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Most mentoring and leadership guidance is geared towards helping an individual to excel in his or her career and get promoted. Time tested themes are to “seek out and excel in positions of leadership” and “break out in competitive FITREP rankings.” This article will discuss a different twist on leadership – that of having the courage to take actions that are best for the Navy – even when those actions are not best for your career. This may mean accepting a reserve assignment where you can make a direct, personal impact versus taking one that is better suited to “check a box” on your career path.

Many Reservists work in government and industry occupations developing capabilities to improve remote sensing, tactical data delivery, information processing, tracking technology, precision targeting, missile defense, and the like. I want each of you to think about ways to leverage your civilian skills and technical insights in order to bring enhanced capabilities to the Navy and to the rest of the Defense Department.

As an example from my own career, I turned down an XO tour as a mid-grade commander and instead pursued a position as the Special Projects Officer with an EA-6B squadron. As XO of a large unit, I would have been positioned to be #1 of a stack of commanders – a great career move. So why would I want to become an “extra” CDR in a Navy squadron, where I would clearly be ranked 2 of 2 (behind the XO)? This would appear to be career suicide. The answer: I was not going to the squadron to further my own career – I was going with the intent to make a difference for the future of naval warfighting. At the time, I worked at the National Reconnaissance Office and helped develop a system that was able to bring near real-time situation awareness and targeting

Making A Difference

By CAPT Randy Nees, USN

data from space sensors directly to tactical users. Despite the huge potential tactical benefit, the Navy had no plans to include this new capability in any of its aircraft. I became determined to change Navy thinking and program plans.

Starting new Navy programs is very difficult, however, and most thought that we would never succeed. The defense acquisition system is poised to say “no” to innovative concepts and technology where no formal requirement exists. However, the VAQ-209 “Starwarriors” did get approval and modified EA-6B aircraft with special equipment to receive the satellite broadcast. After much preparation, we demonstrated the tactical advantage of using long range space sensors to target live High Speed Anti-Radiation missiles for the first time. A Navy Reserve colleague of mine, CDR Bill Rothwell, flew with the reserve P-3 squadron which struck a ship at sea with the first Harpoon missile ever targeted using space sensors. These reserve successes resulted in the establishment of the EA-6B Overhead Connectivity Program and the addition of space reconnaissance capabilities into the P-3C Anti-Surface Warfare Improvement Program and the EP-3 Sensor System Improvement Program.

The impact of these programs is felt today in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) as many naval and joint aircraft can now take advantage of our nation’s space reconnaissance. And the impact continues to grow. The E-2C Hawkeye 2000 and EA-6B ICAP III are both fielding fully integrated versions of this capability in FY05/06. Future platforms like the EA-18G Growler and F-35 Joint Strike Fighter are also adding a space targeting capability. The technology is even finding its way into future weapons. For example, the Advanced Anti-Radiation Guided Missile Program integrates a receiver inside the missile that will enable aircrew to display space reconnaissance information.

I challenge each of you to use your civilian skills and insights to influence future Navy program plans. Maybe, you have ideas on how to improve some aspect of Tactical Tomahawk, Aegis Weapons System, or



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submarine operations. Possibly, you know of technology or procedures that could enhance time critical strike, ballistic missile defense, electronic attack, or combat search and rescue. Who else is better positioned to bring this new capability forward? Who will make this happen, if you don’t? I implore you to have the courage to take the reserve job where you know you’ll be able to make a difference for the Fleet. After all, the end goal is all about making the Navy a more effective warfighting organization for those who follow us.

Mandatory retirement is a “hard stop” that is nonnegotiable. Don’t wait until the very end of your career to make your best contributions; you should be making them all along. Ensure that you earn your promotions based on what you do for the Navy and your Sailors, not what you do for yourself. Seek out opportunities to add value; the satisfaction of making a real difference is worth far more than a paycheck.

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