



In celebration of Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Month

Cmdr. Kenneth Au: The branch didn't matter, I only wanted to serve

Those who choose to serve in the military do so for a variety of reasons. The motivation to serve may be guided by family history, a desire to protect one's country or a need for a change of scenery while gaining job experience. For Cmdr. Kenneth Au, acting program manager for the Great Lakes Icebreaker (GLIB) Program at Coast Guard Headquarters, it was a well-placed Coast Guard recruitment station and the 9/11 tragedy that compelled this Hong Kong immigrant and "native" New Yorker to don the uniform and do his part for his adopted country.

Au was born in Hong Kong. For the first five years of his life, he was left in his grandmother's care as his parents worked to establish a new life in America, with the intent of sending for him when they felt more secure. He recalls very little of his life in Hong Kong other than the hot and humid summers and time spent with his grandmother. Once he was reunited with his family, it took a while for Au to adjust to his parents, as they were practically strangers to him. A year later, his grandmother joined the rest of the family, which included his younger brother, in a small, walk-up apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan a half mile from Chinatown.

Living near Chinatown helped the Au family acclimate to America, as they were able to access all the services they needed without significant language barriers. With his schools also located in that tight-knit Chinese community, Au states his life in Chinatown was quite insulated; he was able to ease into his new life: learning English, having his first taste of ice cream and watching American TV shows. "People always ask me why I don't have a New York accent," said Au. "I



Cmdr. Kenneth Au. Photo courtesy of Cmdr. Kenneth Au.

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tell them Manhattan doesn't really have an accent!"

His exposure to other cultures and races didn't occur until he attended Brooklyn Technical High School, a highly competitive, top-rated public high school that focuses on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Covering almost an entire city block, the school has the second largest auditorium in New York City after Radio City Music Hall and, at the time, had an enrollment of over 4,000 students. Au noted the school's diversity in which "the minorities were the majority" of the student body and he found the atmosphere exciting.

When he attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York, to major in civil engineering, his experience there was the exact opposite of Brooklyn Tech, with few Asians and other minorities. "It wasn't until I attended college that I was exposed to the demographics that shape the rest of the country," stated Au. This exposure to a lack of diversity was jarring for a person who grew up in a cultural melting pot like New York City.

After graduating from RPI with a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering, Au worked for a company as a trainee engineer but didn't find the work stimulating. After switching to the information technology industry, he was still unsatisfied. "I wanted a job with more purpose," Au said. He had begun investigating a career in the military when the World Trade Center fell; his company at the time was located blocks away from the Twin Towers. The 9/11 tragedy turned his inquiries with recruiters into action, connecting with a Coast Guard recruiting station in lower Manhattan. He says he wasn't interested in a particular branch of service; he only wanted to serve. In fact, his desire to serve was so great that he opted to enter as an enlisted member in the electronics technician (ET) rating even though he had a college degree.

While serving as an ET at duty stations that included the electronic support detachment at Coast Guard Sector New York in Staten Island, New York, and Coast Guard Cutter Jarvis in Honolulu, he learned more about the Coast Guard and how officers take the lead in developing policies that shape the service. Observing that they have more responsibility as they oversee their respective departments, Au thought, "I could do that," so he pursued Officers Candidate School and was commissioned in 2008. As an officer, Au has served as damage control assistant on Coast Guard Cutter Bear in Portsmouth, Virginia; as executive officer on Coast Guard Cutter Sturgeon Bay in Bayonne, New Jersey, and as engineer officer on Coast Guard Cutter Healy in Seattle. He earned a Master of Science degree with a double major in naval architecture and marine engineering and industrial and operations engineering from the University of Michigan and attended Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, graduating with a Master of Business Administration degree before assuming his current role with GLIB.

When asked how his family reacted to his decision to join the Coast Guard, he stated if he had made that announcement to his family out of high school, they would have been more concerned. Elaborating further, Au stated that for Chinese American children, there is an expectation they will enter the medical or engineering fields as they are seen as ways for upward mobility; the military is rarely considered as a career choice. Au's family was no different; rigorous academics in STEM were the norm, and sports or creative activities were not. Though his family was still slightly concerned, Au was nearly 25 years old by the time he decided to join, so they were not bothered by his choice.

Au wistfully recalled the importance food played in his family, as it does in most Asian families, especially as it pertains to his grandmother, who regularly cooked dinners. "First generation Asian immigrants don't typically express their feelings or vocalize their love," said Au. "The way they say it is through food." Saturdays were often spent eating dim sum in Chinatown with his grandmother, who interacted with waitstaff so much she was automatically moved to the front of the line for a



Cmdr. Kenneth Au as a child with his grandmother when they first experienced snow in New York. Photo courtesy of Cmdr. Kenneth Au.

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table when recognized. Other Saturdays featured a home-cooked meal, which she would start to prepare early in the morning. "And being in Chinatown, you get the freshest food at the markets, fresh vegetables, fresh fish," said Au. "There's a study that shows that Walmart failed in Asia because Asians prefer fresh food and daily grocery shopping. As I got older, even though I wanted to stay out with my friends, I couldn't because she would be cooking a feast."

