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HUMILIATION RITUAL. 49 photographs of the initiation ceremony for new Chief Petty Officers of the U.S Navy. [Washington], [c. late 1970s]

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[HUMILIATION RITUAL].

Initiation ceremony for new Chief Petty Officers of the U.S Navy.

[Washington], [c. late 1970s].

49 chromogenic photographs (111 × 89 mm - 125 × 88 mm / 4 3/8 × 3 1/2 in - 5 × 3 1/2 in). Fine.

This group of photographs document a group of sailors taking part in the Chief Petty Officer's initiation ceremony which marks their promotion to the highest enlisted rank of the United States Navy.

Chief Petty Officers are considered management class, and as such are assigned special duties and afforded special privileges such as being issued with a khaki uniform in place of the usual blue one. In order to be promoted the sailors were subjected to a lengthy initiation which took place in late summer and included physical training, studying naval tradition, and until recently culminated in a degrading initiation ceremony. Rituals such as this and the 'Crossing the Line' ceremony are perceived by many sailors to help build trust, continue tradition, and to instill discipline, fostering a spirit of esprit-de-corps. Clear parallels can be drawn to the tribal initiations that signify a child's entrance to adulthood in other cultures.

Under pressure from Congress an attempt to clean up the ceremonies began in the late 1980s and in 2013 the hazing element was abolished, together with any references to 'initiation', 'orientation', and 'induction'. Instead, the new program is referred to as 'CPO 365 - Phase II', with the emphasis placed on training as opposed to the tradition of drinking and ritual humiliation. These measures have led to a backlash from retired chiefs bemoaning the new watered-down Navy.


The present photographs show a series of different forms of ritual humiliation including tar and feathering, cross-dressing, eating from toilets, the internment of three men with live chickens and an octopus in what appears to be an excrement-stained box, egg-pelting, and being asked to ride a child's tricycle whilst wearing a single flipper. The final photographs show the new officers in their new khaki uniforms and one shows the cutting of a decorated cake which reads 'congratulations new chiefs'.


Whilst photographs of the line-crossing ceremonies are occasionally seen, documentation of the Chief Petty Officer initiation appear to be extremely uncommon.


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