

Terry McKnight

Celestial Navigation

On the deck of the Navy ship the *U.S.S. El Paso*, an expert surface warfare officer took the time to teach Ensign Terry McKnight how to read stars and sunlines. Each night, they would use the sky to fix their position and chart their course—an ancient science no longer taught.

Since that time, when Terry thought he'd only serve in the Navy for three years, a different kind of celestial navigation has guided his days. His life course set by God, he has triangulated his position and progress through mentors, fellow service members, and friends who have shown like stars, and family as the moon to illuminate even the darkest nights. These bearings led him to over thirty years of military service, each packed with leadership lessons, meaningful work, and fun along his ascent to Rear Admiral.

Now the Senior VP for Government Relations at Cobham, a diverse British manufacturing company that serves as a core supplier to leading U.S. defense contractors, he carries on the torch of service by keeping his sights trained on the points that have always led to his true north star. "Why am I so lucky?" he asks today. "Why has the good Lord taken such good care of me? I don't know the answer, but I'm grateful."

Born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia, Terry grew up with an older sister, an older brother, and a younger sister in a very traditional, conservative Roman Catholic home. After serving in World War II, including Normandy, his father took a job with Graybar Electric and later worked as an insurance salesman—something young Terry decided he never wanted to do. "He's more of an introvert and didn't seem happy doing it," Terry remembers. His mother, from whom he inherited his winning outgoing personality, stayed home with the children and volunteered a lot, later working at a bank and then running the gift shop at a hospital for many years.



Family life for the McKnights was rigid and structured, with family dinners each evening, confessional on Saturday afternoons, Notre Dame football games over the radio on Saturday afternoons, and church on Sundays. His father was especially strict with Terry, so Terry often preferred learning from hard knocks over his parents. Still, they were all very close. "We were your basic family and didn't have anything special, but my mother and father gave me two of the greatest gifts anyone could give: love for family and love for God," he affirms. "That's been central in keeping me focused my whole life."

As a kid in the 1950s and 60s, Terry was always outside and on the move with friends. He tried every sport but especially fell in love with golf and baseball. He made his first dollar when his father forced him to take over his brother's paper route, but he hated getting up at 6:00 AM. He always had jobs, and spent most summers and breaks through high school and early college working at a building supply store. "My parents didn't have a lot of money, so if I wanted to go to camp or play golf, it was up to me to pay for it," he says.

Despite his strong work ethic, Terry's active personality was like a square peg trying to fit into the round hole of academics. His grades weren't strong, and he didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up. Everything changed, however, when he graduated and enrolled at Virginia Military Institute (VMI), where his older brother had gotten a football scholarship. Going to games with his parents, he had been enchanted by the military environment, and something had clicked for him. When he arrived in the fall of 1974, he decided to follow his dad and chose the Naval ROTC program. "It was really tough," he says. "I was getting yelled at all the time for not shining my shoes correctly. But it was ultimately a great place to be, to learn, and to bond

with people. Most remarkably, it operated on a true honor system, with \$5 bills left on tables and no locks on doors. It was a place built around structure, excellence, and self-preservation of honor, and it taught me to grow up."

When Terry graduated in 1978, the sky was the limit. He completed basic officer training in Newport, Rhode Island, and married Lisa, a young woman who had attended a neighboring college and come to VMI as a cheerleader for sports games. A few months later, he reported to his first ship, where three different commanding officers taught him important lessons about being a young junior officer. They deployed in August 1980, heading first to the fjords of Norway and then to Antwerp, Belgium; Lisbon, Portugal; Rota, Spain; Naples, Italy; through the Suez Canal to Mombasa, Kenya; and finally back to Spain. Within a year and a half, he was qualified to be the officer on deck. "I was hooked," Terry says. "I loved everything about seeing the world and driving a ship."

More than anything, though, Terry loved the good times he had with mentors and peers like Bill Chadwick, a Warrant Officer from Philadelphia who would tell Terry stories from his two tours in Vietnam. With a renowned work ethic, Terry always welcomed the hardest jobs from his superiors, and his enthusiasm for each project was clear. He had three commanding officers on the tour, and each one took an interest in him, as did each one that followed in his career. "I don't know why, but I'm grateful they did," he says. "I told myself that when I became a commander, I would try to replicate that and take interest in people, helping them advance up to the next position."

