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A Few Words of Wisdom for Public Works, Circa 1955

by Nate Nickel

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I wrote a brief white paper for APWA-IN last December that focused on the importance of stressing leadership lessons in public works, with a short story from the attack at Pearl Harbor during World War II as its inspiration. In preparing that article, I accumulated a small folder that was full of copies from book excerpts, magazine articles and news stories. It got marked with a pink sticky note labeled ‘Pearl Harbor stuff’ and was my go-to for source materials. That folder has sat on our desk at home for quite some time and now found itself with a nice layer of fine dust on it, plus a good heaping of kids’ toys, dog hair and old grocery store receipts.

While doing some cleaning at home this past weekend, my wife found the folder, looked at me wryly, and said, “Do you really need this anymore?” I took the hint and brought it down to the recycling bin in the garage to dump it out. One piece of paper must have surreptitiously fell onto the floor because I didn’t notice it until the next day.

What I found was a copy of an article in a magazine published by the U.S. Naval Institute in May of 1955. I happened to come across it online and filed it away because it was written by a naval officer that had been stationed at Pearl Harbor during the attack on December 7, 1941. I thought it might be interesting, but never really had a chance to read it. I’m very glad that it didn’t get tossed out.

Titled “*Letter to my Son*”*, the article was written by a veteran naval officer to his son, who was just about to graduate from the Naval Academy in Annapolis and become a newly commissioned ensign. In it he provided his heartfelt and honest advice, experience and a few words of wisdom on what it takes to have a fulfilling and successful career in the navy. In reading it, I couldn’t help but be struck by how so many of his words readily apply to the public works field today in the 21st Century.

So, here are a few thoughts from the article that I found particularly relevant and wanted to share with you:

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- We must never lose sight of the importance of the individual in our profession, regardless of any apparently humble part he plays.
- I have seen officers and men repeatedly spend many consecutive hours of daylight and darkness repairing defective equipment. When the need arises we must make a comparable effort on behalf of a man who has erred. We should be able to detect quickly those erring individuals who will benefit from our guidance, and we must turn to in their behalf with even more zeal than with a piece of defective equipment.
- Your career will rush by at an incredible speed. Each new job will bring with it increased responsibilities that can be discharged best only if full advantage has been taken of the time and experiences that have gone before.
- The difference between superiority and mediocrity in performance is more often the result of the difference between application of the talents we have rather than because of the lack of inherent ability.
- We must resist any tendency to be stifled in personal progress by confining our efforts to routine duties. Advantage should be taken of spare time to expand our knowledge of history, strategy, tactics, and comparable items that touch on our profession.
- Your career will be unusual if it does not include disappointments, frustrations, and discouragement. These may at times appear to be overwhelming, but they must not be allowed to persist. One of the standards by which men are measured is the extent to which they overcome adversity.
- Custom, precedent, and protocol sometimes stand in the way of action that might appear desirable. Should there be a question that the proposed action might violate these, or official regulations, your seniors should be consulted before taking flights into the unknown. A large portion of your proposals may be thereby stopped short of implementation, but don't be too discouraged. After all, it is better to have one's wings clipped rather than atrophied by disuse.
- Cultivate friendships, both service (or in our case, the public works field) and civilian; pursue cultural interests; broaden your horizons constantly.
- I think there is no better way to close this letter than to assure you that much joy and pleasure are inherent in the profession itself. Retain your cheerful nature, your sense of humor, your zest for living. They will stand you in good stead, and you will find ample outlets for them all.

I think a lot of these very same words ring true for the advice that many of us might also pass along to an intern or new employees that are just entering the public works profession. Not a bad shelf life indeed for an article that was written when you could still find a brand new Studebaker

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in an auto dealer's showroom and the Brooklyn Dodgers won the World Series. I guess it looks like I won't be getting rid of that old folder on the desk after all.

* All materials quoted in this article are by an Anonymous U.S. Navy Captain, "A Letter to my Son." *Proceedings*, vol. 81/12/634, May 21, 1955,
<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1955/december/letter-my-son>