

PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH ‘MISTER ED’

by Bill Lee

Edward J. Campbell (1928-2010) was President and Chief Executive Officer of Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) from January 1, 1979 until December 31, 1991. He served in that capacity the longest of any shipyard president in the modern era. He took Admiral Rickover head-on at times; something few others dared. Ed Campbell also was, hands down, the toughest, most demanding and probably the most disliked and misunderstood president in the history of the shipyard.



Ed Campbell was mostly about making money. Which he surely did! But to his credit, Ed Campbell undoubtedly was also instrumental in making retirement more comfortable for thousands of shipbuilders. That is an important part of his legacy, in my opinion.

His propensity to speak at length in management meetings, sparing no one he thought did not measure up to his high standards, resulted in Ed Campbell often and disingenuously being referred to as ‘Mister Ed’. For those not steeped in TV history, Mister Ed was the title of a 1960’s comedy series that featured a talking horse. The analogy to the other end of a horse should be as obvious to the reader as it was to those of us who snickered whenever the nickname ‘Mister Ed’ was applied.

Like many tough taskmasters, he had a softer and occasionally humorous private persona that relatively few got to see. He also had an understated and largely unappreciated respect for shipyard history and tradition. I was fortunate enough to witness that side of him on a few occasions. But only after he decided that I measured up to his standards.

~ A TMI Tale Not Previously Recorded ~

My first ‘test’ came a few months after he arrived in Newport News. At the time I was working at Newport News Industrial (NNI). I don’t know what he knew of my past navy nuclear experience or my follow-on work in the commercial nuclear field, but obviously he knew enough to seek me out when he needed help.

It was early on Wednesday, March 28, 1979 that the worst nuclear accident in this country happened at the Three Mile Island (TMI) commercial nuclear plant. By late morning, I was listening to developing news reports on the radio and speculating with associates as to the cause when my telephone rang. It was Ed Campbell.

That was a very unusual occurrence, since he almost always communicated up and down the chain of command. He quickly explained that he was calling me directly because the President of NNI was on travel and unavailable. Ed Campbell immediately made it clear that he had an urgent need to get information about the accident at TMI.

Brushing aside my utterances of ‘all I know is what they’re reporting’ he told me that Tenneco management was concerned about nuclear safety at the shipyard and he needed a ‘white paper’ to help them understand why such an accident could not happen at NNS. “Two pages, max” he said, and added: “by no later than 5 PM”.

The next thing I heard was a dial tone.

I called people in the commercial nuclear business that I thought would have insider information. By the end of the day, I had gathered as much info as possible, boiled it down to two typed and heavily edited pages and, fearfully, I added a third page. I found it impossible to reduce such a complex subject to two pages of layman prose, so I included a hand-drawn sketch.

With some trepidation, I carried my work product across Washington Avenue and delivered it to Ed Campbell’s secretary. I waited while she took it into his inner sanctum. Several minutes passed. When she emerged, she headed for the door without speaking. I blurted out: “Is it OK?” “Apparently so,” she told me, “I’m off to the telex office to send it to Houston”.

Years later, Ed Campbell informed me off the record in a ‘now it can be told’ manner that Tenneco’s Chairman had wanted him to unilaterally shut down nuclear operations at the shipyard that day, but that my efforts helped him avoid doing so. I asked if he would have really dared to do that, in the face of contractual consequences...and Admiral Rickover. Ed Campbell just smiled...

~ Memorial Day, 1980 ~

Each time this patriotic holiday approaches, or images of carrier homecomings grace newspapers’ front pages and TV screens, my thoughts go back to 1980. That was the year in which an ill-fated mission to rescue American hostages being held in Iran was launched from NIMITZ (CVN 68). She, along with two other NNS-built ships, CALIFORNIA (CGN 36) and TEXAS (CGN 39), returned to Hampton Roads on Memorial Day, following a nine-month deployment in the Persian Gulf.

Community leaders in Tidewater decided to make a patriotic statement by staging a waterborne ‘welcome home’. Numerous articles in area newspapers encouraged people to participate. Inspired, I had the impertinence to send Ed Campbell a memo suggesting that the shipyard participate. I recommended how I thought the shipbuilders of Newport News could best help welcome the crews of those ships home.

