

Dateline: English Channel, 11 Sep 2001

Tuesday morning dawned bright and calm in Portsmouth, England. The US Navy Arleigh Burke destroyer, USS WINSTON S CHURCHILL, was undergoing a first for a brand-new ship—preparing for the demands of deployment at the hands of the Royal Navy. It was called Flag Officer Sea Training, and the forty-five seasoned British trainers were putting the crew through its paces twenty miles at sea in the English Channel. It could not have been a better day.

I was in the main engineering control station, chatting idly with the senior Royal Navy (RN) assessor, when an ashen faced communication tech beckoned me aside. He held the Op Immediate message: An aircraft struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. Little more was said.

CHURCHILL's crew came from across the nation, and even from thirteen other countries. They were a multicultural group, bonded in a single pursuit of excellence and confined to this steel monster at sea. Notifying them of this terrible tragedy could wait, maybe.

I read the message and handed it back to the sailor with instructions to find the executive officer and keep quiet about this. A jumble of thoughts: "What type of aircraft? Was this an accident or intentional? How many of my crew had family working in the north tower? Implications for follow on operations if this wasn't an accident?"

Everything became much clearer in a matter of minutes when another sailor pulled me aside with another message. The south tower was struck. The words after that first line didn't register or maybe I didn't bother reading them. Life just changed for my ship, many of its sailors, for the United States, and maybe for much of the world. I had a quick thought about where my wife was, recalling that she wasn't in New York City.

I told the senior RN assessor that a terrorist attack occurred in NYC and that we need to proceed to port to drop off his team. I did not know anything more. He calmly acknowledged and volunteered to do all he could.

Sailors are a unique subset of military personnel, probably as a consequence of the independence and interdependence of being at sea. They take bad news well. Very stoic. They think they can do pretty much anything, and in many cases, they prove themselves right. This was a different situation.

We had over thirty crewmembers who had family members working either in the World Trade Center or in the vicinity of those buildings. Many of the crew knew people working in the Pentagon's Navy Command Center, as well. We trained with the expectation that we would be ones threatened with a violent end, to fight, to toil against an adversary. It did not sit well that the home front was attacked.

I think the sense that we were a crew, and had a mission before us, made tolerating the unknown easier for everyone. It was clear that no one survived the collapse of the towers, so it

became a communication drill to establish the whereabouts of those missing amongst our families. Some crew received good news—family members checked in and were well. Those whose family members remained missing that first week showed strength. They tarried on at work, consoled by shipmates and infrequent calls home. I was immensely proud of them.

A few days later, the ship was providing air surveillance for the air traffic controllers in the UK when an unexpected event happened. The German warship, FGS LUTJENS, which was undergoing the same type of predeployment training meted by the Royal Navy as the CHURCHILL, radioed a request to come alongside. My bridge team asked permission to say yes, not an automatic yes because the threat condition warranted that all ships were to keep their distance. I said absolutely.

The sight was unforgettable. Alongside, the LUTJENS flew a banner that said, “We stand by you.” Their crew lined the rail, adorned in dress uniforms. The Stars and Stripes flew at half-mast. Their captain saluted and I rendered a response. A dry eye was nowhere in sight.

So that’s what happened to a singular U.S. warship in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. We learned that allies shared grief, and that sailors possess a unique level of trust—in their shipmates and with those in other navies—that transcends borders, beliefs, and nationalities. And our experience

showcased that we are always stronger together than going it alone.



*Michael Franken was the first commanding officer of the USS WINSTON S CHURCHILL. He lives in Sioux City.*