

A Navy Beard

By Julian (Jules) Perrin

This is true. It didn't happen to a friend of a friend of mine, this happened to me.

In my teens I joined the Navy and I found out early on that the military have policies for everything. One of their favourite policies is that they don't allow you to start the day without shaving. Doesn't matter whether you need it or not. Doesn't matter where you are. Doesn't matter what the weather is like. The rule is that you can miss breakfast and starve, but you cannot miss shaving. Imagine, you're in the middle of a tense standoff, both sides are facing each other in readiness, World War 3 is about to start and you haven't shaved. I am sure that some senior would still yell at you and say something like, "You horrible little man. Get back there and shave. I'll not have you out on the front line in the dirt and mud unshaven."

Being a sailor, we didn't spend much time in the mud but we did spend long periods at sea. So to kill a bit of time, the guys, it was only guys in those days, would hold a beard-growing contest. Not to be left out, I thought, no worries I can do this.

It's not that I really wanted a beard; I just wanted a couple of extra minutes in the bunk before going on Watch (shift). Not having to shave would save all of 3 minutes off my showering time. More sleep time was a big incentive and still is.

The catch is, that before you can grow a beard in the Navy, you need to submit an application seeking permission. This is called an "application to cease shaving". Not a simple process as it has to go the full nine yards. The application needs to be reviewed, inspected, dissected, signed and countersigned and that's just to get it out of the office. All this bureaucracy so you don't have to use your shaver for a while.

I think deep down the Navy was probably intent on ensuring the sale of shavers doesn't diminish. The rationale may be that they wanted to maintain a market demand for some of their older ships. True, our metal imports today may have been our old warships. Just think, you could be shaving your face with a bit of history so doesn't that just bring a patriotic lump to your throat.

Ok where was I? Yes, first day at sea and there is a run on application forms. Everyone wants a break from shaving. The applications will still take days to process before you can actually stop shaving and even then you should carry it with you as proof you are an approved non-shaving person.

The process does not end with a completed and approved application form. No, that would be too easy. You have ten days to prove yourself at which point there is a beard inspection, which is carried out by the all powerful and all seeing eye of the Chief Coxswain.

The Chief Coxswain is sort of the head policeman and maintainer of all standards, law, order and discipline on a ship. Some say they do an apprenticeship with Ivan the Terrible to get the job. No, maybe that's too kind.

The sorts of messages you don't want to hear are, "Jules, the Chief Coxswain wants to see you." This instantly ties your stomach in knots while your brain is having a vicious game of rugby trying to remember what scheme he could have found out about. Maybe he saw me put my dirty fork in with the dirty knives this morning. Oh no! The end is neigh. It's even worse when you cannot get to see him straight away and you have to stew on the reason or the impending consequences for a while. The mind is a cruel a viscous beast. It can take very simple things and make them seem like Armageddon.

Your mind takes great delight in conjuring up the cruellest punishments imaginable and the ridiculous part is that the most inhumane punishments are the first things you think of. Thoughts spring to mind of being keel hauled or being lined up and shot every morning for the next week. All this before you know what it is he wants.

I digress. Lets get back to the beard growing.

The inspection by the Chief Coxswain is for him to decide on the potential of the beard. The decision is simple. Will it continue to grow, become a full furry thing in its own right and a credit to the Navy or not? But, that inspection is a whole ten days away. Plenty of time for someone like me to grow a beard. So I thought.

I am not what you call a hairy guy. Now that I'm in my forties, I probably had three hairs on my chest where I only had one when I was younger. I'm a bit like those Mexican hairless dogs, all wrinkly skin and no body hair. So growing any form of facial hair is a painfully long process. It's as if the body says "I agree to grow hair on your head but there is a demarcation line between head hair and a beard."

Some guys seem to have a beard by the first evening their application is approved and then have a full-grown beard after one or two days. By the third, day they are proudly grooming and shaping the thing.

Where was I? OH!!! This young inexperienced naive person, me, proudly delivers the duly completed application to cease shaving. "You", exclaims the Chief Coxswain, "You only shave every second week as it is." The compliments didn't stop there. "All you have to do is stand in a stiff breeze to take your beard off. My cat has more whiskers than you'll ever have", he says. I am sure these guys spend years of professional training to perfect the method of making you feel real comfortable and secure in their presence.

"Yes Chief." I stammered, gave him the form and rapidly departed.

"Don't run in the bloody ship you idiot." He yells after me. See, he always offers kind words and thinks of my safety.

Finally the application is approved. I did think the form had been wet at some stage but I later found out that it was from tears of laughter. But it was approved and I could put the shaver away for a while.

The news that I had approval to cease shaving spread like wild fire through the ship. Money changed hands as the betting odds, on my likelihood of passing the final inspection, shortened with a resounding crash to odds on. Not to be put off, I continued.

Day one of no shaving and I thought I could feel some light abrasion on my chin when I ran my finger across it. Day two and I was sure I could feel something ever so lightly on my chin. Day three arrives and the other guys are having competitions to see who had the longest (beard that is). I, on the other hand, was so proud I could see something like light sand paper growing. When I squinted, and got real close to the mirror, I could actually see stubble. I felt even more proud when on day five my boss came to me and said, "You horrible little man. Get back there and shave. I will not have you working unshaven here in the engine room in all this grease, dirt and grime." All Chiefs are issued with standard phrases they learn and resurrect them as required.

"I have an approved application to cease shaving Chief", I proudly blurted out. (All Chief Petty Officers are called Chief. In private they are called different names but that's another story.) I could see he was so pleased with my ambition to grow a beard that he was unable to speak. His face started to twist to a smile then as he walked off but his loud raucous laughter could distinctively be heard above the noise of the main engines. I am sure that he had attended the same feel good and supportive man management school as the Chief Coxswain.

Half way through the ten day period and I was in with a chance. It was actually noticeable. Someone else could see it except me. I was floating on air.

Walking down the passageway on day seven and the Chief Coxswain, he is the guy who is always aware of my feelings and personal safety, shouts, "Perrin, get here." I front up and reply "Yes Chief." In the military, we are always on a first name basis with our superiors. They call us what ever they want and we call them "Sir" or "Chief." "How many months ago did you put in your application to cease shaving?" he says. "It was last week Chief" I replied making me feel so proud that my new beard growth was recognised and had improved beyond expectations. The trouble is that my expectations were mixed with my capabilities.

"Shave that bum fluff off your face. Your application is cancelled." With that devastating blow delivered, he turned and walked off. My world was shattered. From one moment, believing I had a monumental beard then crashing down to total emotional abyss in the blink of an eye. I must give him credit though; he did take at least ten steps before the laughter became audible.

The crowning insult was that it took the rest of the crew two days to realise that I had shaved off my precious stubble.

During my remaining years in the Navy, I did not submit another application to cease shaving. However, now as a grandfather I was able to grow a beard but the Chief Coxswain, reincarnated as my wife, made me shave it off under threat of murder. So next time your contemplating growing a beard, spare a thought for poor old Jules and submit your application to your wife before you start.

Jules Perrin