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Becoming a Master Chief

Feature by PA2 Thomas McKenzie

At a ceremony on June 1, 2007, attended by friends and co-workers, Senior Chief Petty Officer Martha Utley was officially advanced to Master Chief Petty Officer, becoming the Coast Guard's first female Master Chief Health Services Technician. Having served twenty-three years in a variety of challenging positions, and earning the Sikorsky Life Saving Award along the way, what follows are just some of her experiences and philosophies.



JUNEAU, Alaska – Master Chief Petty Officer Martha Utley becomes the Coast Guard's first master chief health services technician. ISC Ketchikan Commanding Officer Capt. Karl Calvo presided over the ceremony. USCG photo by PA2 Thomas McKenzie.

As with many members of the Coast Guard, Master Chief Petty Officer Martha Utley caught the "enlistment bug" by first seeing our service in action. Growing up, she spent summers on the North Carolina coast watching the small boats go in and out. "I remember thinking it would be a really cool job," said Utley, her mixed accent assembled from equal parts Richmond, Virginia and North Carolina. Some years later, Utley was attending college when a friend of hers wanted to join the Coast Guard reserves. "I was bored with the routine of college, wasn't getting anywhere with it, wasn't challenged by it. So I went to the recruiting station with my friend, inquired about it and thought, 'Why not?' This would be something unique and different, and the humanitarian aspect of the mission really appealed to me. So, that's what I did. It wasn't really a wild hair (idea), because the seed was planted so many years ago."

While Utley feels that she has definitely made a difference on any number of the search and rescue cases she has worked, the thing that has come to mean the most to her is having a positive impact on the junior personnel who have worked for her; she places emphasis on mentorship and leadership. "Being able to watch them grow with competence and confidence, watching their careers successfully progress is a true sign of making a difference."

Having been a medical responder for more than two decades, Utley has responded to numerous medical emergencies, but early in her career Utley was involved in what would prove to be a very note worthy call. “I was doing independent duty tour aboard the CGC Hamilton on my first patrol, and we were in Alaska. We were going to seize a vessel fishing in our (U.S.) waters, but we couldn’t get a Statement of No Objection quick enough. When you’re in the middle of the Bering Sea, on the weekend, waiting for people at home to do what they do, things can take awhile,” Utley said with a smile.

Meanwhile, the captain of the vessel in question had assembled other fishing vessels to the scene, determined not to have his vessel seized. “So, there were 21 fishing trawlers surrounding us at a half mile, literally, in a perfect circle,” said Utley, gesturing with her hands. “And then there was another ring (of surrounding fishing vessels) at a mile and a half, maybe two miles, where they had another 21 vessels! And they said to us, ‘You will not leave here with our fishing boat.’”



JUNEAU, Alaska- HSCM Martha Utley and the ISC Ketchikan Health Clinic staff celebrate celebrate Utley's promotion. USCG photo by PA2 Thomas McKenzie.

The Hamilton went to general quarters. “It got kinda nasty,” said Utley, wide-eyed at the recollection. “There were weapons on line, we were surrounded, the weather was terrible – and this was my first patrol! I couldn’t believe we were involved in an international incident. We were at it for four days. Nobody could get to us because the weather was so bad, and we didn’t have any support or backup. You could hear other aircraft flying above us, but you couldn’t see them and they couldn’t get down to help us. It was pretty intense.”

“I remember we were in GQ for awhile, and the crew had different shifts. Being the independent corpsman (medic) on board, I didn’t have a back up so I manned sick bay the whole time.” Utley had been up for 40 hours when the operations officer came down and relieved her. “If something goes down, we’re gonna need you,” he told me. “Get some rest, that’s an order.” Utley finally relented. “So I went to my room, but I hadn’t been there maybe an hour when someone came flying through the door and yelled, ‘Doc! Doc! The captain’s having a heart attack!’ I jumped up and I ran down to combat, and things were a madhouse. Everyone was shouting. But... I looked over, and there was the skipper. ‘Captain, what’s going on?’ He told me the fishing boat captain was having a heart attack, and he needed me to go over and check him out.” Utley’s expression revealed the surprise she felt at this, even now.



JUNEAU, Alaska – Master Chief Petty Officer Martha Utley addresses an audience after being advanced in rank. Utley is the Coast Guard's first female master chief health services technician. USCG photo by PA2 Thomas McKenzie.

“Captain, are you sure? I’m the only qualified medical person on board and you’re going to send me over there?” Utley laughed, recalling the captain’s sharp, affirmative reply. “He was pretty sure. So, they were going to put me over in a small boat. And I... was... terrified! I got into the RHI (small boat) and the boarding team were very protective of me. They said, ‘Don’t worry, doc.’ Then we launched.”

Meanwhile, two of the fishing vessels had broken from the circle and were making somewhat aggressive moves against the Hamilton. “I don’t know that they were trying to collide with us, specifically, or just making motions toward. But this time, as one of the vessels was trying to move in and put more members on board to assist the crew of the arrested fishing vessel, the other was trying to take them in tow and leave. Suddenly they collided, and our captain gave the order to get us back immediately. And that was just part of my first patrol.”

Utley says she wouldn’t have traded any of her experiences for the world. “Perspective and experiences brought into the clinical setting to help mentor and train the younger generation are part of what I call Senior Chief’s Theory of the Micro and the Macro World. The menial tasks you do in this clinic might seem purposeless or menial, but when you’re in the real world, the operation world, they have a true meaning. When you find yourself in those situations, you suddenly understand.”

When people ask Utley what she’s going to do when she gets out of the Coast Guard, her response is always the same: ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do when I grow up’. “This is a very fulfilling career for me,” she said, “and it takes an incredible amount of time and energy and dedication to do it. At the end of the day I’m done, I’m complete. As far as where I’ll be in five years, well, time will tell,” said Utley. “I have aspirations to the gold badge realm, or maybe the rate force master chief position. I won’t say that I haven’t ruled out the possibility of becoming the Master Chief of the Coast Guard!” she said with a laugh. “Everyone needs a goal.”

Her next duty station at the Maintenance and Logistic Command Atlantic will be a first for Utley. “It’s more of a policy making type of tour, and certainly my first time out of a clinical setting. I like to work with my corpsmen. I’m more of a hands-on person. But you set goals, and see what time brings.”

“I’ve had some incredible experiences, not all of them good,” she said. “But I wouldn’t change even those, as they helped shape me as a person and as a leader. I think back to how things were when I first entered and compare that to where the Coast Guard is today. So much has changed, so much has improved. Through it all, I’ve been afforded the opportunities that put me where I am now. This achievement is a product of opportunity.”

“I like the Coast Guard,” said Utley with a smile. “Actually I love the Coast Guard. I love the job; I’ve been challenged by it, and it keeps me interested. People tell me I can retire any time, but why give up something that you love and start all over with a new career?” She counts off reasons on her fingers. “The pay is good, I get to work with incredible people, and I love what I do. I’m not ready to give it up yet. I see myself being around for awhile.”

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