

Episode 57.mp3

Speaker 1 [00:00:00] The views expressed in this interview are those of the individuals, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy, or the Naval Postgraduate School. Welcome to the Trident Room. Brewer of stout. Conversation unfiltered and on tap.

Speaker 2 [00:00:18] On today's episode of Lieutenant Dan Patterson and Lieutenant Commander Alaina Youngblood speak with Rear Admiral John Oaken about his expansive naval career and the evolution of his leadership values.

Speaker 3 [00:00:32] Good afternoon from the Naval Postgraduate School campus here in Monterey. We are honored to have with us today Rear Admiral John O'Connor, Vice Commander of U.S. Fleet Cyber Command. With me today is Lieutenant Commander Elena Youngblood and myself, Lieutenant Dan Peterson. And typically at this point, we would read through the bio of Admiral O'Connor, but I feel like that might take up the full 30 minute block. So rather than go through that, if you don't mind, sir, would you mind just kind of walking us through some of your career highlights?

Speaker 4 [00:00:58] Sure. I'm just a kid from upstate New York, born and raised in Syracuse. Youngest of five boys. Graduated high school in 1987 from West Tennessee High School. All I ever want to do was be a broadcast meteorologist. Need a way to go to school? Need a way to pay for school. So I went to New York Maritime down South. Graduated in 1991. Started out as a service warfare officer on USS Ticonderoga, and then moved every 24 to 27 months from 1991 to today. So stationed in South Mississippi as an aide did a forecast for optimum track ship routing tour in Norfolk as a young. A meteorology and oceanography officer. Postgraduate school here 2000 to 2003 Ford USS Dwight Eisenhower as a ship's meteorologist and oceanographer, Naval War College Joint Staff deputy director, regional operations work in South Comm. Navy issues command out of Yokosuka. The H.W. center there the top of the seamount. personnel officer Millington command back and lovely Monterey of fleet Numerical Meteorology and oceanography command back on the NAF staff as the ETA Admiral branch and then Admiral Thai then 2017 selected for flag and then commanded Naval Meteorology oceanography command for four years. Oceanographer, the Navy navigator of the Navy. And then, in 2021, moved back to DC and took over as director, information warfare integration. And then last fall, moved up to Fort Meade, just up the Baltimore Washington Parkway, working for Admiral Clapperton and as as his vice commander.

Speaker 3 [00:02:30] Wow. And and I think that's kind of the reason why we didn't want to read the full bio, because that would have taken the full 30 minutes for. Thanks for cutting that down to a couple of minutes after the start. So really appreciate that. And you kind of already knocked out one of the questions I was going to ask at the beginning, I share a common background. I was also born in upstate New York. So my question kind of revolves around how do two people from upstate New York decide to join the Navy?

Speaker 4 [00:02:53] Yeah. So for me, I had no intention of ever joining the Navy. Told you I want to be a broadcast meteorologist. I want to be the next Al Roker. I fell in love with meteorology in high school. My science teacher got me really jazzed about the science. And so, truth be told, I was a terrible student in high school. I didn't apply myself. I didn't work hard. I barely got into college. I got into two schools, Suny Brockport and Suny

enough money to pay for college for one year, and I had to get a scholarship. What I realized at maritime was a lot of the values from upstate New York. And, Dan, you could probably attest to this. Community values, hard work, discipline yourself. Those things started to come out when I had to start living on my own and taking responsibility for my actions, and my parents weren't there to sort of ride roughshod on me. And I naturally found that the sea service, the family values in the sea service, the things that we do started to mesh very, very naturally with my upbringing in my community of Camillus in Syracuse, New York, and my high school, West Genesee. And so I took the ROTC route, and again, I was going to do my four years and get out. And that was in 1995. And lo and behold, we're now 2024.

Speaker 3 [00:04:11] That's crazy, because there's a lot of parallels, I think, in the way that we both arrived in the Navy. I similarly had no interest in joining the military when I was in high school, but a different generation. And I grew up and watch 911 happen live the first semester in college. And that really changed the way that I viewed the world and what I felt like I could give. And you hit the nail on the head being from upstate New York. And when it's time to roll up your sleeves and get work done, that's what we do. So really awesome. Thank you sir.

Speaker 1 [00:04:37] I would think it's a little bit obvious, as you said, what your education was and the categories and genres of that. So would you say that that education and your preference for the environmental sciences influenced your naval career choice?

