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Feature Article

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### I Love It and I Hate It at the Same Time: Interview of Petty Officer Hudson



Petty Officer Hudson in Uniform (2020)

Jesse “Cody” Hudson has dedicated his life to service, first as a missionary in his adolescence, then as a sailor of the United States Navy, and most recently as an educator at a title-one school in South Carolina. When asked what inspired him to be service-oriented, Cody admitted he had no idea, but that his grandparents had a significant influence on his life: “I was raised by my grandparents. My Grandma told me to be kind to everyone and my grandfather is military...and inherently service-oriented.”

As he aged, Cody felt conflict in his personal life. He felt like he didn’t have direction. He was getting into fights, skipping school, and was overall unhappy. “I

recognized two emotions. The feelings of nothingness and the feelings of anger,”

After a particularly difficult interaction with his mother where he punched a hole in the wall, Cody left for his grandparents house. Once he calmed down, he realized he wasn't happy with the cycle of arguments, boredom, and anger. “The person who left home was a sad, angry 19-year old. No respect for anything or anyone.” Within 24 hours of

the fight, Cody's grandfather, Lieutenant Commander Robert Little, drove Cody to the recruitment office where Cody enlisted in the Navy. Cody views it as an honor that there were almost 100 submarines in service between his Grandfather (SSBN 644) service and his (SSBN 743). Yet, upon reflection of this choice, Cody made the comment about what the military means to people like him. “The military is running away from home for adults... how is mom going to catch you when you're in the middle of the ocean?”

After signing up to a “maybe not lovely but a reward[ing] experience,” as a Navy Nuclear Electrician, it became apparent to Cody that even though he created distance from his old life, his new life may have some issues as well. “It was a



Petty Officer Hudson enlisting into the Navy (2015)

necessary evil for the things I enjoyed,” he stated, “I’m not into the military. I’m into submarines. I’m into nuclear power. I really dislike the military.” h=He reaffirmed this love of science later in the interview by stating, “I think the technology is really cool. There are so many systems that come together and have to function for it to work.”

Cody spoke about the process of becoming a Nuclear Electrician on a submarine: “You sign up because you don’t like school only to be thrown into a year and a half of college work. They like to say that the nuclear community is resilient.” He gave a slight smile, “‘Steel sharpens steel,’ they like to say.”

According to Cody, mental resilience is crucial when becoming a submariner. He



Perry Officer Hudson celebrating Nuclear Field "A" School graduation with his parents and grandparents. (2016)

recalls having a prospective sailor come aboard the boat for an overnight to see what it would be like. After complaining to Cody, who only got 3 hours of sleep, about sleeping for 13 hours it became apparent “that person was not

prepared for a submarine world [because] being a nuclear career has been compared to being as [mentally] challenging as becoming a SEAL.”

“[It’s] impossible to communicate what [the military world] feels like, and it’s frustrating because the people in my personal life need to know,” Cody states, his voice crackling. “You are training the people who will take your spot, while navigating personal and professional respect.” He chuckles, “One could argue [the submariners] are crass... If you have had your life threatened for months on end, do you really care if that person is offended by what you say?”

There was a pause echoing off of the leather-bound books at this point in the interview, “It envelopes you,” he said, “if you are working the way we do, you don’t have a personal life.” Submariners spend four years at sea rotating four months “underway,” coming back for four months just to be sent out to sea again. With no texts, phone calls, and only the occasional screened email, Cody notes a niche form of community takes over on the boat as sailors who are trained for a year and half in nuclear science are put on menial labor, such as dishwashing, for months. This comradery of brotherhood is strengthened with the unspoken understanding between sailors that “If you are joining the enlisted, you are running away from something— most likely.”

Under the water, dealing with unimaginable circumstances with no connection to the outside world, changes a person. Cody notes some sailors were

distracted with power, while others struggled to cope with the overbearingness of their choice. It is an environment that “demands so little of [kindness].” The people who inspired Cody were leaders who showed kindness. The military is “too invasive— no matter who you are and what you do, the Navy is involved. If something happens, like if I were to get into an accident, it wouldn’t say ‘Cody Hudson in an accident.’ It would say ‘Navy Petty Officer in an accident.’”

Cody recalls the first time resurfacing after his first underway. Sailors are told that their families have changed around them and that they should give the people in their lives time to adjust to having them home: “I forgot how to drive my car— it felt so unnatural.” It was hard, but in Cody’s eyes, anything hard is valuable.

Even when they surfaced and went into shore duty or dry dock, the military consumed the lives of Cody and his command, “Can you really go home? Leaving at 8 pm and then showing up at 7 am the next day. Is that going home?” The theme of military cognitive dissonance became apparent throughout Cody’s interview; how many enlisted people go into the military looking for an escape and find their problems have followed them, or even worse, the military exacerbated them. “I looked into my own eyes, and I thought I would look cool and I thought I’d looked awesome— I looked terrible. Having such a significant activity in your life...change[s] you. ” He then quipped, “You look for ways to cope with it but there aren’t good ways to cope with it.”

Yet, even in the chaos and unkindness, Cody mentions a fondness of his service: “I wish I could go back to that boat every day and talk to the guys.” Cody thinks back on how he cherishes the niche experience and how he, much like his grandfather, is starting to romanticize it. He stated, “I saw myself as a sacrifice. If I lose myself in this service, then it would mean more than ending [my life] on my own.” Then with a seriousness etched into the underlings of his eyes he stated, “Pain fades and you start remembering the things you like about it...I will be stuck with the military ideas. Forever. My grandfather is 81, and he still talks about it. I’m already out, and I don’t remember going in!” He exclaimed.

“What does your Grandpa say about you leaving?” I asked.

“He says he is proud of the progress I’ve made in such a short time frame I’ve been in.” He inhaled, rolling his shoulders back, “yet, being sick and leaving the military isn't a concept to him.” After a hefty sigh, he stated, “Military changes people for better or for worse.” Cody's voice lifted with a new breath and lightness, “now, being in the classroom, now I see a



Lieutenant Commander Robert Little (left) and Petty Officer Hudson (right) examine dials on a retired submarine at Patriots Point Museum in Charleston, SC. (2017)

bunch of little mes. If I had a little bit of direction, I don't think I would have made the same choice."

I reached out, tempted to take his hand, not as an interviewer but as a wife, and asked, "Is there anything you wish I'd do or understand?"



Petty Officer Hudson with interviewer Eleanor Mead on their wedding day-2021

He answered immediately, "I wish you were there for all of it. For the things that changed me." He simply responded, "I wasn't the right person— I was lost... I don't know what I was running on. I didn't start to look good until I left. Yet," He gave a quick glance at the camera then added, "It's hard to throw away your goals and realize that a part of you has changed," continued Petty Officer Hudson, shifting his weight in the chair. "That conflict of hatred and joy for the service. You know exactly what it feels

like when you've done it. I don't think 19-year-old me would know me now."

Looking into the eyes of the man I married, I felt a deeper understanding. For so long, Cody had tried to separate work and home, hiding the aspects of his job that were ugly. As we wrapped up I began to think about what a gift I have been given to have a partner so dedicated in helping others and working through demons to better our future life together. I turned to him, noting the tiredness that

had taken over his face, I leaned in and asked a simple question that spoke to years of dedication, compassion, and love: “Can I treat you to lunch?”