Several days went by with no indication that he had gotten the memo or acted upon it. Ah, well...I thought. Then, on the Friday preceding the Memorial Day weekend, I got a call from his secretary. She told me he had ‘strongly encouraged’ that my suggestion be enacted as a ‘waterfront’ activity. As always, his wish became their command...

In addition, he had directed that I be included. He didn't explain why; leaving that up to me to explain! On that bright and sunny May Monday morning, the yard's two tugs, with huge 'welcome home' signs fastened to the sides of their superstructures traveled to the Chesapeake Bay entrance. As the three NNS-built vessels drew near, the tugs' captains ordered their fire nozzles activated. We turned into their wake, and followed NIMITZ into the harbor.



This aerial photo was made into a commemorative lithograph and distributed to shipyard employees. A related story in a *Shipyards Bulletin* issue gave full credit for participation to the waterfront. No mention of Ed Campbell's involvement was included, which I have to believe was his desire. This man, who almost always referred to himself as an 'industrialist', understood, when it came to matters of shipbuilder pride...

~ I Want My Damn Money! ~

A few months later, Ed Campbell led a delegation of NNS and NNI personnel to a high-level meeting in Cleveland, Ohio with top officials of the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company (CEI). The purpose was to discuss how to adjudicate a huge backlog of changes that had put Newport News Industrial in a negative cash flow position of roughly \$50 million, which was magnified by the 18% interest rate prevalent at that time.

That financial shortfall and the need to borrow money to sustain operations was affecting Tenneco's bottom line. That made Ed Campbell really unhappy. A few weeks before that meeting, Ed Campbell summarily fired the president of NNI and replaced him. The person responsible for NNI's work at the Perry Nuclear Power Plant site was assigned other duties. Ed Campbell dictated that I replace that individual.

I wasn't at all happy with the prospect of undertaking what initially seemed to me to be an 'insurmountable opportunity'. Nevertheless, I got busy trying to figure out how to keep the job going and get paid. But not in that order! Ed had made that crystal clear to me before I left Newport News to spend time at the site to get a handle on my new responsibilities.

The aforementioned ‘summit’ meeting with CEI started off quietly enough. Both sides made polite opening statements and professed wanting to deal with the situation properly. As the meeting droned on, it became apparent that CEI expected ‘business as usual’, which meant many months of painfully settling individual change orders one by one.

I don’t recall noticing that Ed Campbell was getting mad. That is, until he suddenly interrupted the proceedings by loudly blurting out **“I want my damn money!”** and pounding on the conference room table with his fist. That outburst got CEI’s undivided attention. It also instantly reminded me of when Nikita Khrushchev pounded on a UN desk with his shoe 20 years earlier.



A florid-faced Ed Campbell then angrily demanded a private discussion with the CEI chairman, who quickly acquiesced. I doubt he’d ever seen such a performance in his board room. They left the rest of us to silently speculate on what might happen. But I had a pretty good idea what might possibly result...

Ed Campbell had secretly instructed me before the meeting to have all NNI records on site made ready for quick removal. His intent was clear; if some solution to our financial problem did not result from that meeting, NNI was to walk off the job site and remove, amongst other things, vital quality control documentation. That prospect scared the hell out of me, but defying Ed Campbell seemed more ominous.

Early on the day of the meeting, I informed a chosen few site personnel to be prepared to load about twenty file cabinets on a truck and take them off-site to a NNI warehouse if I called and gave the order to do so. They were as shocked and scared as I, but did as told. One of them stayed in my office, keeping the phone line clear, in case I called.

When Ed Campbell and the CEI chairman returned, we were informed that a ‘global settlement’ approach was to be initiated. CEI named a negotiator for their side and Ed Campbell named me. Fortunately, their negotiator was an extremely fair and honest individual. It took a couple of months of intense negotiation, but we settled on the value of 500+ change orders at 76% of the total estimated cost of the changes and associated delay and disruption that NNI had identified.

NNS financial analysts had expected no more 40%. Tenneco pessimistically had expected only 25%, so they were extremely happy with the results. Even Ed was pleased, but said he wished we had gotten more! We were paid in three installments over a period of as many consecutive months. Each time, at Ed’s insistence, I personally collected a multi-million dollar check and flew to New York to deposit the check into a Tenneco account.

