

# SWOS-in-a-Box

## Generation Y's Division Officer Training

By LTJG Kate Shovlin, USN



USS Kitty Hawk — Photo courtesy of LTJG Kate Shovlin, USN

You're excited. You've managed your time wisely and now have 45 minutes to knock out the last remaining "SWOS-in-a-Box (Surface Warfare Officer School)" engineering modules. If only you could find a free computer ...

"ASWO!" (Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer) normally a first tour division officer billet.

Blast! Tasking from your department head. "Sir, I have the next watch and I'm trying to finish ..."

Your entreaties go unheard. No problem, you can route the overdue E-5 evaluation for the required signature in 15 minutes, with time to spare for the modules. The eval is done and your three roommates are finally off the one computer you share. A knock on your stateroom door. A chit requires your signature. Back to the computer. Knock, knock. Your division was just reprimanded by the XO for goofing off and your chief is nowhere to be found.

"Go fix them, ASWO!"

Finally, you surrender to the SWO (Surface Warfare Officer) powers that be. The engineering modules will not be completed tonight.

Sound familiar?

### Six Months of Classroom Time = 6 CDs

Soon after the Division Officer At-Sea Training Program—a six-disc CD-ROM set commonly known by most JOs as "SWOS-in-a-Box"—in the streets, NETC (Naval Education and Training Command) was patting itself on the back for a job well done. They anticipated that their "re-engineering" of the surface warfare qualification from six months' worth of classroom instruction to six CDs would no doubt yield great performance results, not to mention save Big Navy

some money and produce SWO qualified officers approximately 12 months earlier than under the previous qualification process.

This rapid qualification certainly has taken place on a grand scale, as wave after wave of SWO-pin-bound candidates make their way to Newport, RI, for the three-week "finishing school" that marks the final leg of their qualification journey only 12 to 18 months after first arriving to their ship.

### Quantity vs. Quality

What NETC may fail to recognize, however, is the quality of the division officer they're now producing—one who lacks baseline knowledge when first reporting onboard and must struggle to qualify through a process of trial, error and failure, while being forced to sit in front of a computer for hours on end. The fact is, the current training program is ineffective and wasteful. Shipboard life is not conducive to completing a program like "SWOS-in-a-Box," and the follow-on three-week finishing school is, quite simply, a paid vacation.

For those unfamiliar with the current SWO qualification process, here it is in a nutshell:

- Report to your ship.
- Complete numerous PQS (Personnel Qualification Standard) packages.
- Stand watch as the Conning Officer on the bridge, then Junior Officer of the Deck and then finally Officer of the Deck (OOD).
- After the Captain has sufficient confidence in your abilities as OOD to the point where he can go to sleep at night and know you won't hit a rock or faint at the slightest scent of danger, he will sign a letter designating you as a qualified OOD.
- During this time, you must also complete all modules of "SWOS-in-a-Box," which range from general knowledge in engineering and combat systems, to navigation and damage control. The program even provides a handy tracking sheet in order to show your progress through the final tests and case studies.

### Teaching Ourselves to Be SWOs

Most JOs hear legendary stories of what the Surface Warfare Officer School (SWOS) in Newport used to be like. Six months of partying, college beyond college, days spent in the classroom, nights spent at Pelham's or the Brick Alley Pub.

Nowadays, green ensigns, fresh from the Naval Academy and ROTC units, report directly to their ships – Do not pass Go, do not collect your baseline shipboard knowledge. All they have are six CDs and a promise: that they'll get a mentor and plenty of hands-on training. Good luck! In the meantime, while they're juggling hours in front of the computer moving at their own pace (or rather the pace that their ship's daily routine dictates), these officers also are supposed to step up and lead their divisions from day one. For some, there was no learning curve. For most, there is this challenge: how do I effectively teach myself to be a SWO?

According to the SWOS Command Web site, the division officer at-sea curriculum is "a computer-based training that uses shipboard evolutions and experience as a training tool..." and "involves the trainees, senior SWOs assigned as mentors to the trainee and technical mentors for specialized topics." If the CD program is used properly, division officers must first complete a module, or a chapter on a specific subject and all associated practicum and problems. Then they must take the associated module exam. If they pass, they then repeat all the modules, complete the case studies and move on to the next module. If not, they keep taking that test until they pass, and then move on.



