



Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
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Keynote address transcript

It is great to be back.

As “Street” [Chanik] mentioned, I am a past president of Tailhook.

There’s a couple of people I want to recognize this evening -- three in particular. It’s always dangerous for me to single out individuals when this is truly a collective successful event, as Tailhook in general has been these last couple of days.

“Roy” Rogers gave me a call and said the board was interested in having me become president. So that was in 2005. It turns out that’s the last Tailhook that Trish and I attended. As is the way with outgoing presidents, as “Chaser” alluded to with “Sterls” [Gilliam], I had the benefit of “Roy” Rogers taking me under his wing for a year when I was supposedly the president. Unfortunately the day before I was supposed to come up here for Tailhook, my father passed away. So I didn’t have the pleasure of standing here, as “Chaser” has done this evening, and stand here as the incoming president and preside over this banquet.

But true to form, “Roy” heard about the loss and called and said, “Whatever you do, don’t come to Reno.” And that’s the kind of guy that “Roy” is.

So when we landed here a couple of days ago, “Roy” was at the airport to meet us. And if anybody should be sitting at this head table up here, it’s “Roy” Rogers.

[Applause]

There’s a couple of others that have been mentioned already, and that’s “JR” and “Tag” [Ostertag]. In the short time that I served as president, their phones were ringing off the hook. On a regular basis, I was reaching out to the two of them. I will talk a little bit about history and heritage – but I look at people like “Tag” and “JR” that are already working on next year’s Tailhook. And sometimes we forget how critical it is to have volunteers like that, who really sacrifice year after year after year, so that we can enjoy an event like this. So “JR” and “Tag,” thank you for that.

[Applause]

As “Street” mentioned, shortly after that Hook 2005, I was selected for flag. I used to describe that as CNO picking me as the poster child for hope. He had to pick somebody as flag, that everybody then realizes that they too have a chance of putting on admiral.

I used to tell people that no one was more surprised than I was about putting on flag, but I would say that to an audience like this, and there would be 300 people lined up afterwards and I’d think, “I really made an impact with my comments.”

And all 300 of them were saying, “No, I was more surprised than you were that you were picked for flag.”

[Laughter]

My ego couldn't take it anymore.

But it's great to be back, and this is a great Hook. I don't know if it's because we've been gone for ten years. Some of it I think is the theme, "JOs at the tip of the spear." I can't remember so many JOs being at Hook as I've seen in the time that Trish and I have been wandering the hallways here over the last couple of days.

As is the way in our life, we have an anchor event, and then around that anchor event, we tie several other events to it. So I committed to speaking here at Tailhook about six months ago. And there were ten times since then that the staff was shaking their heads and I was shaking my head, saying "Why did I ever commit to that?" The conflicts that were coming up in the schedule, and we were trying to protect this date. We are very grateful we were able to do that.

We tied it to a swing through Japan. We just turned over Seventh Fleet from [Vice] Admiral Thomas to [Vice] Admiral Aucoin, through a very deceptive and very secretive process that the last DNS – me – created a plan by which the entire Pacific would be commanded by naval aviators.

[Laughter and applause]

We completed that plan when Joey Aucoin relieved Admiral Thomas. So we've got Joey Aucoin commanding Seventh Fleet, Nora Tyson commanding Third Fleet, I've got the privilege of leading Pacific Fleet, and of course Harry Harris is leading PACOM.

So I can't claim to take credit for that, but give me a chance and I will, being an aviator.

[Laughter]

So it's great to be back. I'm reminded as well by the theme, the year of the JO, Trish sent me an email the other day, and in it was a cartoon. It was a young boy sitting at the breakfast table, his mother was in the frame, and he was commenting to his mother, saying, "When I grow up I want to be a Naval Aviator."

And his mother responded, "Son, you can't do both."

[Laughter]

So as I look across this room tonight, as an ensign – I was fortunate enough to make it to the fleet as an ensign – there were people like "Wart," "Jacko," "Sterno," and many others out there that are here tonight that enabled me to be here today. In fact, I think they're here tonight because they're so incredulous, they can't believe that this has happened.

But I see a room full of JOs here, full of the JO spirit.

Now my staff tells me that I do best when I speak off the cuff, but tonight I need to make sure that I get it right rather than get it good. So I prepared a few comments.

I am going to talk about four specific points tonight;

One is who we are as JOs, and from my personal experience, where we came from. I am betting my experiences are no different than yours, or the JOs that are out there today, leading from the tip of the spear.

The second is my perspective of carrier aviation today and tomorrow, the challenges we face and what I suggest is a path forward that ensures the continued success of the community that we honor here tonight.

The third is the value Naval Aviation, specifically carriers, and what they bring to the nation.

The fourth and last is about the difference between history and heritage, and why I think that is so important for the Tailhook Association to continue the things that they do.

