

I was in USS ELLIOT (DD-967) in 1979, when I was promoted to Electronics Technician Chief Petty Officer (like a Master Sergeant). So ELLIOT's Chief Petty Officer's Mess was the first one I experienced from the inside.

A navy chief's mess, or "Goat Locker" (to the Unwashed and Uninitiated), is far more than just another shipboard space for eating and sleeping. It's a closed society of brothers, all of whom got there, traditionally, after years of study, hard work, long days, sleepless nights, and regularly having dung poured upon them from a great height.

Most who achieve CPO rank don their new khaki uniforms, swell with pride, and stride into the future with renewed vigor. But there are always a sad few who follow Doctor Peter's principle: they enter the ROAD program, "Retired On Active Duty", and merely swell. For, you see, very good food is available in most afloat navy CPO messes; and when that's coupled with the physical limitations of duty at sea--lending a ready excuse for not exercising--the situation becomes fraught with peril for Fleet CPO waistlines.

Chief's mess chow is composed of the same basic ingredients as that served in the crew's mess, but is augmented by private purchases the chiefs make via the CPO Mess Caterer. The Mess Caterer job is a critical assignment, and one which is made only after a careful deliberation by a quorum of the chiefs. They review all candidates' aptitude, drive, experience. . .and then they pick a guy who didn't show up for that mess meeting.

The chiefs have their own refrigerator and other usual galley equipment. They are also given their own mess cooks, culled from among the best and brightest of the mob assigned those duties in the crew's mess. Mess cooks are junior enlisted men on loan from their parent departments who fetch, carry, serve and clean for ninety-day periods. The Caterer will set a "tip can" out on a table on paydays, and if the CPO mess cooks have striven to please over the previous weeks they can clean up in tips from the chiefs.

That last is a powerful incentive to the youngsters to work hard to keep the chiefs happy, and do nothing to get them returned to the general prison population in the crew's mess. It's a symbiotic relationship: hard-working

mess cooks = happy chiefs = large tips = harder-working  
mess cooks = even happier chiefs = Nirvana.

Our CPO Mess had recently voted to buy a microwave oven. Those were relatively new in 1979, and so, while many had heard of them, most had little or no experience with them. We bought and installed a new Amana Radarange, which was destroyed almost immediately by a chief who tried boiling eggs in it, shell and all, which blew the door off when they exploded. We bought a second Radarange, chained the instruction manual to one of its front mounting legs, and gave notice that the next guy to ruin it would replace it himself.

Caution set in. *The damn things can go off! Best git somebuddy ta read da book ta me...*

The microwave was known to be useful for quickly heating water, say for making a cup of tea or instant-mix cocoa. But prior to my intervention the ELLIOT chiefs were blissfully ignorant of its wider possibilities.

Not all navy chow rates three stars in the Michelin Guide. No matter how ruinous the meal, though, the navy cranks out dynamite desserts; the Bellyrobbers' way of saying "Sorry," perhaps. Cakes, pies, cookies, puddings, brownies, sweet rolls, all are great, and all serve to induce forgetfulness in men who've just suffered through a ménage of standard navy chow such as sliders, bug juice, foreskins-on-toast, beeny-weenies, chili-con-cockroach, and Nairobi Trail Markers.

During an evening meal at sea off San Diego--a meal that featured a glutinous entrée we called "Gray"--the usual "come early, stay late" crowd was lingering around the CPO mess tables. Post-prandial conversation was dominated by our larger, more resolute diners; men for whom discussing food was almost as pleasurable as eating. Guys whose guts had reached third-trimester, so they had to sit sideways to get close enough to the table to eat. And if there was one thing the ELLIOT chiefs loved to do more than eat, it was bitch about the food's quality. So, with up to twenty Chiefs eating and talking at once, the meal's debrief was a free-for-all.

Dessert that day was apple pie and ice cream. It was delicious, as always, but you wouldn't know that from the critique. . .

"WELL: this ain't too bad, I s'pose, but it sure ain't like my Ol' Lady makes it!" said Chief Whale, snorkeling through a second helping.

"Yuh, no shit! It ain't even hot! (burp, belch) Huccome da pie ain't even hot? (braaaaack)," whined Chief Maxipants.

ELLIOT's senior cook, Senior Chief Stewburner, rose to the challenge.

"C'mon! You assholes know the night cook-baker makes these before breakfast. There ain't no time or room in my Galley to put out pies after Reveille. Gimme a fuckin' break!"

Chief Widebody, fork-load of the offending dessert poised at his mouth, piped up from the next table.