Speaker 4 [00:04:50] Yeah, absolutely. Lana. So let me just sort of unpack that a little bit. When I graduated maritime, I had no idea we had a meteorology and oceanography community. It was never talked about. None of those Nonso aviator submarine communities were ever talked about. And so I get on board the USS Ticonderoga and we're doing kind of drug ops. This is in 1994. And on board Senior Chief Gary Benner, an AG one rolling scholar. So Ajax, Benner and AG one scow, I come aboard and we're doing a back. Well, now, it was a rest back then. But, you know, basically, environmental prediction of low, slow fliers and how to tune our radars. And I was just blown away. I'm like, I had no idea we had a community that did that brought the two loves of my life outside my wife, Valerie, but the two loves of my career. Right. The love for the science and and the love for the ocean. And I fell in love with the ocean at Maritime College. It was just. It's just a whole nother thing being at sea, especially as a young person. And I just. I fell in love with the sea. And I found these, these two communities. And the truth is, I was getting out in 1995, I was going to get out of the Navy, and I was going to go pursue my career in broadcast meteorology. And until I found Senior Chief Benner. And if senior Chief Banner's going to watch us because he's still live in Norfolk, I guarantee you'll remember that conversation that him and I had. But that's the, I found the two labs, and, I decided I'm going to make. I'm going to try this. I'm going to a lateral transfer. I'll try it one time. And if I like it, great, I'll stick with it. And what I found is the organization that I was in. And this is nothing against the surface warfare officers or the ships. Right. But, back in the 90s, I was finding myself an environment that the community cared more about what I could do by who I am. And when I transitioned into the meter community, I found a community that cared as much about who I am, as much as what I can do. They care that my dad was dying of cancer in upstate New York, and allowed me to take leave for me to go see my dad as he was dying. And so it was that love of the community and. The family environment that I think. I would hope all of you would agree that we have in our community, and it transcends any pay grade. It's we are part of the meta family. And and so from 1995 to today, I've had a great ride, and I think I'm leaving it in a place where it

it and talk it. And I think anything that I've been able to do as far as the fundamental

sub commands underneath it? And they literally told it from the stars to the seabed, from the bottom of the floor, but the bottom of the ocean to the stars. And we lined up our commands on the pier. And it started with USO. So we started with the stars in time, and it worked its way down through the environment, down to the ground, down to the boundary layer, down to the surface air sea interface, and then down into the ocean and all the way down to the seabed. And when they got done with that conversation, then they actually went on board Maury to see the data collection, including the core samplers and the ROVs. And so we try to tell that story that it's the seamless movement throughout the environment, from the bottom of the ocean to the stars that we are responsible to deliver.

Speaker 3 [00:14:11] I think that's awesome because, you know, a lot of times we get wrapped up into different domains, and sometimes we forget that there is a seamless transition between all of them, and how they connect is critically important. So that's amazing to be able to tie that all together in one storyboard like that.

Speaker 1 [00:14:25] Or you generally just get told like, oh, you're you're me, talk your weather. No.

Speaker 4 [00:14:28] What's the goal forecast?

Speaker 1 [00:14:29] It's it's a whole wholesome forecast. It's everything.

Speaker 3 [00:14:33] So there's been a lot of iterations. You know, it starts with us I think kind of struck a chord within the community. It's still something that the community still

our words, our actions. You got to think like your thoughts turn into your words. Your words turn into actions. Your actions turn into habits. And it starts with us, every one of us.

Speaker 3 [00:17:14] And I think that's one of the pieces about it starts with us. That really resonates with me because, you know, we talk about the most important ships in the fleet, and I think this one in particular hits to the cornerstone of what the US Navy is built on. And that's ownership. And I think, you know, it starts with us, really encapsulates that ownership piece of each one of us owns a piece of the fight, and it's up to us as individuals to perform. And really, like you were saying, have that positive influence on other people's lives. And so I, I really resonated with me, and I'm glad to hear the Genesis and where it all kind of started from. So thank you for that, sir.

Speaker 4 [00:17:49] I think it was a binding moment also in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, that it starts with us. How are we going to treat each other? How are we going to have those conversat

porter, Caucasian southern white naval aviator. Fred, African American Air Force aviator from the South. And Porter was put in the cell with Fred and nursed him back together. I didn't know the story until I went to War College. And the two gentlemen that I just mentioned were on stage, and they told her entire story right in front of us. And that was one of those ones where, like, hey, we are one. We are one. Regardless of what the book cover shows. Embrace the book cover. But it's really about the book.

