

By Staff Sgt. Karen J. Savage

INITIATION

The fools' errand is a military tradition, a rite of passage and an initiation to military life. Servicemembers newly arrived at their first permanent duty station are sent on these tasks by the older, wiser members of the unit.

The new member usually learns the location of the units' supply, administration, maintenance and training offices while he tries to complete the task. Or the new member learns something about his new job or about military terminology.

Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Shawn P. Eklund, an advanced electronic imaging course student here, once watched as two airmen tried to get a contact sheet to print in focus. Laying the camera negative directly on photographic print paper and exposing the print produces a contact sheet. There is no focusing involved.

"When I saw what they were doing, I had to walk out of the room to laugh. I walked back in to the darkroom and told them they needed to use focusing fluid on the contact sheet," said Eklund.

"I gave them a made-up national stock number and sent them to the section chief to get the fluid. The chief made sure they got extra photography training," Eklund said, grinning.

Navy Seaman Eric J. Brown, a basic broadcaster course student here, said a popular fools' errand aboard ship is to send a new member to get a can of relative bearing grease.

“Relative bearing is which direction an object is relative to the bow of the ship, and true bearing is which direction an object is from the ship referenced to true north. After the sailor returned to report the ship was out of relative bearing grease, I’d send him off to find an I-D-ten-T form to report the shortage on,” said Brown.

Marine Cpl. John J. Watts, a student in the intermediate photojournalist course here, said he once sent a Lance Cpl. in his section on a fools’ errand to the Gunnery Sgt. in charge of the section.

“I told the lance corporal to ask the gunny for a P-R-C E-7 and 15 yards of flight line. Another time I sent a Pfc. to the commissary to look for Master Sgt. Ramen, and that he could find ‘top’ Ramen waiting on aisle 7,” Watts said, laughing.

Army Sgt. Dennis L. Cox, a student in the basic journalist course here, was on the receiving end of a fools’ errand.

“I was a brand-new private. My NCO sent me to look for chemlight batteries. Because I didn’t know they don’t use batteries, I spent two days going from NCO to NCO, looking like an idiot,” Cox said.

Navy Airman Amanda L. Reeder, an advanced electronic imaging course student here, was stationed aboard a small frigate when she witnessed a fools’ errand.

“They told this new seaman that the main mast had to be lowered so the ship could safely go under a bridge. Actually, the frigate’s masts can’t be lowered.” Reeder said.

“The deck crew rigged up a winch from a civilian boat trailer, some pulleys and some levers that would move when the winch was cranked. They also rigged up a sound-powered telephone at the ‘mast lowering station.’ Almost everybody on the deck was in on the prank,” said Reeder

“As the ship approached the bridge, the seaman was told to turn the crank to lower the mast. He was cranking away, but the mast wasn’t going down. Then he got a call to hurry up, ‘cause the ship was about to hit the bridge. He started cranking as fast as he could,” Reeder said.

“Then someone on the deck yelled, ‘We’re gonna’ crash! Hit the deck!’, and everyone hit the deck, including the freaked-out seaman who had been trying to lower the mast,” said Reeder, laughing.

As long as there is a military, there will continue to be the fools’ errand initiation. So, if you see a junior enlisted asking for a bucket of rotor wash, a box of RPM’s, a squeegee sharpener or the cannon report, smile and hand them a bag of B-A-eleven-hundred-N’s.