

Climbing the chain of command

Tribal member Ronald “Arch” Bly became a high-ranking naval officer

By Danielle Frost
Smoke Signals staff writer

To the uninitiated, hearing that someone had been promoted through the Navy’s ranks from a seaman recruit to chief warrant officer IV may not have much meaning.

But Tribal member and retired Naval officer Ronald “Arch” Bly described just how seldom that happens.

“It would be like going from being the groundskeeper here to the Tribal Council chair,” he said. “It is very unusual.”

Chief warrant officers serve a unique role in naval service as they are enlisted people who are commissioned as officers and have been called to serve from their senior enlisted ranks as technical managers.

Bly, 54, served in the military from 1982 to 2007, or as he puts it, “Twenty-five years, two months and five days.”

Since retiring, Bly has spent much of his time traveling in his motorhome, sailing and in the mountains exploring. His favorite spot to sail is the Saratoga Passage in Puget Sound.

He grew up in Montana, Oregon and Wyoming and graduated high school in 1982. His parents are Tribal Elder Betty Bly and Roger Bly, who live in Elder housing.

“I decided to join the Navy because I wanted to see the world,” he said. “I only intended to join for four years though. Since the Earth is mostly water, I did see quite a bit of it.”

Bly worked as a surface ordnance technician, which he describes as “anything not underwater, any surface-to-air weapon, we worked on.”

Once Bly decided on the Navy for a career, he set his sights on moving up the chain of command.

“There are a very low percentage of people who stay in long enough to become a chief petty officer,” he said. “And the Navy is very strict about the process. ... There are a lot of hoops to jump through. It is



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Ronald “Arch” Bly served in the U.S. Navy from 1982-2007. In retirement his hobbies include sailing, mountain climbing, and collecting antique rifles and pistols.

a very strict application process.”

After 10 years, he became a chief petty officer and continued to move up through the ranks until 2002, when Bly was commissioned as one of 75 chief warrant officers in his specialty. He was one of two applicants selected that year and commissioned after 19 years of service to the Navy.

At the time, Bly was working in the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., as chief adviser to the Naval Ordnance Command and traveling 230 days a year.

“That was a great job,” he said. “I really enjoyed it and got to meet the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was extremely refreshing job, but an immense amount of work.”

Bly was part of the team that traveled to Yemen and inspected the U.S.S. Cole after it was bombed as part of a terrorist attack against the Navy’s guided-missile destroyer in October 2000 while it was being refueled in Yemen’s Aden Harbor. Seventeen American sailors were killed and 39 were injured.

Bly was directly responsible for the safe offload of the weapons systems after the attack.

“Our job was to ‘safe’ the ship,”

Bly said. “We had to make sure it was safe to sail it home.”

During the Iraq War, Bly trained and certified warships going over from his base in the Pacific Northwest. The drill included 17 weeks of training service men and women on what to do if the ship came under attack from terrorists and potential security pitfalls.

“I was the chief training officer selected to teach anti-terrorism and had 15 senior chiefs who worked for me,” he said. “I did that for two tours.”

Bly’s final post in the Navy was at Misawa Air Base in Japan from 2004 to 2007, where he served in Naval Ordnance Command and took over as commanding officer. At the time, he was the only chief warrant officer serving as a com-

manding officer in the entire Navy.

“We pre-positioned and forward-ed ships to the entire Fifth Fleet operations area in Iraq, Afghanistan and the North Arabian Gulf,” he said.

For the last 12 years of his career, Bly essentially worked with little to no supervision in his role, which he enjoyed but it also came with heavy responsibility.

“My boss in Washington, D.C., was a two-star admiral and I almost never saw her,” he said. “It gives you a lot of responsibility and you had better have your ducks in a row, especially when you are dealing with explosives and millions of dollars in equipment.”

Bly is a veteran of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the Global War on Terrorism, the Iraq War and war in Afghanistan.

Bly’s decorations include 53 military medals and ribbons. There are four meritorious service medals, six Navy commendation medals, three Navy achievement medals, three outstanding volunteer service medals, two humanitarian service medals and numerous campaign, operations and service ribbons.

Bly has lived in Grand Ronde for a year. Before that, he resided in a houseboat on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula and spent the past 10 years sailing the Puget Sound Inside Passage.

He is engaged to Cynthia Afflerbach and enjoys a quiet life near the mountains and rivers, as well as a good joke. Bly is grateful for the opportunities he has had.

In his past, Bly was an avid climber and summited 41 mountains, including Mount Adams, Mount Hood and Mount Baker. His two favorite climbs were Mount Iwate and Mount Ishaee in Japan. He still climbs on occasion. ■

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