



## Pass it On . . .

When I was a boy, we used to play a game called “Pass-it-on.” I’ve since heard the same game called by several different names, including “Telephone,” “Telegraph,” and “The Whisper Game.” It’s easy to play. You line up a bunch of kids, and whisper a message into the ear of the first child. He or she then whispers the same message into the ear of the next child in line, who repeats it — in turn — to the child after that. The message travels from one end of the line to the other, passed only in whispers from one child to another. When it comes to the last child in line, he or she is supposed to repeat the message aloud.

Chances are, you played the game as a child, although you may know it by a different name. You may even have tried it as an adult, probably as part of a training seminar. It’s a popular exercise for demonstrating the problems inherent in verbal communication.

Whether you played it as an adult or child, you already know what happens. The message received and repeated by the last person in line usually bears only a passing resemblance to the original whisper. Sometimes the message comes through essentially intact, but — more often — it becomes garbled to the point of being comical. At the very least, the details tend to get skewed.

It turns out that the same thing can happen easily, even if the message is in written form, as demonstrated by a recent incident involving my opinion column. I got my first clue that something had gone amiss when I received an email from one of the staff writers at the *Navy Times* newspaper. The gentleman from *Navy Times* gave me the name and phone number of a Commander assigned to the Public Affairs Office for the Chief of Naval Operations. Something strange had happened to one of my opinion columns. Something involving the CNO himself.

The column in question turned out to be “The Wrong Army,” written and published this past March. Someone had either liked (or disliked) my words enough to copy them into an email, and forward it one or more friends. Perhaps the original forwarder was dazzled by my sterling wit and

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His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

His first novel, *[TORPEDO](#)* won the 2005 Admiral Nimitz Award for Outstanding Naval Fiction, and the 2005 American Author Medal.

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brilliant logic, and simply could not *wait* to share them with his or her friends. Or, maybe he or she found my writing disjointed enough or offensive enough to hold up as an object of ridicule. I cannot say, although I *will* admit to having a personal favorite among those alternatives.

Whatever the intent, the email containing “The Wrong Army” began swimming around in the strange backwaters of the Internet, forwarded — with comments or without — to thousands of people. And, much like the children’s game that I mentioned in the first few paragraphs of this column, the content of that much-forwarded email began to change as it passed from one reader to another. The actual body of the piece, the text of the original column, remained pretty much intact. But the header at the top of the message began to undergo metamorphosis.

Somewhere along the line, it picked up the headline “**Navy Chief Lets Loose a Broadside.**” So far, so good. I *am* a retired Navy Chief, and you could certainly argue that I was loosing a broadside. If you haven’t read it, “The Wrong Army” is a fairly opinionated piece. (Okay, it’s a *very* opinionated piece.) So that header was appropriate, even if I hadn’t chosen it myself.

If the shape shifting had ended there, nothing else would have happened, apart from a lot of people circulating an email from an old Navy Chief. But, after a few hundred bounces, the header of the email became “**Navy Chief of Operations Lets Loose a Broadside.**” *Now* we were starting to get into the danger zone. Someone could look at that header, and easily conclude that the words that followed were straight from the mouth of the CNO. Not good. But the header of the email wasn’t through changing yet. A few hundred bounces later, it had acquired another headline: “**Speech by the Chief of Naval Operations.**” By this time, all mention of retired Navy Chief Petty Officer Jeff Edwards had vanished from the email. It was squarely marked as the work of the Chief of Naval Operations.

Even that might have gone unnoticed. All manner of strange things propagate through the internet, often under the names of people who never said any such thing. But somewhere along the line, my column — now relabeled as a speech from the CNO — found its way into the inbox of a journalist. I honestly don’t know which one, and I don’t really know how to go about finding out. It probably doesn’t matter. But *that’s* when the fun started.

As I’ve mentioned, “The Wrong Army” is a rather opinionated bit of writing. It’s more than a little tongue-in-cheek, but there’s some no-kidding fire in there too. It’s not exactly the kind of thing that the Navy’s top Admiral is likely to say in a public address. But here was an email, complete with built-in diatribe, purporting to be a transcript from a speech delivered by Admiral Mullen himself.

It might be an exaggeration to call the result a feeding frenzy, but I don’t think I’d be off by much. Before you could say “*misattribution,*” the phones were ringing and the email inquiries were flying. The CNO’s Public Affairs staff spent an entire morning fielding calls and messages. Did the CNO *really* say all that stuff? *When* had he given the speech? What group had been speaking to at the time?

The answer was simple. Those were *not* Admiral Mullen’s remarks. Period. End of story. Nonetheless, the Admiral’s PAO staff spent a lot of time jumping through hoops, trying to make sure that their boss didn’t end up taking the heat for something the man never said.



At the request of the CNO's Public Affairs Officer, the online edition of *Navy Times* has already published a statement clarifying the mix-up under the headline "**CNO wrongly linked to retired chief's Web diatribe.**" The announcement, although accurate in all other respects, describes "The Wrong Army" as "*critical of armed forces management, the media, and the public.*" The difference is purely one of interpretation, but I don't believe my article is critical of armed forces management, or the general American public. If it comes across that way, then I expressed myself poorly.

"The Wrong Army" *is* critical of some elements of the media, some politicians, and a certain class of so-called experts. I don't apologize for that. Specifically, I intended to turn the focus of criticism back on those people who are inclined to condemn the military under any and all circumstances. I object to the default assumption that our armed forces are doing the wrong thing all the time.

I don't pretend that our military personnel never make mistakes, or that our leaders never make bad decisions. But some people are incapable of recognizing the dedication and sacrifice of the men and women who defend America. *Those* are the people I was taking to task; *not* the leaders of our armed forces, and *not* the common American citizen.

Although I'm not altogether crazy about the way the *Navy Times* piece characterizes my message, the gist of their article is right on target. I appreciate their quick action in debunking this little tempest in a teapot. With luck, their efforts will squelch some of the rumors that are rocketing around the web.

But I know that information takes on a life of its own once it gets sucked into the Internet. Myths, hoaxes, and legends can breed and flourish indefinitely, often despite easily accessible proof that they are false. Even an Internet rumor that appears to be definitely dead can rise to live again — and again, and *again*. The only hope of countering the *stories-that-will-not-die* is to replicate the truth that repudiates them as frequently as possible. And so I am writing this column. This is part of my attempt to set the record straight. I've made similar efforts in other venues, but this is my most far-reaching podium, so I repeat them here.

For the record, I am *not* the Chief of Naval Operations. I may have delusions of grandeur, but they don't stretch the boundaries of reality quite *that* far. Also for the record, the CNO did not write "The Wrong Army." I did. If you like the column, the credit goes to *me*. If you hate it, *I* get the blame. It's neither part of a CNO speech, nor any part of his professional writings. "The Wrong Army" is my baby, warts and all.

If you see anyone trying to give the credit (or blame) for "The Wrong Army" to the CNO, please set them straight. Admiral Mullen has quite enough on his hands, without catching flack for something I wrote.

In other words, please *Pass it on ...*

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