When he finished his first three-year tour, Terry did not leave military service as originally planned, but instead took an onshore tour, followed by two department head tours. Through that period, as he progressed up the ladder, he learned important leadership lessons like the value of always having an out. "When you drive down a three-lane road, which lane do you choose?" he asks. "I seldom choose the middle lane because there's no out. Learning to drive Navy ships, I came to understand the importance of situational awareness and having a 360-degree understanding of your surroundings so you always know how to get out of trouble."

Terry learned even more about driving a

ship when Captain John McKay, who had served as the XO with Terry on the *U.S.S. El Paso*, requested that Terry be assigned to his ship for his second department head. Aboard the *U.S.S. Shreveport*, he underwent refresher training in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. "We'd get underway before dark in the morning and spend all day doing seamanship drills," he recounts. By the tour's completion, Terry was an expert sailor and won the Atlantic Fleet Ship Handler of the Year in 1985—an honor his father was able to witness before he passed in 1986.

Of his 31 years of service, perhaps the most defining leadership experience came in 1993 when, as a Lieutenant Commander, Terry worked for a remarkable aviator, Admiral Ronald "Zap" Zlatoper. Admiral Zap taught Terry the cores of leadership, most notably how to treat others. "He was a three-star Admiral at the time, and had the extremely demanding job of Chief of Naval Personnel," says Terry. "But he always made time for people, and he made time to work out every day, no matter what. Maybe because of that, I never saw him yell at anyone, even if he was having the worst day in the world. We were on a flight once, and he told me that life revolves around the five F's: family, friends, faith, financial security, and fun. I've always used that when people ask me to speak. He was really a phenomenal leader and role model."

During that time, Terry's oldest sister, Mary, was diagnosed with leukemia and needed a bone marrow transplant. Terry was the only match in the family, and as they moved forward with the procedure, he was especially grateful to Admiral "Zap" for his support and understanding. Now, 25 years later, all the other patients who had been on Mary's floor in the hospital have since passed, but Mary has miraculously survived. "Now, every April 13, the anniversary of the procedure, she calls again to thank me and tell me about her grandchildren," Terry says. "I'm grateful to have been a part of that. Through my Navy career, I was awarded the Bronze Star and other high honors. I commanded two ships and wrote a book, but being able to give the gift of life to my sister was by far my greatest reward. If Mary wasn't here today, what would life be?"

Mary wasn't Terry's only sister to knock on Heaven's door. Several years later, his younger sister, Kathie, suffered an aneurysm while she was out running with no ID. Miraculously, a man

looking out his window happened to see her fall and called 911 immediately. For her first critical hours in the hospital, until her family tracked her down later, she was just Jane Doe. "Had the doctor known her name and been able to call us at that point, he said he would have recommended she be taken off life support," Terry says. "When I got to the hospital two days later, she was in intensive care, and the doctor wasn't sure she would survive the weekend. A friend of ours, who's Catholic, threw holy water on her. The next day was Sunday, and my phone rang. It was Mary, calling to tell me that Kathie was starting to breathe on her own. We took her off the ventilator, and she's since recovered fully. Moments like that have confirmed for me that there is a God, without question."

If celestial navigation guided the McKnight family through those hardships, Terry also had someone looking out for him on the beautifully cloudless day of September 11, 2001, when he was working in the Pentagon. He was surprised when the Chief Petty Officer came in and put a TV on the conference table, and they turned on the news just in time to see the second plane hit. "When the third plane hit the Pentagon, it shook the whole building, which is built with solid concrete," Terry recounts. "We thought a bomb had gone off."

By that time, Terry had advanced to commander and put his skills to the test at the helm of the *U.S.S. Whidbey Island*. "I loved the experience of leading and doing things as I saw fit, and it was a lot of fun, but that first ship was a lot of hard work," he says. "When we first got underway, we went to the North Atlantic in March, which was kind of like trial by fire. Suffice it to say, the sea is incredibly powerful."

Now a commanding officer, Terry remembered the people who took him under their wing, providing inspiration and keeping him moving forward in life. Paying it forward, he would give his officers or senior enlisted 3x5 notecards, instructing them to write three short-term goals on one side and three long-term goals on the other. "They'd keep the cards in their wallets as periodic reminders," he says. "I tried to teach them that every day you wake up and don't plan for your goals is a day wasted."

As a leader, Terry also strived to embrace the unique character and circumstance of each individual. When someone under his command

got promoted, he wrote a letter home to their family. When they made a mistake, he tried to be understanding of the complete picture when deciding the punishment. "I always tried to look at the details of each case," he says. "If they were married with kids, how would it affect the whole family to lose half a month's pay? I also focused on helping them get where they wanted to go in life by reaching for that next job. I believe everyone's on earth for a purpose, so I try to look for that in each person I meet."

