

Jenni Hendrickson

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Final Fieldwork Project

The subculture I chose to study was Non Destructive Inspection (NDI), Air Frames, MALS (Marine Aviation Logistic Squadron) 24, Kaneohe Bay Marine Corp Base, Hawaii. Through a friend I know a few people in NDI and wanted to find out what their job entails and more about the military in general. For my research I used participant-observation, informal interview, and formal interview as methods to obtain my research. The informants names have been changed in order to conceal their identity. NDI consists of a small number of individuals: SSgt Smith, AM1 Hango, AM1 Owens, Sgt Henderson, Sgt Chu, and AM2 Pouttu. Three of them, AM1 Hango, AM1 Owens, and AM2 Pouttu, are in the Navy. The other three are in the Marine Corps. There are more people that work in NDI; however, the other two are in Iraq on a deployment.

NDI is short for Non Destructive Inspection. It seems that so many acronyms are used on a daily basis in the Navy and Marine Corps that the real words don't exist anymore. They have abbreviations, acronyms, and short hand for everything they do including the six different types of inspections they do. These six types of inspections make up the whole of what NDI does. Different helicopter and airplane parts come in from all the different shops in air frames. Their job is to determine whether or not those parts are in working order. They are very particular about what the parts look like when they come to them. They have to be clean in order to run tests. If they are not clean, they give them back to the person who sent it. They don't clean them themselves because as Henderson stated, "If we cleaned one part for someone, we would have to clean parts for everyone, that would double our work."

In the NDI inspections many chemicals and machinery are used. The first inspection is called Liquid Penetrant or (PT) which is only used for non-ferrous metals (metal that does not contain iron). A viscous fluorescent solution coats the different parts, mostly bolts and screws. Various pieces are dipped into the liquid penetrant and have to sit. They are then sprayed with a developer and viewed under a fluorescent light. If it weren't for the light, the small cracks would not be visible. The magnetic particle inspection (MT) uses fluorescent magnetic particles to detect cracks in ferrous metal (Any metal that contains Iron). The part is placed in the magnetic particles and the whole thing is magnetized and then demagnetized, leaving the particles in any cracks. The MT also uses a fluorescent light to detect cracks in the piece. Eddy current (ET) is a test that uses electrical current through a probe to detect cracks in any type of metal that that is conductible. Supposedly this is the most complicated of all the tests, according to AM2 Pouttu. The ultrasonic test (UT) uses an ultrasound machine to detect places where there is a separation (dis-bond) in metal and fiberglass. They can view this in the machine, much like an ultrasound tech views a baby in its mother's womb. Radiographic test (RT) is the use of x-rays to detect unseen defects. It wasn't really specific as to what the x-rays showed. The final of all the tests is one that is rarely used, the visual test. Most of the problems that NDI faces cannot be view by the naked eye; the use of machinery to diagnose problems is vital to their work.

Despite all these different inspections there is quite a bit of down time. In fact, there are days that go by they don't even do a single inspection. What seems to happen more than not, according to Smith, is a lag all day and a whole bunch of parts coming in at one time right at the end of the day. "I've seen it where we just chill all day waiting for something to happen, we'll dink around on the computer, bullshit a little, think the day is over and here comes a whole bunch of rims to do at like 3. It sucks, you think your going to get out of there early but you end up staying late."

All this downtime makes for some very interesting conversations. Because of my presence their wording was a little cleaner than what really happens on a regular basis. They can go from childish banter to dirty jokes in no time. When a new part comes in the phrase “1, 2, 3 Not It!” seems to be the first thing out of all their mouths. This refers to a child’s game that many kids play in order to get out of whatever imminent chore is coming their way. Within a few days, that phrase was uttered at least 20 times. If it isn’t the fight over who gets to do the work, they are talking about random thoughts that most people in the civilian world could not get away with at their occupation. It was apparent that when there is company in the shop, they don’t talk quite the same way as if it were just them together. In my presence, many phrases were started and abruptly finished, even though they were told many times they should pretend I’m not there.

Pouttu was the only one who didn’t seem to care that there was a visitor present. Henderson said, “We all kind of have our place in the group. I’m the quiet one; Smith is the one in charge; Chu is the other quiet one but she’s a girl and girls are usually always more quiet around here; Hango is the smart one; Owens is just there; and Pouttu is the stupid one. He doesn’t think before he talks which has gotten him in trouble way too many times. We just call him a dumbass and tell him to shut up.”

The informants made it clear that NDI sticks together. They look out for each other. It seems that even though each of them has a different place, they all seem like a small family with slightly dysfunctional dynamics. From what it seems, they share things with each other more that they would with their family. Most bodily functions that most people would fear doing in public all take place in competitive form in the NDI shop. They feel the need to announce every time they go to the bathroom. Even Chu, the only female in the shop, participates in the lewd banter and the odd competitions that take place. The most entertaining example was the “You know how I know you’re gay....”

conversation that must have lasted over an hour. Yu says that they are a common occurrence in NDI.

As stated previously, Chu is the only female in the NDI shop. “Sometimes they make me feel like the only girl, but not very often. I would rather think of myself as one of the guys than a girl working with a bunch of men. If they ever made me feel shitty, they would know because I’d beat the shit out of them.” She presents herself as one of the guys. Her tiny frame makes her less intimidating than the guys in there, but the words that come out of her mouth are no less perverse than theirs.

Wrapped up in all the fun and games is the military aspect of their job. Not only do they have to adhere to the rules of the shop and air frames, but they also have to adhere to the values instilled on them by the military. Some of them feel like it’s not a big deal; others seem to hate everything there is in the military. Rather than call each other by name, often one hears “staff sergeant”, “sergeant”, “sir”, “ma’am”, “gunny”. It sounds rather confusing to a regular civilian, but to them it’s like an addition to their name. Some of the guys hate being called by their title. If that’s the case, whoever is around them usually refers to them by their last name. This is easy due to the fact that everyone has their name written on their clothing.

Each of the NDI techs takes the military part of their jobs in different ways. All of them extended their enlistments after their first four years, but about half of them really don’t know why. Pouttu cannot stand being in the Navy, but he stated that he really didn’t know what else to do if he didn’t stay in. Chu loves it so much she said she would stay in until she dies if they let her. Henderson seems to be indifferent. He stated, “I figured after my first four that I’d either have to stay in or go home, ten years later I’m still here. I like it; it keeps me from being fat and lazy. It’s nice to know that I’ll always have a paycheck. I only have ten years left now anyway; there is no sense in getting out now, might as well retire.” Smith prefers to stay in due to his large family; he said that the

benefits outweigh the risks. "If it weren't for housing and all the perks, I wouldn't be able to support my family. Five kids would be hard to feed."

All those perks come at a price, not only for the guys in, but also for their families. At any given time they could be sent all around the world. Right now Henderson is preparing for his second deployment to Yuma, Arizona for training. He stated, "I'm pissed. They were going to send me to India, now I have to go back to Hell." But because of the military many of them have gotten to see some amazing places. For example: India, Alaska, Thailand, Australia, North Korea, China, Japan...just to name a few.

All the people in NDI are ready to go anywhere they are needed in order to do their job and serve their country. With all the other aspects of their job they also have pride. They have pride in what they do on a daily basis and pride in the fact that they may be needed at any time. Its not something they think about all the time, but its something they are all ready for.