Speaker 3 [00:25:08] And I'm glad that you brought up the importance of family. I don't think there's been a podcast interview that I've done, leadership, that the value and the importance of family has not been left or impressed upon me personally, as so, you know, in the military, it's more than just the member, it's the family. And that goes more, I think, to the human aspect of what you've been discussing with developing the human and also the families. And so it's an incredibly valuable strength that we have, and it's a.

Speaker 4 [00:25:32] Cornerstone of our nation's strength.

Speaker 3 [00:25:34] Absolutely, sir. You were the commander of Cinemark, and I just wanted to kind of ask, as you've progressed through your career now, how did that

Speaker 1 [00:27:58] Absolutely. Thank you very much. In your most recent role, you were the director of Warfare Integration Directorate into in six at the office of the Chief of Naval Operations. How did your role as the oceanographer and 80 and all of your previous meteoric experience, as we've discussed, help you for that specific position?

Speaker 4 [00:28:17] Yeah, we're an apprentice organization. The Navy is an apprentice organization. Every job you take is going to be something new that you've never done before, and you're gonna have to figure it out. So when I stepped in as the integrator, I had a fleet concentration approach where I had a fleet first approach, which I was able to, I think, bring that into a building that in some pockets thinks fleet first, but in a large section does not think that fleet fleet forces nav your first. So so that was helpful. But the other aspects of it, it was a steep learning curve for cryptology, electromagnetic warfare, intelligence, information technology, information technology policy. But I leaned on my fleet experience. I leaned on what was happening in the fleet, what they thought was a priority, what makes their readiness, their operational readiness to deliver warfighting and combat power. What was happening. And this is through the times of Admiral Davidson and Admiral Grady. What did he think about what what consumed his time and those things that I made a priority because the commander down to fleet forces was making them a priority, and he was using his limited and most precious asset, which is time on these critical capabilities.

Speaker 3 [00:29:27] So what were some of your biggest takeaways is opposed to unsexy.

Speaker 4 [00:29:31] We need more cowbell. We need more I and I think. You can see that if you just you want to follow the priorities, you follow the money. And we grew the budget 18% over the last three years, largely through other people's money, whether it's big corporate, Navy money, DoD or congressional ads. That's a true sense of what we're doing is very important things in, from and through space really, really important. It's a domain that we must pay strict attention to. And and I think you can see the Navy we established while I was there, the maritime space officer designator, to allow us to put our limited intellectual capital. And the folks that are really good in the space domain, that wear the Navy uniform into these critical billets in MOX and some of the other locations to help operational commanders make these tough decisions. I want to talk about maritime operations in from a through space.

Speaker 1 [00:30:23] Thank you very much, sir. Thank you for your time and 1

you have to understand how to communicate with individuals. And I learned that with Kim. And when I barged into her office. So, Kim, you're listening. I'm really sorry I did that. We built a good friendship over the years, but I think that talks to the the leadership aspect, that it is inherent. You just can't communicate with everybody the same way.

Speaker 3 [00:36:07] So we're winding down on time. And I really appreciate your time and being so gracious with us today. I got two more real quick questions for you. One is, what advice would you give to any college student looking to pursue a career in the military?

Speaker 4 [00:36:19] Yeah, I'll specifically talk about the Navy. The Navy is a land of opportunity. If you want to do something bigger than yourself for the greater good things that you can even see that you can do, and you want to be part of a large family, a large network where you gain friendships that last decades. This is a place for you. I'd also tell them find your purpose, your passion, and accept the lifestyle that goes with it. This is not an easy life, but anything worth doing is going to be hard. And the Navy's no different than any. But this is a it's been a great time. I've absolutely loved my 33 years that they're winding down now, but I look back with no regrets and a lot of admiration for the folks that poured leadership into me and those young people that John O'Connor that's out there in some small town in upstate New York that's thinking about, you know, what do I want to do with my life? Join the Navy?

Speaker 3 [00:37:09] Absolutely. Thank you sir. And lastly, before we go, I'd be remiss to not acknowledge that you're a huge sports fan. And so we got the Caps and Penguins coming up tomorrow tomt T8 reW*Od