Those file cabinets and their vital records never left the site. I never knew if that outburst was spontaneous or deliberate, and never asked. And CEI never knew how close they came to having an even bigger problem with Ed Campbell...

~ Living Dangerously at 30,000 Feet ~

By early 1982, the work at the Perry Nuclear Power Plant was winding down...profitably. My work assignments at NNI took new directions. One self-initiated task was to try to get other Tenneco companies to utilize NNI as project manager on any plant expansions. That effort took to me to Houston on numerous occasions.

On one such trip, I followed standing orders to determine if a Tenneco private aircraft was heading to Newport News. If so, I was expected to cash in my return ticket and fly home in the lap of luxury. I learned that a Tenneco executive jet was headed to Newport News that evening. Ed Campbell was the only passenger. I made my way to the airport's general aviation base to wait...in extreme comfort...onboard the aircraft.



I knew from experience that we would depart as soon as Ed Campbell arrived. Sure enough, as soon as he got onboard, we took off. Having flown with him several times before, I knew he usually worked in the front of the cabin while in transit and didn't want to be disturbed. I took a seat in the rear of the cabin. Out of sight, out of mind, I thought.

All of a sudden, he uttered a string of words more suitable for the waterfront than polite society. Then, he asked me to join him. I did. Ed handed me a document that was clearly marked classified, asked me to read it and then comment on its contents.

That put me in a bit of a quandary. I no longer held any kind of security clearance. I was well aware of the penalties for even looking at such a document; much less discussing it. But I also didn't want to refuse his bidding. I quickly rationalized that Ed knew that I could and would be discreet. Besides, at 30,000 feet, who else was going to know?

What had prompted his ire was a scathing commentary, filled with personal invective from Admiral Rickover. The subject matter was a technical problem that he felt the shipyard was ignoring, magnified by Ed's refusal to pay for a major investigation and possibly a costly modification on one of the nuclear carriers under construction at NNS.

Ed couldn't fully understand the technical analysis attached to the Admiral's letter that purported to prove that what was potentially wrong was entirely the shipyard's fault. Those details notwithstanding, the shipyard's legal experts had taken the position that NNS was not contractually responsible for what was being demanded. I was told that Rickover had angrily rejected that contention; first in an acrimonious telephone conversation with Ed, then followed up by the document I had been asked to review.

Ah, vintage Rickover, I thought.

Also, at that time the shipyard was embroiled in a multi-million dollar dispute with the Navy over several other similar differences of opinion. Ed Campbell had been dealing with the Admiral long enough to know that a ‘watertight’ basis, both technically and contractually, had to be put forth in hopes of avoiding a contract directive. In which case, the shipyard would have been compelled to proceed as directed, gather cost information and hope to get payment, in whole or in part, months or even years later.

Due to my past work at NNS, I had a good understanding of the issue at hand. I explained why I thought the shipyard’s position was correct, both technically and contractually. I drew a sketch (history *does* repeat itself) to illustrate a flaw in Naval Reactors’ logic.

At his request, I created a list of possible actions for his staff to utilize in preparing a convincing response. He thanked me profusely, which I found somewhat out of character, but much appreciated and flattering.

I then voiced a concern: My unique left-handed, Apprentice School-trained printing would almost certainly have tipped some people off as to the author’s identity if that list was shared in its original form. Ed assured me he’d have it typed up, the sketch redrawn and the originals destroyed. It was not lost on me that such an approach would also make him seem to be technically savvy.

With that out of the way, Ed leaned back and sighed, and said that he had been trying hard to work with the Admiral for months to reconcile major contractual differences, but to no avail. He then asked, perhaps rhetorically, why he and Rickover could not get along. Basking in the glow of having pleased him, I thoughtlessly blurted out:

“Because the two of you are so much alike.”

The shocked expression on his face that followed was almost immediately replaced by an angry and frightening look I had witnessed before when others had imprudently crossed him. I saw my whole career flash before my eyes. But nothing came of it, for I had spoken the truth, and, at least sub-consciously, he knew it.