Terry's second command at sea was the *U.S.S. Kearsarge*, went far more smoothly than the first, and marked a pinnacle of his Navy career. With 1,500 people working under his command, he led seamlessly with the exceptional leaders below him, and the ship ran like clockwork even before it deployed in January of 2003 for Operation Iraqi Freedom. In 2006, after a return tour to the Pentagon, he was promoted to Admiral—an achievement he never imagined in his wildest dreams.

His distinguished Navy career culminated in January of 2009 when Terry, now the Commander of *Expeditionary Strike TWO* deployed to the Middle East, was suddenly charged with standing up an anti-piracy task force off the coast of Somalia. "I had no idea how to do it, but piracy had gotten to be such a problem that merchant ships couldn't protect themselves," he explains. "So, with those orders, I set to work chasing pirates for five months, and it was magnificent. I was Peter Pan, out in Never Never Land around the Horn of Africa. I got the honor of working with a group of coalition of nations, including China, Russia, Germany, Turkey, Denmark, and the U.K. I got to spend days underway on a Chinese War Ship, which is incredibly rare in this day and age."

When Terry returned to the U.S., he had his staff put together a PowerPoint presentation of the experience and began giving unclassified talks. Someone suggested he write a book called *Terry and the Pirates*, after a famous comic strip. He did, indeed, write a book about his experiences, called *Pirate Alley – Commanding Task Force 151 off the Coast of Somalia*. Years later, he reconnected with an old friend who also wrote a piece about his experience. "Did you ever think I'd write a book on chasing pirates?" he asked. "I thought you'd be a pirate," she said with a smile.

By the time Terry finally retired from service toward the end of 2009, he had seen the

world, served with the best, and led teams on enough adventures to last a lifetime. "I never knew someone could have so much fun in a job," he marvels. "They say that as long as you love your job, you never have to go to work in the morning. That's exactly what the Navy was for me. Words can't explain how much fun it was."

But Terry, an extreme extrovert, always engaged and always on the go, wasn't ready for retirement. "I love to work," he says. "I get up every morning at 5:00 AM, work out to get my brain started, and then do what I love, which is work. I like being around people, working with people and for people. I like trying to help people. I'm inspired everyday by what I learn from people, and by what we do together."

That's why he took a job as Senior VP of Government Relations at Cobham, launched in 1934 by a pioneer in air-to-air refueling named Sir Allen Cobham. Now a global company just shy of \$3 billion in revenue, it still focuses on that core business but has diversified remarkably over the last 85 years to include satellite and maritime communications. The company flies to the mines in the outback of Australia and operates maritime surveillance, and also runs a basic training school for helicopter pilots for the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. When it began acquiring U.S. companies, Terry came onboard in 2009 to handle customer and government relations with a Navy angle.

When the company reorganized into sectors in 2014, Terry was transferred into Cobham Advanced Electronic Solutions, a \$900 million sector working on high-end micro-electric systems like those used on missiles, ships, radars, and electronic warfare systems. A tier three supplier, they build parts that go to major prime contractors for use in defense weapon systems. Terry supplements this effort by working with the military, drawing on his Navy contacts and educating Congressional offices.

Through it all, Terry is grateful for his wife, Lisa, who shares his values and interests. Never faltered during his long months of

deployment, she took the lead in raising their two wonderful sons, Terence and Tyler. "My oldest son, Terence, is such an inspiration to me," Terry says. "He's 35 years old and has a disability, but he's out the door ready to go to work every day. He's got a heart the size of the Pacific Ocean, and it's a joy to be with him. Tyler, a Navy helicopter pilot with two children of his own, is also amazing. The joy that my grandchildren bring to my life is priceless. My blood is still 90 percent saltwater, and I think it's fantastic that he's continuing the proud Navy tradition of our family."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Terry encourages others to dream the impossible dream. "Almost everybody in this world has the opportunity to be successful," he says. "One of the greatest things about the military is that people come from all over the country, from the richest areas and the poorest areas. Everyone comes to basic training on a level playing field, and from there, they can go as far as they want in their careers. It just takes hard work and the willingness to embrace your own celestial navigation. So chart a course, reach as far as you can go, and if you can't quite get to the star you want, grab the moon on the way back."

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