

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Springer

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My journey into the naval service, and eventually serving the flying public and today's youth, began not so much with my swearing in as a Midshipman Fourth Class at the Norwich University Naval ROTC Unit, but in a movie theater as a pre-teenager.

With all the news of the

USS Nimitz (CVN 68) returning from its final deployment in December, I recalled being back in a Linden, New Jersey, movie theater in 1980 seeing the twin tails of a VF-84 Jolly Roger jump off the deck and onto the screen at the start of "The Final Countdown." What an unforgettable sight for a 10-year-old!

With a script partly science fiction and all Navy, the time-traveling Nimitz would later attempt to change history with the top gunning F-14 A Tomcats and CVW-9 air wing flying right into the face of destiny on Dec. 6, 1941, the day before the Day of Infamy.

In a way, that Christmastime movie debut gift has brought me full circle in 45 years to another airborne defender of the homeland that leapt into action that week in 1941, the Civil Air Patrol. CAP was founded on Dec. 1, 1941, with America short on planes and pilots qualified for military service.

As a naval aviator who retired at commander in 2015 and still flying as a commercial airline pilot, I continue to serve the country, my state and community in the Civil Air Patrol.

Civil Air Patrol is the longtime auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force and as such is a valued member of its Total Force structure. In its auxiliary role, CAP operates a fleet of 560 single-engine aircraft and 1,550 small unmanned aircraft systems. It performs about 90% of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as

tasked by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center and is credited by the AFRCC with saving an average of 82 lives annually. CAP's 66,000 members also perform homeland security, disaster relief and drug interdiction missions at the request of federal, state and local agencies.

As Illinois Wing Director of Operations I oversee a statewide network of pilots, planes and squadrons that fly search and rescue missions, perform humanitarian assistance and train up a new generation of military and general aviation pilots. Every CAP cadet at or under the age of 19 can partake in "O" flights, orientation flights that put them in the cockpit and up the skies.

My path as a naval aviator first took me to the P-3C Orion anti-submarine community, and also its electronic warfare counterpart, the EP-3 Aries, that gained its own place in history as the first crisis of 2001 for the new George W. Bush Administration on April 1. No April Fool's Day joke when the Navy aviator and his crew made a miraculous landing on Hainan Island after a mid-air collision with an over aggressive Chinese interceptor that struck the signals intelligence aircraft. That left the crew detained until April 11 in the international incident.

Perhaps my own brush with history in a Navy where timings weren't always aligned with your career goals was being a shooter on the USS John F. Kennedy (CV 67) on a Med deployment in 1997 prior to Operation Desert Fox. I not only loved the job but the 10-year-old inside the heart of Lt. Charles "Weasel" Springer got to play RIO in a backseat Tomcat cat shot and trap.

After retiring from the Navy I became a commercial airline pilot, flying for a number of firms including the former Continental Airlines at a particularly turbulent time. Through thick and thin my military experience has served me well in giving me the patience to realize that timing can't always work to your advantage, but patience and persistence will.

Today my civilian career path in aviation has me on track and on time, flying state-of-the-art Boeing 737 models

as a flight officer for American Airlines. My favorite route to date has been the Chicago-to-Bogota run to South America and back.

Five years ago, while logging the miles between continents, it turned out that my next career would come sitting in the chair of an air crew lounge in Denver. A previous occupant had left a copy of Volunteer magazine, the slick, high-end publication that CAP shares with all its adult and teen cadet members.

When I looked, I was hooked. An apt description for someone who had tailhooked and saw Navy values of honor, courage and

commitment also alive and well with a passion for serving others in Civil Air Patrol; which also bears the official title of United State Air Force Auxiliary.

CAP's stated core values are integrity, volunteer services, excellence and respect. We teach that in every squadron and activity in all 50 states, Guam and Puerto Rico.

Our three-part mission is "saving lives, serving communities and shaping futures." It's that last component that is most important to me. We do indeed save lives. We've been in the lifesaving business since the early days of

the Battle for the Atlantic chasing submarines, since mapping rescue routes in the wreckage of the World Trade Center, serving as the Air Force's primary domestic search and rescue resource.

And certainly aerospace advocacy and education is a large component of our mission.

But it's that shaping of futures that is vitally important no matter what organization you're in — Sea Cadets, Young Marines, Civil Air Patrol, scouting — it's your obligation to pass on what you've learned and prepare the next generation to lead. ■

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