



PHOTO BY MIKE MORGAN

## The Honorable Sean J. Stackley '79

By Ellen Ternes

On a cold October night in 2015, 10 members of the Class of 1979 gathered in Sandwich, MA, for the dedication of a new high school football stadium. The stadium was built to honor their classmate Captain Gerald R. "Fish" DeConto '79, USN, who was killed in the Pentagon on 9/11. DeConto's family, firefighters, police and the community packed the stands for the pre-game ceremony.

The Honorable Sean J. Stackley '79, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition, was one of those classmates. He came up from Washington, DC, to deliver the featured speech. He brought an American flag flown over the Pentagon in DeConto's honor and a piece of limestone from the Pentagon memorial wall.

As Stackley has shown throughout his Navy and civilian careers, his words and actions went far deeper than an official duty. The evening before, he spent some time alone at the 9/11 Pentagon Memorial, thinking about what he would say. When he took the podium in Sandwich, he reflected on the world-changing events of 9/11, then he paid tribute to "Fish" in words that came from the heart and from the unbreakable bonds of classmates.

When the crowd turned their attention to the football game about to start, Stackley stayed around "to shake hands, talk to people, to take photos with everyone who wanted one," recalled Lieutenant Commander Sean Cate '79, USN (Ret.), former class president. "Sean made that a magical night."

The values that shaped Sean Stackley have been with him from the beginning. After graduating with distinction, he reported to the newly commissioned JOHN YOUNG.

"I just fell in love with it," he said. "It was long hours, long periods away from home, but you're a part of a crew who are just there together, spurring each other on. I'm a 22-year-old ensign,

and all of a sudden, I'm in charge of a division of sailors who were giving it their all, side by side with you.

"It's inspiring. And I was fortunate to have a senior chief who taught me the ropes, made sure I didn't screw up too bad."

### Teamwork

One lesson would become ingrained in the young officer. It was about 0200 one July night in 1982. Then-Lieutenant Junior Grade Stackley was mid-watch officer of the deck, transiting the ship through the narrow channels of the Surigao Straits when one, then a second and then countless small fishing vessels surrounded JOHN YOUNG's track. Stackley decided this was a time to call the captain to the bridge.

"And seeing the look in his face when he came to the bridge, I'm realizing that even though he's got 20 years of experience, he sees the same challenge I do," Stackley said. "You know that lives are at stake. And with him on one bridge wing, me on the other, the JOOD on centerline and a steady helmsman and lee helmsman at the wheel we worked our way through those navigational hazards. It was meaningful in many dimensions, but the lasting lesson that came away from it was the power of teamwork. That has stuck with me throughout my life."

Stackley's career would go on to hand him responsibility for the safety of thousands of sailors and Marines, the development and construction of new classes of warships and aircraft, and navigating Capitol Hill as Assistant Secretary and later (acting) Secretary of the Navy. The teamwork that got him through the Surigao Straits would remain at the core of his leadership.

"To this day, I tell people, don't go it alone," he said. "The things that we're trying to accomplish, that we're going after require a team. It's critical that you build a team, a strong team and that you work together."



After four years on JOHN YOUNG, Stackley decided to become an engineering duty officer.

He earned degrees in ocean and mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, then moved on to roles that would have a long-lasting impact on the Navy and sailors. While still in uniform, he worked on the design of the HALIFAX, the construction of ARLEIGH BURKE and as program manager of the LPD 17 San Antonio class, overseeing the design, construction, testing and delivery of three first-of-class warships.

"Starting a new ship class is just hard, by every measure," said Stackley.

One of the century's most powerful hurricanes made the trials for SAN ANTONIO especially turbulent.

"So here I have a ship that's trying to finish on the Gulf Coast, and Katrina hits," he said. "It wipes out the shipyard, so not only did we have to finish building the ship, they had to rebuild the shipyard at the same time. I had a wonderful team, military and civilian, and dedicated industry partners, and I pay particular homage to the crew of SAN ANTONIO in terms of what it took to get through. We just took on all the challenges together."

In 2005, only three weeks after retiring at the rank of captain, Stackley went to work for the Senate Armed Services Committee to oversee Navy and Marine Corps programs. In 2008, President George W. Bush appointed him Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition, a position he filled until 2017, when he became the acting Secretary of the Navy under President Donald J. Trump. In that time, he was responsible for an acquisition program that included the contracting of 90 ships, 1,700 aircraft and 20,000

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—The Honorable Sean J. Stackley '79

weapons, and pushing through an armored vehicle program to better protect troops from improvised explosive device blasts.

"They were some of the Navy's most complicated shipbuilding programs," wrote Rear Admiral Jeffrey A. Lemmons '79, USN (Ret.), in his Distinguished Graduate Award (DGA) endorsement for Stackley. "It amazes me that he could get so much done, in three very different administrations, in service to our Navy and nation's interests and remain a humble, selfless and modest man."

## Touchstones

Stackley has four, what he calls, touchstones, he says should drive those serving the country.

"Number one, we protect the nation," he said. "That's a noble purpose for everyone, not just in uniform, but everyone who is given that opportunity, that responsibility."

"We take care of our men and women in uniform. We expect 18-year-old-kids to put their lives on the line. When you get to be senior, whether as a division officer, department head or acting Secretary, your job is to take care of those men and women. If we don't, then we can't protect the nation. They go hand-in-hand."

Third, as a member of the armed forces and as a public servant, Stackley said, "It's our duty to uphold the highest of ideals provided by the Constitution. It is the solemn oath that we take." And fourth, having worked on Capitol Hill, Stackley said he learned that, "You've got to protect the taxpayer, because the taxpayer is going to bear the financial burden that comes with protecting the nation."

In his DGA letter of endorsement, Vice Admiral John Terence Blake '75, USN (Ret.), said adhering to those touchstones enabled Stackley "to safely navigate the turbulent and often treacherous political currents routinely encountered on Capitol Hill. His longevity in this demanding and complex assignment is a testament to his dedication to our Navy/Marine Corps and is indicative of his selfless devotion to our nation."



The Honorable Sean J. Stackley '79 was acting Secretary of the Navy under President Donald J. Trump. During his active-duty career, he served as program manager of the LPD 17 San Antonio class, overseeing the design, construction, testing and delivery of three first-of-class warships.

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To midshipmen, Stackley counsels, "be the best at what you choose to do, and be prepared to take risks. You do not get to be the most powerful nation in the world, the most powerful Navy in the world, if you're not willing to take risks. And be prepared. The world will evolve, and there will be these tectonic shifts on your watch. When we send the fleet around the world, we need to ensure they are equipped to deal with whatever challenge might come."

### Forever Linked

When he was acting Secretary of the Navy, Stackley addressed the commencement ceremony for the Class of 2017. He knew they weren't supposed to have their cell phones with them,

but he told them to take their phones out anyway. After being assured the transgression would be overlooked, the graduates started to pull out their phones.

Stackley then told them to take a photo of the classmates seated to the right and the classmates to the left, to capture that moment and remind them they are forever linked.

"There were 24 of us in 9th company," Stackley said. "We have stayed in constant close contact. We have always been there for each other. That's been true since Plebe Summer. It's just a unique relationship with a band of brothers that we all cherish. We cannot separate thoughts of the Academy from thoughts of each other." ⚓

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