So, to the first point, let me do what aviators do best, talk about myself.

[Laughter]

This is how my career as a naval aviator started for me. I got in the Navy to get out of the Navy. I loved flying. And I started my path to a private pilot's license in high school, and I completed it shortly after my first year in college. I loved flying from the time that I was a very young man. My first memories were tied to flying.

So consequently as you would expect, like many of us here, I was fascinated with becoming an airline pilot, but I didn't have the resources to do it on my own. I couldn't afford the flight time. I couldn't afford the qualification. So despite the fact that my father was a Navy veteran, I went to the Air Force recruiter.

I walked into the Air Force recruiting office, and there was a tech sergeant there with his feet up on the desk, and I told him I wanted to be a pilot. He said, "Well, that's great. If you want to be an Air Force officer, we can make you an officer. Then once you receive your commission, if you're lucky they might send you to flight school."

So I walked next door, since that didn't fit with what my plan was for my future. So I walked next door to the Navy recruiter, and there was a young first class petty officer there. And I walked in there, and I said, "I'm interested in becoming an aviator." And I swear, I think I heard the door lock behind me.

[Laughter]

So he said, "Hang on a minute. I don't do recruiting for aviators, but I've got a guy that does." And he threw a video in the video machine. It was Blue Angels, and aircraft flying off of carriers. And five minutes later, a Mercedes pulls up in front. And this young Lieutenant gets out...

[Laughter]

A P-3 guy that had been flying around on per diem...

[Laughter and applause]

At that point I didn't care, because the next weekend – I grew up in San Diego – the next weekend we went flying out in a T-34B and I was hooked. The weekend after that we went out to a carrier and watched carrier operations. And that was the end of the story.

But at that time I was still interested in becoming an airline pilot. The MSR [minimum service requirement] was only four and a half years from the time you got your wings. So when I got my wings, I started that countdown. And I counted every month that went by.

I got down to just about two months before I could get out of the Navy. And I started having second thoughts. And those second thoughts ran along the lines of... I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to engender the same relationships outside the Navy, that I had enjoyed inside the Navy. And it was because of those relationships that I decided that I would take one more tour.

Looking back, it's been, "One more tour," throughout my entire career. I would never compare myself to someone like Admiral Stavridis, who wrote a recent book that he called, "The Accidental Admiral." I've been referring to myself as the accidental admiral for six years now. And my friends have been calling me that for seven.

[Laughter]

But looking back, and I share this with Sailors, I think the best rank that I ever had was lieutenant. I think for an enlisted Sailor, the best rank, commensurate rank, is a second class petty officer.

I never knew my weapon systems better. I knew how to fight that aircraft with a full-up system, and I knew how to fight that aircraft with a system that was broken. And more often than not, I could make that system work as well as a full-up system, even when it had deficiencies and degrades.

I was an LSO – don't hold it against me. One of the two awards I'm most proud of... I had the opportunity to attend the A-7 breakfast this morning, and it had two of this year's Michael Hoff award winners. And I was privileged to receive that award myself, as well as the LSO of the year award. So there's one trophy in my office in Pac Fleet, and that's the Michael Hoff award.

But I had the great privilege of being an LSO and running an LSO platform as a lieutenant, as a CAG LSO. When you talk about the authorities and responsibilities that this organization, and who we are as Tailhookers, gives to young lieutenants – and it's been that way for as long as there's been Tailhookers – it's just stunning. No other community can touch that.

I had a daily to-do list. I would show up to work every morning with my seven or eight items that I needed to get done. And I was done by about ten o'clock in the morning. I was squared away.

[Laughter]

So I had time. I worked for some great COs. One of my first COs when I was a young lieutenant j.g., he told me, "It's not enough to identify problems, Notso. You need to bring solutions to the problem as well." So in that day, after I finished my seven things I needed to get done, I sat down and I thought about all the things that were screwed up in the Navy.

[Laughter]

And that list grew over time.

[Laughter]

But listening to Jack I realized it wasn't enough just to criticize the Navy, that I needed to come up with solutions as well. So I came up with solutions to those problems. But it dawned on me that I was just too junior. If I could just be a four-star someday, I could really turn this Navy around.

[Laughter and applause]

Well that dream lasted for a little while, until I promoted to lieutenant commander, and I got kicked out of the JOPA, and I found out life wasn't as easy as it seems to be.

So on that note, on it not being as easy as it seems to be, let me transition to my second point, which is my perspective of carrier aviation today and tomorrow.

So the current landscape as I see it – and this is my perspective as the DNS now forward to the Pacific Fleet commander, so my data is a little bit dated – but JSF bills will continue to come forward as we field that awesome capability.

