

All except one: my daughter. I saw her across the playground, and she saw me. Have you ever seen pictures taken from satellites where you can actually make out the Grand Canyon or the Great Wall of China from space? That was what my daughter's mouth looked like. At that moment, her face contorted, and her mouth became this big gaping hole. She started to cry and ran over to the fence. My heart sank. I had missed the hat parade.

When she got up near me, she laced her fingers through the fence, reaching out to me on the other side, and said, "Mommy, you promised you would be here, and you weren't."

Epic parent fail. While missing the hat parade may seem like a small thing, it wasn't at that moment to my daughter. She had believed in me and trusted that I would do what I said I would. As I touched her little fingers through the fence, my heart broke. In that instant, I made a decision that I was not going to be "that parent," the one who put work and service above all else, including my daughter and family.

That is not to say that we would not sacrifice over the years or that we would not have challenging times. As a military family, you are faced with separation during deployments,

moving every few years, long hours at work, and always being on call. But by the same token, because it is service and not just a job, we develop a selfless mentality to always do what is asked of us regardless of the price to our loved ones.

I decided in that moment, though, that I was going to get my life in balance and would not prioritize everything else over my daughter.



Fast-forward six months later and almost the same scenario was in play. An exercise was starting the next day, and the ship would be getting underway for six weeks with a couple hundred additional personnel streaming aboard. Communications and network chaos again ruled the day, which stressed out my immediate supervisor, since he was not a communications or network engineer; he was a ship driver who relied on me and the other officers to get the communications right. For those of us who had several years of experience under our belt in this field, we all understood that being a communications officer means never having to say you're welcome, but for my boss, it was new territory, and he was getting heat from his own boss to make sure everyone was up on the networks and preparing for the exercise.

It was my daughter's birthday, and I had cupcakes with melting frosting in the car ready to be presented as a Michelin meal loaded with sugar to a bunch of already hyper three- and four-year-olds at the Child Development Center.

I went to my boss and said, "Sir, I need to leave for an hour to take some cupcakes to my daughter's birthday party at the Child Development Center."

He said, "You can't leave now! It's crazy here with all these people and the problems we are having, and we need to be ready for this exercise."

I told him, "Sir, you are right. It is crazy and hectic now, and it's going to be crazy in an hour and the rest of the day. I am going to be here all night, and we get underway tomorrow. We will get these problems fixed. I just need one hour to do this."

He replied, "OK, but you better be back here in one hour."

So off I scrambled to the center with my lamely decorated cupcakes, which were a hit, as is anything with an overabundance of sugar and neon food coloring with the three- and four-year-old center mafia. But most important, my daughter's face lit up when she saw me, and her faith was restored in my word. She knew how important it was for me to keep that covenant with her. I was back on the ship in an hour, and all was still chaos, so plenty of job security to go around.

At that moment, I made a choice to do something that was not focused entirely on work. It could have left some to question my loyalty or commitment to the concerns of the organization or the mission. But what it did was make me more grateful that they understood how important that one hour was to my family, and it actually made me want to work harder for the organization. The commitment was mutual and reciprocated.

You need to be savvy enough to know when to play that card. For example, I would never go to the commanding officer of the ship and say, “Gee, I would love to get underway with the ship when we leave port tomorrow, but it’s hat parade day at the Child Development Center, so I think I’ll take a rain check on that deployment.” I also would have explained to my daughter that I wouldn’t be there for that hat parade and why if I knew I couldn’t make it. And I would make sure I was at the next one when we returned back to port.

What were the professional repercussions of prioritizing my family? Do you think when my selection board for the next higher rank came up that anyone at that board said, “Lieutenant Barrett? Holy cow! I remember she missed one hour of communications checks prior to an exercise back in 1998. There is no way she can be promoted!” Of course, that didn’t happen. But would my daughter have remembered that I missed her birthday? Absolutely.

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“You’re Naked!”

When my daughter was about fifteen years old, she had three of her friends sleeping over for the night. Now, I loved a good sleepover, because it normally consisted of the girls lounging around doing their thing on their cell phones—texting each other from the same sofa, posting every waking moment to Instagram or Twitter, taking 450 pictures of their big toes after adding face filters and setting that to music, and so on—but most of all, lots of giggling and raucous noise. It made the house come alive in a way that you have to stop and appreciate.

Well, this particular night, things had slowed down, and the girls had exhausted all their activities, like making some inedible science project in the kitchen. This is inevitably filled with tons of sugar and butter, and they surely eat most of it before it gets anywhere near the oven. No matter how bad it turns out, the remains are reserved for my husband because, of course, “Dad eats anything.” Because they were looking for something to do, I suggested, “Hey, let’s watch some home movies from when you were a baby. Those are always fun.”

A teenager staple, the eye roll, from my daughter. But her friends egged her on, and before long, everyone was all in, especially when I recommended that critically acclaimed favorite, the naked baby video. What teenager doesn’t want to show naked baby videos of themselves to their friends, am I right? So, good sport that my daughter is, she was up for a little teenage humiliation and agreed. In went the video, and we were off to the races.

The video starts off with us on one of those ginormous ships, taking a cruise through the Panama Canal. My daughter was eighteen months old at the time and cute as a button. We were in our cabin on the ship getting ready to go to the pool. As all kids love to do, she was running around, buck naked, as we tried to catch her to put her bathing suit on. There is something about kids and not wearing a stitch of clothes; something brings out the exhibitionist streaker in all of them. Thankfully, most of us grow out of this. There is this sense of freedom seldom replicated in adulthood when jiggling and dangly bits get in the way of that unabashed freedom of movement.

So, there she was, running all over as I videotaped her, yelling “naked baby!” to which she responded with joyous peals of laughter as she would run by us and we would fake trying to catch her, only to have her “escape” at the last second for more laps around the room. The

girls were watching the video and laughing at how silly and cute she was when my daughter turned to me in complete horror and said, “Mom, you’re *naked!*”

I looked at her, not understanding what she meant, and said, “No, honey, *you’re* naked. You know, ‘Naked baby! Naked baby.’”

My daughter, face beet red, replied, “Mom, look in the mirror.”

Sure enough, off to the side of my wild daughter was a mirror. Clearly visible in the reflection is me, completely naked, only my face hidden from view by the video camera. It goes on for an excruciating amount of time. I cannot believe we did not notice that before. The girls started laughing even more now. But that was not the worst part.

The worst is when I think about how many copies of our vacation video we happily gave to relatives and friends—probably upward of ten copies. I can only imagine their reactions. “Does she know what she sent us?” before they too, I’m sure, burst into laughter. No one ever said a word to us about it, but this does explain a great many mysteries that have been unanswered since that fateful day, like why my mother-in-law has given me underwear and nightgowns like clockwork for Christmas for the last fifteen years. She would have probably sent a weed whacker too if postage from South America hadn’t been too high.



Important safety tips for future reference: Refrain from holding recording devices while naked. Mirrors are not your friends; they are evil, so know where they are at all times. (This is a helpful tip for murders and other crimes you may be considering as well.) Never give your kid more ammunition for blackmail. They are also inherently evil and will use it to their advantage.