guest column

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I went back home recently, back to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Technically, I didn't grow up in Chattanooga. My "hometown" is actually Rising Fawn, GA; which is just a few miles down the road.

I was invited to serve as the master of ceremonies for "Navy Week" in Chattanooga. I know most of you have heard of the annual Fleet Weeks that take place in New York and Fort Lauderdale. Navy Weeks are a little different as they're held in smaller towns across the country and are often the first exposure those Americans have to our Navy.

For a few days, the Navy took center stage in a city that had never had a lot of exposure to it. We had Sailors from *USS TENNESSEE*, Navy divers, the Navy Band, recruiters, and the men and women assigned to Navy Operational Support Centers talking about the Navy all over that town.

Every event we attended began with the citizens of Chattanooga leading us all in the Pledge of Allegiance. And let me tell you, those patriots weren't just going through the motions. Every time they said it, they were literally renewing their devotion to our flag, our nation, and the freedoms we love as Americans. It was awe-inspriring.

I found something else that surprised me, though. As much as the people in Chattanooga love our military and support our Navy, they really had no idea what our Sailors are up to. Like most Americans, they understand that thousands of our men and women are at sea on ships or aboard submarines. But when you get down to the nuts and bolts of it, to discussing what our Sailors do and what we expect of them, the good people of Chattanooga were amazed.

I told them that the average age aboard an aircraft carrier is nineteen. I asked them to think about that as I explained the levels of responsibility we give our Sailors at a young age. I told them about the Sailors in Iraq and Afghanistan, wearing desert camouflage, working and fighting alongside the Army and Marine Corps. They understood the kind of bravery required of our warriors fighting over there, but it took some explaining as to why those Americans are United States Sailors.

Many of our missions, I explained, are traditional. When we have Sailors with eyes scanning the horizon looking for pirates, that's a maritime responsibility as old as the Navy itself. Drug interdiction, launching planes, diving subs. Seabees, Corpsmen, SEALS, and EOD technicians. Every conversation I had that week seemed to touch on our entire Navy and every one of our Sailors. Talking about what our men and women do and seeing disbelief give way to intense American pride was a gratifying experience.

I told them about the *USNS Comfort* and *Mercy*. The folks in Chattanooga know about the *STENNIS* and they know about *GETTYSBURG, IWO JIMA,* and *MICHIGAN*, our traditional ships and submarines. But they were shocked when I told them about those two ships that travel the world healing the sick and spreading American goodwill. Even the most patriotic of Americans had no idea that when our hospital ships pull into many of the nations they visit, it's the first time thousands of people had ever seen or visited a medical facility.

So, we talked about the surgeries to restore sight, the prevention of deadly diseases, and the true compassion our Sailors have for those in need. And the people of Chattanooga learned about our Navy and our missions. What I hope, though, is that they learned even more than that. It was my goal that week to introduce them to the United States Sailor, your sons and daughters. I wanted them to feel the same kind of pride in them that I do, and I just hope my words were enough to help them see these warriors for who they are.

The folks I talked to were the business leaders of a town that is on its way back. They've rebuilt their city, cleaned it up, and turned it into a fantastic place to live and work. I told them that I appreciated the way they raised me down there but that I had a few more favors to ask of them. I told them that we have Sailors leave the Navy every day. Some retire after twenty years. Others serve their time honorably and move on. We talked about what kind of positive impact these men and women can have on a community. I asked the citizens of Chattanooga to consider that when our Sailors come home.

We also talked about opportunity and how the Navy offers so much of it to the youth of our nation. I have no doubt that dinner table conversations around that region that week included talk of what the military can offer a young American.

I'm not stopping with Chattanooga. That week convinced me that we all need to do more when it comes to telling the Navy story. I've got more than three years left as your MCPON, and I plan to spend a good amount of that time talking Navy with America. It's not about just recruiting anymore. Yes, we still need to find the best our nation has to offer to fill our ranks. But it's more than that. The people of this country pay our salaries and they love their military. They deserve to know about the heroes who serve them as Sailors. I'm going to do what I can to make sure they're introduced to them.

Every group I talked to had similar questions. They want to know who our Sailors are, what they're doing, and how they're doing it. ⚓