

A Long Lineage of Military Service

An Interview with Vice Admiral Sean Buck, Superintendent, United States Naval Academy

EDITORS' NOTE Vice Admiral Sean Buck is a native of Indianapolis, Indiana. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and received his commission in 1983. He was designated a naval flight officer in 1985. He earned a Master of Arts in International Security Policy from George Washington University and has completed studies at the College of Naval Command and Staff, U.S. Naval War College, and the Armed Forces Staff College; a fellowship with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Seminar XXI: Foreign



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Politics, International Relations, and the National Interest; and executive certificate programs at both the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Graduate School of Education. As a flag officer, Buck has served as Commander, Patrol and Reconnaissance Force with U.S. 5th and 7th Fleets, Fleet Air Forward, Patrol and Reconnaissance Group; Chief of Staff, Strategy, Plans and Policy (J5), the Joint Staff; Director, 21st Century Sailor Office, where his portfolio included the Navy's programs on sexual assault prevention and response, suicide prevention, alcohol abuse and other destructive behaviors; and most recently he served as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet. Flying the P-3C Orion, Buck's early at-sea operational tours were with the "Fighting Marlins" of Patrol Squadron (VP) 40; a disassociated sea tour aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) as the Catapult and Arresting Gear Division Officer; and a department head tour with the "Tridents" of VP-26. He subsequently commanded VP-26 and Patrol and Reconnaissance Wing 11. His shore and staff assignments include Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 1; Bureau of Naval Personnel; Joint Staff J3; Office of the Chief of Naval Operations staff as executive assistant to the deputy chief of Naval Operations (CNO) for Warfare Requirements and Programs (N6/N7); and as Deputy Director for Operations in the Strategy and Policy Directorate (J5), U.S. Joint Forces Command. Prior to major command, Buck completed an interim assignment with the National Reconnaissance Office and he is a member of the Navy's Space Cadre. He also completed a special assignment as a senior fellow on the CNO's Strategic Studies Group in Newport, Rhode Island, an innovation think tank for the Navy. Buck became the 63rd Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy on July 26, 2019. Buck's personal awards include the Distinguished Service Medal, Defense Superior Service Medal (two awards), Legion of Merit (five awards) and various other personal, unit and service awards. .

ACADEMY BRIEF As the undergraduate college of our country's naval service, the Naval Academy (usna.edu) prepares young men and women to become professional officers of competence, character, and compassion in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Naval Academy students are midshipmen on active duty in the U.S. Navy. They attend the academy for four years, graduating with BS degrees and commissions as ensigns in the Navy or second lieutenants in the Marine Corps. Naval Academy graduates serve at least five years in the Navy or Marine Corps.

What attracted you to a career in the military?

The most significant thing that attracted me to a career in the military was my family's long lineage of military service, particularly in the U.S. Navy. The Buck family has four consecutive generations of naval officers who have served from 1900 to the present day: Lt. Cmdr. Arthur Whittier (my grandfather); Navy Capt. Edward G. Buck (my father); myself; and my son, Lt. Cmdr. Jeffrey S. Buck. Adding to this lineage, three of us have been or still are naval aviators, all flying maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft.

How has the military shaped your leadership approach and style?

The military began to shape my leadership style and approach long before I joined. My grandfather and father always stressed to me the importance of teamwork, being part of a team, accountability for my actions and treating everyone with dignity and respect. I would suggest that my grandmother and mother played an even more important role in teaching me how to treat others, which is the bedrock foundation to the success of any team or organization.

How do you define resilience and how critical is resilience in the military?

I define resilience as the ability to maintain my focus, my ability to think and my ability to safely and effectively lead and act during times of significant fatigue and/or when faced with times of stress, crisis, uncertainty, ambiguity or grief. Resilience is also characterized by the willingness and ability to bounce back from setback or defeat and try, try again.

As Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, you are charged with the weighty responsibility of training the next generation of sailors and marines. How critical is it for these future leaders to be resilient and do you feel that this is something that can be taught?

As Superintendent, I am charged with leading the team charged with developing the next generations of leaders of character to assume the highest responsibilities of command, citizenship and government. Resilience is a critical aspect of this professional and personal development because on day one – post-graduation and commissioning – our graduates will be charged with leading and caring for hundreds of young sailors and marines while they work together to defend our cherished way of life and freedoms against adversaries bent on challenging that. They need embedded in them the ability to persevere in all situations and remain confident and bold in times of strife. At the United States Naval Academy we know through decades of experience that resilience can be taught - taught through repetition and sets of practice until it becomes part of each midshipman's make up. We teach this through a myriad of experiential leadership opportunities over the four-year journey of a midshipman.

How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?

My personal resilience skills have held me in good stead through countless examples of physical fatigue, cognitive overload, horrific and tragic accidents, unexpected twists, turns and disruptions to initial plans; it's allowed me to continue to think and lead with purpose and with success.

Who are some of the resilient leaders you see today?

Some examples of resilient leaders that I see today are my Department of Defense senior leaders (service chiefs and service secretaries); my fellow flag and general officers in the Armed Services; first responders; medical professionals providing care in a pandemic; school teachers reacting to teaching in a COVID-19 environment; and policemen continuing to serve and protect their respective communities despite great social and racial unrest in our country.

What do you tell young people about the importance and value of serving in the military and, more specifically, the Navy?

I believe service to one's country is a noble undertaking. Service, specifically in the Armed Forces, is a great place to start one's young life. It develops character, maturity, resilience, leadership, and confidence – all skills that will hold you in good stead for whatever profession you choose to pursue later in life. Navy life is an adventure, not a job. It is a wonderful opportunity to see the world, meet new people, learn about different cultures and broaden your perspectives on life. ●