

100 Great Chiefs
Nomination: BMCM James Nagle

This is a nomination for BMCM James R. Nagle. Master Chief Nagle served for nearly 22 years, married a SPAR (Betty, his wife of 55 years) while in the service, encouraged his brother Thomas B. Nagle to transfer to the Coast Guard after first enlisting in the Navy in WWII (Tom later retired QMCM), and inspired three of his sons (Jim, Frank and Steve) to pursue Coast Guard careers, retiring after 23, 23 and 20 years as Commander, ET1, and RMC, respectively.

Chief Nagle instilled an abiding commitment to excellence and service in his sons and in many of the sailors who served with him, and in the officers who served above him. His professionalism and skill was noted repeatedly in official correspondence, including a recommendation for officer training, praise for his handling of regular duties and of a special assignment to train Libyan defense forces in 1960 as part of a US State Department mission, and in the personal recollections of others who served with him.

Chief Nagle was among the first batches of USCG E-9s, named BMCM on 1 JAN 1961. While his retirement was pending in approximately late 1962, he was requested for a meeting at Coast Guard HQ in Washington to discuss his interest in a prospective new enlisted position being considered at the time — what later became the MCPOCG. Also at that time, the Group Commander sent a memo citing a letter which we do not have and suggesting that Chief Nagle cancel his retirement. We are endeavoring to locate the referenced letter from CG personnel archives.

For a variety of reasons, including concern about moving a young family of 8 to Washington, Master Chief Nagle respectfully declined the offer. Of course, the MCPOCG position was not established until Master Chief Calhoun became the first in 1969.

For other documentation, we have much of Master Chief Nagle's service record, as well as photographs and newspaper clippings, particularly from his service at Straitsmouth and in Libya. These can be digitized and provided if desired.

Dates of Service

23 APR 1942 - 1 MAR 1964

Ships and stations

USS Monomoy
USCG First District Office Boston/Base Chelsea
USCGC Amarok
USS Groton (PF-29, 1944-45)
USCGC Matagorda
USCGC Humboldt
83488 (O-i-C)

83487 (O-i-C)

83503 (O-i-C)

LBS Straitsmouth (Rockport) (O-i-C)

US State Department Libyan Assistance Mission (temporary assignment while at Straitsmouth for Libyan Navy crew training on transferred 83-footers)

Recollections and Experiences

From Cdr. James R. Nagle II (ret.) (Jim's son):

1) During the summer months I had the opportunity to spend time at Straitsmouth lifeboat station when my Dad had the duty. The station had a watch tower and the watchstander would use a Detex clock while on duty. There was one fellow, Willy, who had managed to drop two Detex units while climbing to the tower watch room. To eliminate the issue of the Detex being too heavy for Willy to hold on to Dad came up with the following solution: He spread out newspaper on the desk in the office and disassembled the Detex clock into what must have been 1,000 pieces. When I saw all the pieces on the desk, I asked Dad what was going on. About that time Willy also showed up in the office. Dad advised Willy that since the clocks appeared to be too heavy for Willy to carry, he was going to help him out by allowing him to carry the clock up to the tower watch room one piece at a time and, by the way, Willy would not be going on liberty until each piece individually had been carried up the tower. That resolved the issue of falling Detex clocks.

2) I remember going out on harbor entrance patrol on the 83-footer and Dad letting me report the Boston Belly (Boston Belle) passing by.

3) I remember making the trip from Newcastle, NH, to Boston on the Humboldt and walking around the deck with the Captain and Dad. It was cold so the Captain had given me his rabbit fur-lined leather gloves to wear. We came across some garbage on the deck, I picked it up and threw it over the side as the glove also flew off my hand. Very interesting quarters the next morning.

4) Boy Scout knot tying skills were kids' stuff. In order to pass Dad's test I needed to do a 1-handed bowline behind my back. I think Frank also passed the test.

5) When I was at boot camp I think Dad had a map of every Chief's location on Cape May. I would be marching around in company when I would get a message to report to Chief so & so at a location that was usually the farthest away from my current location. The issue was that if you were not marching you needed to be running if you were going somewhere. I would run to the location and be greeted by the Chiefs who let me know they knew Dad. Then I had to run back to join my recruit company.

6) Dad's advice when I was commissioned "You want people to work with you. They know who they work for because that's listed on the org chart. It's working with you that gets things done."

From Chief Nagle's oral history recorded between 1997 and 2001 prior to his death in May 2001:

During my time there at Straitsmouth we had the usual number of fishing boats on fire, fishing boats sinking, playing babysitter to the weekend sailors at the Sandy Bay yacht club. It was fairly interesting. We had all varied assignments to do. One time at two o'clock in the morning the kid up in the radar tower on watch called down and said there was a ship aground inside the breakwater off Rockport. It turned out to be a Navy minesweeper with a reserve crew that was out doing their weekend duty (USS Grouse: see attached). So, they managed to get out around the breakwater and go out the channel again but they made a wrong turn, and by the way, it was completely fogged in, you couldn't see your hand in front of you. And they made the wrong turn and they ended up on Dry Salvages which is a ledge off of Rockport.

They couldn't have gone up at a worse time. They went up that mean high water so that when the tide went out they were sitting high and dry. And it happened to be the time of the month when the tide was at its highest and there would be no more for another month. Well it turned out they got a couple of Navy tugs up from Norfolk, Virginia, to try to pull it off. They kept breaking cables. They couldn't get it off. I knew damn well they couldn't get it off. So the Navy admiral that came up he said, "Well what should we do chief?" I said, "well Admiral, unless you want a monument to the Navy out there you'd better take off all the equipment you can salvage and burn it." Well eventually, after trying for three or four days, that's what they did.

That night at the station it was real bad because one of our kids, our crew members, got killed up in Newburyport. He'd gone to pick his mother up at Anna Jacque's hospital but he got run into by a big trailer truck and got killed. Well, I wasn't down the station at the time and my first class Joseph called me up and he said, "Chief, Red Welch got killed." And he said, "There's a Navy minesweeper a ground out here with 35 men on it," And he says, "What shall I do?" And I says, "Look it, Joe, you've got one dead one and you've got 35 live ones, what are you going to do?" He did it. And like I said, they burnt the minesweeper. And skin divers had a ball out there salvaging all kinds of bronze and stuff because on those wooden minesweepers they had to have nonferrous metals so they wouldn't attract the mines to them and explode.