Au's commitment to the Coast Guard was tested while aboard Jarvis: He received word his beloved grandmother was in hospice, and he was unable to leave. She passed away before he had a chance to say goodbye to the woman who raised him until he was 5, was a constant presence in his life and said "I love you" with dim sum and Saturday family dinners.

Food was also the family's means of income. Au's father saved money from his out-of-state restaurant jobs to own a Chinese food takeout place in New Jersey for five years and then a bigger restaurant outside of Pittsburgh while Au was in college. His college breaks were spent at the restaurant working alongside the entire family in practically every position, from busboy to host, except for cook, a job reserved for his father until his retirement.

Au has found that one important benefit to serving in the Coast Guard is the ability to fulfill his duties while still being present for his wife, Sandy, a graphics designer working remotely, and their two children. He acknowledged he has been fortunate his kids have only experienced three moves so far, which minimized the upheaval military families sometimes experience. But he is also well aware of the sacrifices Sandy has had to make as a military wife, such as leaving behind a support system that consisted of her friends and family.

Presently, Au is preparing for his next assignment, beginning this summer at the Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation. He is eager to share his knowledge and experience in crafting leadership recommendations that will strengthen the future of the Coast Guard, an organization for which he has great respect. "To me, the military is one of the most inclusive employers out there," said Au. "Outsiders may not see that, and lately in the news there has been a lot of divisiveness. But when you wear that uniform, you are my shipmate, and we are all Coast Guard blue." ■

#CelebrateAANHPI

Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Heritage Month, observed annually in May, honors the rich and diverse cultures, histories and contributions of the AANHPI community in the United States. This monthlong celebration recognizes the accomplishments and cultural traditions of these communities, while also raising awareness about the challenges and issues they continue to face. The terms Asian/Pacific encompass all of the Asian continent and the Pacific islands of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Native Hawaiian refers to the indigenous people of Hawaii.

For more, visit the Federal Asian Pacific American Council at <https://fapac.org/AAP-Resources>.

Lt. Andre Jones-Butler: overcoming adversity to become a leader, mentor and honoree for supporting civil rights in the Coast Guard

At one time or another, we have faced adversity in our lives, but how often do we talk about what motivates us to keep going, to tell ourselves failure isn't an option until we reach what we perceive as success? For Lt. Andre Jones-Butler, numerous factors contributed to his perseverance, including sacrifices made and guidance received by family members, as well as the mentors who saw his potential and shepherded him along the way.

That perseverance led Jones-Butler to be the Coast Guard's 2023 recipient of the NAACP Roy Wilkins Renown Service Award. The award recognizes outstanding accomplishments of members of the workforce who support civil rights in the armed services and civilian workforce. Jones-Butler was recognized for his activities in raising awareness of Coast Guard opportunities in underrepresented areas and mentoring and supporting prospective and junior officers.

As a teenager in Tyrone, Georgia, raised in a single parent household, the distractions that normal 14-year-olds experience led to nearly disastrous consequences that could have dogged Jones-Butler for his entire life. His mother, frustrated, was forced to take action before it was too late. She found the funds to pay for his tuition to Randolph-Macon Academy in Front Royal, Virginia, the state of her birth and where she still had relatives.

The military academy was a huge adjustment for a young man who was always free to sneak out the back door of school to cut class. Yet, he found that limiting his freedom and accepting the discipline at Randolph-Macon Academy allowed him to focus and be more engaged in class. Jones-Butler shared that the contact with cadets from in and out of the continental U.S. opened his mind and gave him his first entry into a variety of viewpoints and backgrounds that raised his head to the horizon to seek more knowledge, especially around our country's history.

"Iron sharpens iron," said Jones-Butler. "Being exposed to so many perspectives on different ideas raised my standards and gave me a better understanding of the world."

In addition to the exposure to new ideas, Jones-Butler observed the wealth and financial stability of other cadets and recognized he would have to work hard to achieve something similar. That goal and his mother's actions motivated him to take on the academic and personal challenges of Randolph-Macon Academy.

"She made an investment in my future," said Jones-Butler. "Failure isn't an option. I honor the sacrifices she made for me."

Honoring his mother's sacrifices hasn't stopped with his growing career in the Coast Guard; Jones-Butler, who is now a father, is currently pursuing a master's degree in business administration.

In his senior year at Randolph-Macon Academy, Jones-Butler faced a dilemma experienced by most high school seniors: determining the best path toward a college degree. His first choice was Purdue University, but the scholarships offered would not be enough to cover four years of tuition. His aunt, who was paying for his college application fees and is a former Coast Guard member, made a deal with him: she would continue to pay his fees if he applied to colleges she chose. One of those colleges was the Coast Guard Academy and the rest, as they say, is history.