I just spent some time in Fallon, just before we arrived here in Reno. And we had three jets, three JSFs on the flight line there. And just as has always been the case, as soon as we field a new platform, as good as it is, as good as the requirements have been, as good as the system has been that delivered that platform to us, as soon as you get it into the hands of the JOs, I mean that machine really sings. And that's exactly, talking to [Rear Admiral Scott] Conn there, the CO of NAWDC, and he tells me that's exactly what's happening with those three JSFs that are on the line there. They are starting to shake the wrinkles out of what our thoughts were of what that airplane would bring us as a carrier force.

P-8 bills will continue as well as we bring that very important leap forward in technology, what P-8 does for us, to forward warfighters. I had the privilege of flying in that aircraft not too long ago, and it is stunning. There are two areas, empty spaces, that you can put additional racks in there. The growth potential of that airframe in particular, and it is delivered as a brand new aircraft that has true revolutionary warfighting capability across the spectrum of warfighting in Naval Aviation. It's eye-watering.

Two carriers are in production today, Ford and Kennedy at \$12B a piece. One carrier is completing refueling in 2017, Lincoln, and one starting in 2017 as soon as Lincoln finishes, the Washington. Stennis is scheduled for her refueling in 2020, Truman in 2024 and Reagan in 2028. And those refuelings are running at about \$4B apiece.

We are still in the midst of the most extensive modernization program we have ever experienced in Naval Aviation, some of which I've enumerated here previously. This includes the leading edge of unmanned aircraft: UCLASS, Triton, Fire Scout and Blackjack.

These are all good challenges to have, but to expect funding relief for the unfunded challenges we face such as Strike Fighter Inventory Management is just not realistic in today's funding environment.

Surface warfare bills are coming due: the cruiser modernization program, LCS to frigate modernization program, the DDG 1000 program; resetting the DDG, cruiser, and amphibious fleet in stride. The Navy has not returned to garrison. We have been forward operating at the same optempo today as we have for the last 15 years. And OCO is going away. We are going to have to reset the force in stride.

Submarine bills face us as well. The Ohio Replacement Program represents about \$10B in startup costs. For the whole program start to finish, that's about \$100B bill. And that is a critical strategic asset that this nation absolutely has to have.

IDFOR continues to build out to get after the cyber threat that we all face day in and day out.

So what is the way ahead? Well the way ahead has been shown to us by Admiral Gortney, with the Optimized Fleet Response Plan, O-FRP as we refer to it. A process to connect means, ways and ends, taking resources and applying a process, the O-FRP, to an end that optimizes readiness.

Whether we get to our desired readiness end state or not is dependent upon the resources we have to produce that readiness. We cannot abandon the Optimized Fleet Response Plan if we fall short of our readiness goals. In fact, budget resourcing uncertainty that we face today heightens the critical importance of O-FRP. It truly is a tool to optimize the utilization of available resources to gain the most operational readiness possible.

Admiral Gortney talked about the Readiness Kill Chain, the RKC. It produces readiness. I talk about the Kill Readiness Chain, the KRC. It consumes readiness. As the Pac Fleet commander, I own both sides of that equation. I'm responsible for building readiness and I'm responsible for consuming readiness. Both have to be balanced.

Two points: One, we are no longer in a world where we can solve our readiness production shortfalls or our over-consumption of readiness by throwing money at the problem. That money is just not there, as I pointed out earlier. There are too many critical competing priorities across the total force that Navy brings to bear across the globe.

Two, readiness consumption has to match readiness production. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Strike Fighter Inventory Management challenge we face.

So what is the key to current, near term and future success besides adherence to the OFRP process?

As this year's Hook theme would suggest, I am confident JO's are going to be a large part of the solution, but as I realized when I left the JOPA as a lieutenant commander, this problem is too complicated for JO's to resolve on their own. So what is the solution source?

Naval Aviation is best known for its ability to organize chaos. Launching and recovering aircraft is the most used example but just one of many we are known for. And though we are more than happy to follow rules of our own making, we as a community are not inclined to follow the rules made by others, including the rules of Mother Nature. Hence a worrisome habit of embracing unnatural acts, like flying off of flightdecks at night, regardless of weather, without any place to divert to other than happily jumping on a taxi one wire.

[Laughter]

In a moment, I'll expand on this phenomenon and how it has been the foundation of greatness on which we stand, but now, and in the near term, is not the time to pursue rules of our own making as we grapple with the readiness challenges we face today. Now is the time to apply rules carefully chosen by our aviation leadership, taking into consideration the realities, much more challenging, of the other communities' readiness issues.

Our naval leadership on this issue is a collective we call the Naval Aviation Enterprise or NAE, in which all are enabled and encouraged to participate in, JO and geriatric alike. It is the brain child of folks like "Black" Nathman and John Lockhard, and many others who are in the audience tonight, when we faced similar challenges in Naval Aviation in the past.