LTJG Kate Shovlin, USN (on left)  
Photo courtesy of LTJG Kate Shovlin, USN



Mt Fuji off the bow USS Shiloh  
Photo courtesy of LTJG Kate Shovlin, USN

### “SWOS-in-a-Box” Takes a Backseat

In a perfect SWO world, one where personal computers abound, 36-hour days exist, all department heads were willing to give a helping hand and calorie-free donuts were served for breakfast, maybe this "SWOS-in-a-Box" would be the ultimate solution. Instead, DIVOs (Division Officers) find themselves desperately hunting down free computers, since most share one among their six-man stateroom. My guess would be that many do not have the promised assigned mentor, either.

In other words, the support system is not in place for this program. Furthermore, many find it hard to sit in front of a computer for hours without being distracted by real-world events. "SWOS-in-a-Box" will always take a backseat, which is, perhaps, why some COs choose not to enforce its completion. When I showed up to SWOS, only half of my class had actually completed the program. That was my first hint that the standard was being enforced at different levels throughout the fleet.

### Where's SWOS When We Need It Most?

The mission of SWOS is "to prepare OOD underway qualified officers for SWO qualification by immersing them in a collaborative, task-based environment which will broaden each officer's professional knowledge base and reinforce fundamental principles and practices in accordance with existing instructions and policies."

The three-week division officer course claims to cover the knowledge a SWO is expected to know, including firefighting

and damage control, DIVO admin, simulated 3-D shipboard driving and maritime warfare scenarios. On our first day, however, the instructors made it clear that this course was not designed "to help us earn our SWO pins." Instead, it was to help us on our way to becoming department heads.

I found myself asking two questions: if that indeed was the case, why then is this course required before we earn our pins? And why wasn't I sent here en route to my first ship? I could have used the driving practice then, before I earned my OOD underway letter, rather than a refresher course 12 months later. Where were you, SWOS, when I needed you most?

### Training through Failure

We have the ability and the money to set up our division officers for success. Instead, we have a system of trial-by-fire in place. SWOs teach their young through failure. For example, I learned how to do a proper spot-check only after having completely failed four other checks, and for months I didn't know what an "R-check" was. The 3-M (maintenance, material and management) system is just one of the many things DIVOs should learn before reporting.

Other topics that would build a strong baseline knowledge could include an explanation of the training cycle, information about naturalizations and marriages, Navy programs and repair locker officer basics. Yes, Buttercup was fun, but I'm probably never going to set up a K-type shoring myself. As a locker officer, I will be expected to read a DC-plate and recommend a safe-route so my hose team can avoid the smoke boundaries. Do they teach that at SWOS? No. What instruction do I turn to if a Sailor in my division wants to become a US citizen? "SWOS-in-a-Box" isn't going show me how to help him with his required naturalization paperwork and route his chit.

### Make It Portable

"SWOS-in-a-Box" is an effective reference tool. Used in lieu of hands-on training, however, it's weak at best. It's as if the Navy has resigned itself to the fact that there is just no time for personal instruction. Have we become a do-it-yourself service? Unless the Navy wants to issue each ensign a laptop, the CD-ROM program should also be made into a textbook or portable pamphlets – something



USS Chancellorsville (foreground) — Photo courtesy of LTJG Kate Shovlin, USN

that can be carried around and studied without a computer. Why not give "SWOS-in-a-Box" to the ROTC units and academies to complete prior to graduation, when computers are readily available?

As far as the finishing school in Newport goes, perhaps three weeks is the perfect amount of time for class-based instruction; six months certainly is too long. But how about putting it at the beginning of our first DIVO tour, instead of towards the end? All ensigns will then arrive with the same baseline knowledge and be valuable members of the wardroom from the start. They'll know how to do a spot-check and can jump in, ready to lead a repair locker. Some may even learn the bow from the stern before the two-month mark.

During the last few days of SWOS, instructors ask for feedback about the course of instruction and the CD-ROM

program. After receiving the feedback sheets, they tell us about how, after careful feedback analysis, they have the new and improved "SWOS-in-a-Box" version 6.0! This one won't lock up after the third module, guaranteed!

This is not the answer.

*About the Author: LTJG Kate Shovlin, a 2004 graduate of the US Naval Academy, is currently serving as the Navigator and Legal Officer on board USS SHILOH (CG-67), forward deployed in Yokosuka, Japan. She's a diehard fan of Philly sports teams, especially when they're terrible, and always fights to win, even if it's at a game of Scrabble. She's also thankful that there is Starbucks in Japan.*