"Alls I know is I git this at home, the fuckin' pie's hot 'n the fuckin' ice cream just melts 'n runs into the fuckin' crust, 'n *THAT'S* how ya do fuckin' apple pie 'n ice cream, like my momma done it--not like this sorry shit here!"

"Ah, *fuck* yer momma AND her favorite fuckin' mule!" snarled Stewburner, as he got up, rammed his chair under the table and left.

Mournfully, shaking my head, I said, "I don't believe you guys. What a buncha idiots."

"Da fuck you mean, lightweight?" Whale said around a mouthful of pie.

I said, "You've got a perfectly good microwave sitting over there, and you're all pissin' 'n moanin' about cold pie. Why'd you buy the damn thing, if you're not going to use it? Heat up your pie in it."

Our hyper-excitable Filipino Senior Chief Storekeeper, spraying food particles over a wide area, hair quivering, sputtered, "Da puck you *talk-in'* a-bout, Dill? I already got puh-king ice cream all over da puh-king pie!"

"Give me *strength*," I said, rolling my eyes Heavenward while wiping soggy pie shrapnel off my face. "I do not believe the morons in this mess! That microwave works *fast*, it'll heat the pie just fine 'n won't hurt that cold ice cream at all. Go on, try it."

And I got up and left, as the Storekeep put his two-pound piece of pie topped with four scoops of ice cream in the Radarange and wrenched the timer dial around towards "Tomorrow."

I reentered the mess a few minutes later as the fire alarms were going off.

Smoke was down to waist level. The Storekeeper and several others were staring into the microwave at what was left of his plate of dessert.

The plate itself was in two concentric pieces, burned completely through at the thin, navy-blue-painted ring an

inch from its outer edge; and the apple pie 'n ice cream was reduced to a bubbling, popping, Kilauean magma flow at the center.

The ship's General Announcing System speakers lit off as I snuck back out the door.

"*FIRE, FIRE, FIRE*, Class Alpha fire in the Chiefs' Mess, this is *NOT* a drill, provide from Repair Five!"

"Successful Gags, Rule One: when playing a joke on someone, it always works better if you get an innocent third party's unwitting support." - Dill's Guide to Interpersonal Relationships, Vol. 2, Chap. IV.

The next round of Microwave Madness stemmed from our being told we needed to shape up. The navy had just given its top command in the Pacific to some stinking jogger asshole, and the slim, trim admiral's first official concern was Fleet flab. Apparently, some crews now weighed more than their ships, leading to serious concerns about metacentric height and capsizing.

As you might expect, this news was met with universal loathing and bitterness ("What next, fuh Chrissakes? *WIMMIN* on board? *FAGS*?").

Meals in ELLIOT became gloomy affairs. The CPO mess zeitgeist was threatened. Stern measures were needed.

*I stood ready.*

At lunch the day after the admiral's physical fitness bomb was dropped on us, I was sandwiched between the Chief Bosun's Mate and his body-double, The Whale, and across from the Chief Signalman. Dining amidst the Titans like that was daunting, especially with them being irate about the new physical fitness requirements. I was already in shape, so I kept my own counsel while concentrating on dodging large, agitated arms waving cutlery . . . until an opening appeared.

"Lose weight er else? Now ain't that some kinda shore-duty *shit*! Pass me the cake," growled Boats Buddhabelly, as he narrowly missed stabbing me with his fork.

"Ya done had three big pieces already, Boats," muttered Sigs Hogjowls, yearningly eying the cake pan.

"Yer my Momma now?" spat Buddhabelly. "Gimmee the fuckin' cake. I gotta have sumpin' ta go widdis coffee."

"'Cordin' ta that message, I gotta lose forty-eight pounds," whined The Whale. "That's horseshit! No way I'm gonna risk my health like that! Save me some cake, Boats."

Chief Maxipants chimed in from next door.

"Yuh! (burp) That's right! I ain't doin' it neither! (belch) 'N that countin' calories shit don't work, my Ole Lady's bin doin' it fer years 'n she ain't lost a ounce! (burp, belch)"

My cue!

"Here we go, again. I swim in a sea of losers. Why don't you clowns just put your chow in the microwave for a minute before you eat it? It'll zap the calories right out."

Five seconds' incredulous silence.

Chorus: "YER FULLA SHIT!"

"Look," I said, "I'll try to make this simple for you cretins. Hey there, Chief Snipe! What's a calorie, anyway--a unit of heat, right?"

Suspicious as hell, the engineering chief slowly put his fork down, wiped his mouth, peered squinty-eyed at me, and said, "Yeah . . . yeah, that's right. So?"

I stood up and walked over to the counter where the microwave sat.