When Wally Massenburg assumed command of NAVAIR, he set the stage for the foundation of the NAE as it stands today when one of his first acts was to call the Air Boss and report for duty. From this simple but seminal act, we have the solution at hand for the Naval Aviation challenges both now and in the future – it's the Air Boss.

We have had some great Air Bosses throughout our history, but none as talented or timely as Mike Shoemaker. He has picked up where Dave Buss left off and accelerated into the fight with a pace and persistence no one could have anticipated.

So while our strength remains our organizing of chaos, there can be no wavering on who the strike lead is to carry us forward. It's Shoe Shoemaker. When he transmits join up and shut up, if we ignore that order we do so at the peril of Naval Aviation as we know it. I don't exaggerate. Air wings are on the chopping block, and as air wings go, so go carriers. It is a slippery slope that we do not want to get caught on.

Which brings me to the third point: the value of carrier aviation today.

So what about carriers? Too big to fail? What a stunning statement of ignorance. I don't say this as a Naval Aviator anchored in a wistful fog of past glory. I say this as the Pacific Fleet commander who fully recognizes the magnitude of the challenges we face globally, set in the fabric of the Pacific. It is a challenge that requires the capacity and capability of a Joint Force, and no Joint Force element, certainly in the Pacific, has more throw weight, utility, flexibility, adaptability or agility than a carrier strike group. Carrier strike groups are not guarantors of future warfighting success. As I said, such a conflict would require the amalgamated strength of our Joint Forces. But the challenge that Joint Force would face will be significantly increased, as will the risk to force and the risk to mission, with the absence of carrier strike groups.

I mentioned the throw weight and utility of carrier strike groups. History is resplendent with examples but we only have to go back to the 19th of June last year. On that day, and for the next 50-plus days, the only aircraft flying against ISIL were naval aircraft, initially from CAG Eight, and from the George Bush Strike Group as we recognized earlier this evening, assigned to Carrier Strike Group Two, off of George Gush, and were later joined by their Marine Naval Aviation counterparts flying from their expeditionary base ashore. The combined force resulted in the only force that flew against ISIL, as I mentioned earlier, for more than 50 days.

But wait, there is more. While the 19th of June was the first day of combat operations launched from the Northern Arabian Gulf conducted to counter ISIL, 30 hours prior, the Bush Carrier Strike Group orchestrated the launch of OEF combat sorties from the Gulf of Oman in support of the Afghan Democratic run-off elections. When the last cycle was recovered she steamed west executing an inbound transit of the Strait of Hormuz, to take station in the northern Arabian Gulf, immediately transitioning to the 7/24 air operations I just mentioned, having conducted sustained combat operations in two theaters of war, hundreds of miles apart, in the same day. That's what carrier aviation brings to this nation.

[Applause]

When asked on the viability of carrier strike groups today, my response is much as I have just stated, followed with the solicitation of advice – “If you are suggesting carrier strike groups are no longer relevant in today's high threat environment, what is your recommended alternative that provides equal value at equal cost?” The only thing lacking in relevance in this dialog is the responses I have received so far.

And last, I want to comment on the difference between history and heritage.

In my comments I have talked about our history and our heritage, but clarifying the difference is important tonight, especially as our focus has been on the value we gain from our eternal cadre of junior officers.

History is what we make. It is what we do.

History is reflected in text books and documentaries. It is reflective of the work of Carrier Strike Group Two as they exercised their operations last summer. We have a long storied history from the very inception of Naval Aviation, but carrier aviation came to the fore in World War II; in Korea; in Vietnam; in Desert Storm; in OEF; in OIF.

[Slide show of territory and ships and aircraft from each era]

That was history. Pictures full of stuff. Carriers and aircraft.

This is heritage. This is who we are. This is who you are.

[Slide show of naval aviators from each era]

Ian W. Toll has a new book out "Pacific Crucible." In the prologue he quotes something Teddy Roosevelt said about 1906. It's a statement about the qualities required of naval officers, and his quote is on the screen for you now.

[Slide]

"They must have skill in handling the ships, skill in tactics, skill in strategy ... The dogged ability to bear punishment, the power and desire to inflict it, the resolution, the willingness to take risks and incur responsibilities which have been possessed by the great captains of all ages, and without which no man can ever hope to stand in the front rank of fighting men."

References to 'men' and 'ships' aside, this, I think, elegantly captures the connection to heritage, fighting spirit, and the proclivity to take measured risk – qualities we have come to expect of JOs and should expect of those that lead them.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you this evening about who we are, eternal JOs, taking the tools the nation as given us, and standing as the vanguard defending our national character forward, wherever the front yard is of those who attempt to do us harm. Knock, knock, Naval Aviation is here.

May God bless each of you with the ability to pass on the freedoms that have been given to us. Thank you very much.