However, whenever I get to this point in retelling this all-time favorite Ed Campbell ‘sea story’, I like to embellish things a tad by saying something like the following:

*“Seeing the look on his face,
I stepped outside and stood
on the wing until he cooled off.”*



I later learned, from other sources, that the shipyard eventually prevailed...

~ An Unexpected Visit ~

I left Newport News at the end of 1983 to start a second career with a firm in Charlotte, North Carolina. When I gave my notice to the president of NNI, he informed Ed Campbell of my plans, who then asked - through channels, of course - if I wished to reconsider. I said “no” - through channels - and that’s all there was to that.

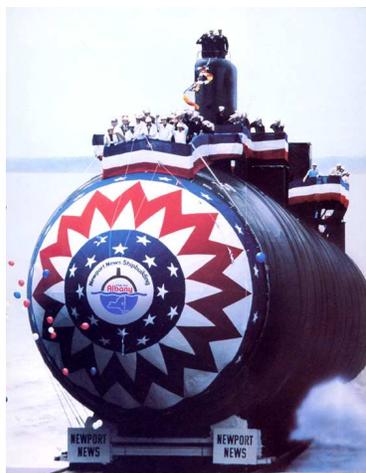
A few years later, my secretary came into my office and said “There’s a Mr. Campbell from Newport News on the phone; do you wish to speak to him?” I was stunned, but quickly picked up the phone. Turned out that Ed was in Charlotte. He had just attended a bank board meeting and asked if I had time for a visit.

Not knowing his purpose, but understandably curious at this unexpected and unusual request, I gave him directions to our office building. While I waited, various thoughts, possibilities and expectations crowded out what I had been working on when he called.

Upon his arrival, we chatted about this and that like old friends for about an hour, even laughing about some of the things that had transpired in the past, as related on previous pages. I told him about my current work in commercial nuclear field and the nuclear weapons program. He asked questions about the financial success of these projects.

Ed candidly shared some shipyard gossip and knowing of my interest in shipyard history, talked about the 1986 centennial celebration. What he didn’t reveal, but which I learned later, was that the Huntington monument was moved back to the shipyard on his watch.

Imagine bringing back that rock whose plaque included that phrase Tenneco disliked so much... “*At a loss if we must*”. Ed Campbell wasn’t ‘all about money’ after all!



Almost kid-like, he also described the thrill of being lifted by crane from the sponsor’s platform onboard the last submarine launched from an inclined shipway at NNS. When she commenced that traditional slide to the sea, which hundreds of NNS-built vessels had previously made, he was standing in the midst of the proud shipbuilders positioned on her bow.

I kept waiting for him to reveal what I assumed was the real purpose for our meeting. Eventually, Ed looked at his watch, said it was time for him to go to the airport. Then he abruptly departed. What turned out to be our last visit may have been just a way for him to relax and reminisce.

I'm probably the only person, other than Ed Campbell's immediate subordinates at Newport News, whose relationship with him began and ended with a direct phone call...

~ Postscript ~

During his lengthy tenure as President of Newport News Shipbuilding, Ed Campbell repeatedly supported and publicly complimented the Apprentice School. He often stated that he did not understand all the technology associated with building nuclear-powered vessels. But he was always quick to add that he did understand and appreciated the need to train and retain skilled craftsmen in any industrial enterprise.

In 1983, the Apprentice Alumni Association made Ed Campbell an honorary member of their organization. In his acceptance comments, he stated that being inducted into the alumni association was one of the highest honors he had ever received. Cynics probably thought: "They all say that".



But Ed Campbell quietly underscored his sincerity numerous times thereafter. Even though Honorary Members of the Apprentice Alumni Association are not assessed dues or expected to attend events, Ed always sent a check for \$100 each year to the Alumni Association. Whenever his schedule permitted, he also attended the group's annual banquet.

Sometimes, when the Association's Board of Directors and Officers held quarterly meetings at the Althaus Restaurant, Ed Campbell might also, coincidentally, be dining there. It was one of his favorite places to eat in Newport News. Whenever he learned that the group was meeting in a private room, he did not intrude. But on such occasions he told Sam Althaus to put the group's bill on his tab.

"In the final analysis, the measure of a man is not what society thinks of him, but what his actions teach us that he really was"

Anonymous