Pointing to it, I said, "Look at the front panel, right here. See that? It says 'Radarange'. A microwave oven uses a magnetron tube out of a radar transmitter to heat food at the molecular level. That converts the calories to heat, which escape into the air as steam, and the exhaust fan blows 'em out of the back of the oven. Now do you Bugs Bunny *maroons* get it?"

I was an electronics expert. Said so, right there on my chief suit.

There was an immediate stampede for the microwave. Joy was unconfined.

For the next several weeks there was always a line at the microwave, as every piece of food they stuck in their faces went through the Radarange first. There were serious proposals to buy one or two more, to cut waiting time. I watched them put slices of bread in the microwave before sticking them in the toaster. Every dessert made a pass through the Amana, even ice cream. I watched one guy stick his bowl of breakfast cereal in it, milk, banana and all.

And they didn't just get bigger: a couple of them got *HUGE*.

"Don't unnerstand! I even nuke my *gum*, fuh Chrissake! I'm up two trou sizes! Da fuck's WRONG?"

### *Pièce de Résistance*

One of my favorite shipmates in ELLIOT was Data Systems Chief Quentin Danielson, a man who was never down, who was always quick with a joke or gag. Dan had a ruddy Irish complexion, an eternal smile, a twinkle in his eye, and a love of life. He loved his chow, too: he was about 5' 9" and portly. Hadn't actually seen his crotch or toes in a *while*.

Dan and I were in the same in-port duty section, and had duty one Saturday not long after we'd returned to San Diego from a six-month overseas deployment. With most of the crew on leave the ship was fairly deserted, and routine services were at a minimum. I had the 16-20 Quarterdeck watch, or 4-to-8 P.M., and Dan came up and relieved me for evening chow around 1700.

We had a new CPO mess cook, a real go-getter. He planned to break all records for earning tips in ELLIOT. He'd even talked seriously to me about putting mints on each chief's pillow every night.

The meal that Saturday evening was underwhelming. When I was done, the mess cook asked if I'd like dessert. Dispiritedly, I said, "Whadda ya got."

"Well, we got ice cream, but if ya'd like, I kin make ya a banana split."

"Bullshit. No way."

"Way, Chief Dill, no kiddin', I checked, they got alla stuff to do it inna Galley, just ain't nobody put it all together! I kin make ya a good one! Ya like cherries?"

"Yeah, Riley, I do. Okay, you're on. I want a banana split with cherries."

"You got it, Chief! Be right back!"

Not five minutes later he set a cereal bowl full of lovely banana split down in front of me. It was excellent. And the Devil whispered in my ear.

"Riley, you got enough stuff to make another one of these? A really big one?"

"Uh...yeah, Chief. You wanna 'nother one?"

"Yes, I do. But it's not for me. Get the shit together and bring it in here."

We took a CPO mess deep-dish china platter big enough to hold a Thanksgiving turkey and built a banana split on it. It took two gallons of vanilla ice cream, a dozen bananas, a quart of cherry syrup, a quart of cherries, a one-pound can of mixed nuts, a pint of chocolate syrup, a pint of pineapple syrup, and two full squirt cans of Ready Whip topping. It was magnificent. It weighed more than an M-14.

We had to clear off one shelf and re-adjust the one above that one just to fit it in the fridge.

"Okay, Riley, listen up: I'm going topside and relieve Chief Danielson. He'll come in here for chow. And when he's done, you ask him if he'd like a banana split. Got it?"

"Yeah, sure Chief."

"Now, here's the important part. You ask him if he'd like one, and he *will* say Yes. You get that platter outta the reefer and put it down in front of him. And if he makes any comment about the size--and only if he does--you tell him that I ate one just like it. Okay?"

Grinning ear-to-ear, Riley said, "Oh, yeah! I got it, Chief Dill!"

"You're a good man, Seaman Riley. Carry on."

I went back up and relieved Dan. At 1945 I was relieved, went below, and entered the CPO lounge.

Dan was sprawled across a corner sofa on his back, head and shoulders propped up on cushions, mouth ajar, staring glassy-eyed at the TV. He was still in his dress Blues, but with the belt, fly and coat undone and gaping open. He'd opened his collar, loosened his tie. His belly stretched his dress-white shirt, seriously strain-testing the buttons.

"Hey, Dan. Whatcha watchin'?"

In a faint voice, Dan said, "grrgllspt."

"Huh? What'sa matter, shipmate?"

"spppshhtrlk."

"Speak up man, can't make out what yer sayin'."

"Said. Can't b'lieve ya ate all a wanna them splits. Ya fuckin' cracker ass."

He'd eaten half the damned thing without puking.

An ELLIOT record.