After graduating from the academy, a series of mentors who saw his promise assisted with his career advancement. Jones-Butler states those mentors were the driving force in pursuing opportunities out of his comfort level, which led him to where he is today:



Lt. Andre Jones-Butler, safety officer for the Aviation Projects Acquisition Center in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and 2023 recipient of the NAACP Roy Wilkins Renown Service Award.

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as safety officer for the Aviation Projects Acquisition Center in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, a command he enjoys and in which he is ready to excel.

If there's one piece of advice Jones-Butler could give to others, it is this: "Expand your circle of mentors to find opportunities that will advance your skills and qualities that will make you an effective and empathic leader." His experience with mentors compelled him to pay it forward and serve as a mentor to others. Jones-Butler saw a way to move things forward, be a part of the improvements the Coast Guard has made regarding diversity and to take on something that was bigger than himself. ■

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'Leave something better than I found it': Reflections on the C5ISR domain from a departing leader

Have you ever been presented with an opportunity to be a part of something unique and long lasting? Not everyone gets to say they participated in a unique project that was large in scope, with the sole purpose of better protecting U.S. borders while keeping Coast Guard members safe and operation ready. The demands of any project surrounding the security of oceans and waterways are innumerable and challenging. Yet for Capt. Vincent Skwarek, it was just the type of challenge he was looking for when he was appointed as the assistant program executive officer for the command, control, communications, computers, cyber, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C5ISR) domain. But his two years overseeing that unique and challenging area will come to an end when he retires on May 31, 2024.

A native of Trenton, New Jersey, Skwarek originally desired to enlist in the U.S. Navy to pursue a role in the submarine force. But as a young Sea Cadet during training at Coast Guard Station Castle Hill in Newport, Rhode Island, he experienced rescuing a family, which redirected his aspirations to the Coast Guard. He began his career upon earning his Bachelor of Science degree (with high honors) in naval architecture and marine engineering from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in 1994. His first assignment was with Coast Guard Cutter Polar Sea based in Seattle, Washington, as a student engineer; he ended that four-year tour as an assistant engineer. Electing to further his education, he next enrolled in graduate school, earning his first of two master's degrees: a Master of Science in naval architecture and marine engineering from the University of Michigan, in 1999. He completed a Master of Arts degree in defense and strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College in 2019.

Additional assignments include the Office of Systems Deepwater Integration in Washington, D.C.; Coast Guard Cutter Spencer based in Boston, Massachusetts, and the Coast Guard Surface Forces Logistics Center in Baltimore before assuming in 2010 his role as commanding officer at the Coast Guard Naval Engineering Support Unit in New Orleans, where he participated in Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. It was during his 2019-2022 assignment as commanding officer of Coast Guard Yard in Baltimore when he heard about the opportunity to work with C5ISR.

Before taking on the leadership role, Skwarek had indirect, limited exposure in the support of sustaining equipment important to C5ISR. However, this exposure piqued his interest in working more directly with the C5ISR, which led him to pursue an executive managerial assignment that resulted in his appointment as assistant program executive officer in July 2022.

What makes C5ISR unique, in Skwarek's opinion, is that each program under the C5ISR umbrella is very different in characteristics, size and acquisition strategy when compared to other air and surface acquisition programs. Because of these differences, his focus upon appointment was to prepare the C5I domain to better handle the work that falls under its umbrella, as well as address assessments generated from the In-Service Vessel Sustainment Program planning effort in order to ensure consideration was given to the advanced C5I systems found onboard the 418-foot Legend-class national security cutters.

Skwarek stated that 30 years ago, a cutter would be cut off from shore communication while underway, and it has been exciting for him to see and be a part of the advancements in technology over time that have made non-communication and



Capt. Vincent Skwarek.

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limited operation capabilities while at sea a thing of the past. The importance of C5ISR acquisitions will increase over time “as the speed and capability of technology improves as well as the manner in which technology is implemented.” Interest in the Coast Guard’s cutters and aircraft carrying C5I assets will also increase as the reliance on such assets for mission completion increases.

When looking back on his career, he stated his main priority with any assignment is to “Leave something better than I found it” and this includes his time with C5ISR, which he stated he has thoroughly enjoyed. “I loved being part of a team that works to implement service-wide technology improvements and innovations. Shaping C5I for use in the Coast Guard is extremely satisfying work. It has been a privilege to serve for the last two years knowing that each day I would be benefiting others.”

Skwarek won’t be entirely separated from the Coast Guard after his official retirement; he will be recalled on active duty and report to the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office as systems integration adviser. He will look forward to attending his daughter’s lacrosse games to make up for the ones missed and spending more time with his wife, Ruth, and their other three children.

As one stage of his life comes to a close, he reflected on what fueled his commitment all these years: his ability to embrace the Coast Guard primary mission, which is to save lives at sea. “It is essential for each of us in our day-to-day CG-9 acquisition work to think about the hard connection between what we do and our operational forces. If our forces save lives and carry out our missions, then our efforts have contributed to those achievements.” ■
