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2022-03-18

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Career Submariner Steps in as NPS' New Undersea Warfare Chair

MC2 Tom Tonthat | March 18, 2022



Retired Navy Vice Adm. Phil Sawyer is the Naval Postgraduate School's new Undersea Warfare (USW) Chair, taking over for longtime USW chair retired Rear Adm. Jerry Ellis. Sawyer will serve as the principal advisor and liaison between the university and the Navy's submarine forces.

Retired Navy Vice Adm. Phillip G. Sawyer has taken the helm as the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Undersea Warfare (USW) Chair, and will now serve as the primary liaison and advisor between the university and the Navy's submarine force.

Sawyer retired from active duty in September 2021, serving as Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Operations, Plans and Strategy (N3/N5) in his final assignment. In fact, Sawyer **visited NPS in May** of 2021, and says he was highly impressed with the school's capabilities, and the direct Naval application of student research.

“The lieutenants and lieutenant commanders bring an enthusiasm through their academics and research that is rejuvenating and adds an operational advantage to the world-class organization that is the Naval Postgraduate School,” said Sawyer. “It’s just an ideal place to be able to come and work to progress the Navy and Marine Corps down the paths that we need for the future.”

As a career submariner, Sawyer brings years of experience and knowledge to the USW program in guiding its future direction. He understands the importance of maintaining an advantage in the USW domain and how NPS can help solve Fleet problems and create operational advantage for the U.S. Navy to stay ahead of its rivals.

“There’s a lot out there for undersea warfare and there’s plenty of work for us to do both here at NPS and in the Navy,” said Sawyer. “My goal here is twofold. First, help the students understand what undersea warfare is while helping the world-class academic staff here better understand the operational side of what they’re doing and how it applies to the fleet.

“Also, I’m here to make sure that we’re helping the fleet as best we can,” he continued. “It’s making sure that they have an open door to come in and say, ‘Here’s something we’re trying to solve. Can Naval Postgraduate School help us with that?’”

Sawyer also sees the interdisciplinary capabilities of NPS as a way to support the USW program, finding ways for various areas of research to connect with the domain.

“I think the research that’s done here – from acoustics or physics to mechanical engineering and additive manufacturing, even [artificial intelligence] and machine learning – have applications within the Navy and specifically USW,” he said. “A strong link between what NPS is doing and how we’re going to use that operationally is needed. With maybe some tweaks to refine or focus a project a little bit differently to leverage it for undersea warfare.”

Sawyer says that NPS’ interdisciplinary capacity is further demonstrated through its **Naval Warfare Studies Institute** (NWSI) and its task force approach to research to benefit USW and other programs.

“The point is that most Navy problems don’t neatly fall into one degree discipline,” said Sawyer. “If you’re outside looking in, you may not know if it’s a physics problem or an acoustic issue. NWSI is now the place to bring that problem and the NWSI team let the subject matter experts who understand NPS to all work on it. They will direct it to the right NPS experts – researchers, academics, professors, students – across departments to attack the problem. As Undersea Warfare Chair, I will be a senior advisor to some of the teams to develop an operational voice. I am very excited about the advent of NWSI here. I think it’s going to be significant for the Fleet and NPS.”

NPS President retired Vice Adm. Ann Rondeau also expressed excitement about the future of the USW program under Sawyer’s leadership, while also offering her deep appreciation for the exemplary performance of former chair retired Rear Adm. Jerry Ellis, who served in the

position from March 2009 until his retirement in 2021.

“I am deeply grateful to these leaders,” said Rondeau. “Rear Adm. Ellis dedicated his life to the Navy with nearly 60 years of total service. In the final chapter of his career, he focused his leadership into teaching and mentoring our warrior scholars, many of whom are leading the Naval forces today.

“Vice Adm. Sawyer brings a wealth of Fleet experience, strategic insight and exemplary leadership skill with him,” she continued. “We are very fortunate to have Vice Adm. Sawyer join our senior leader team and faculty. Our students, NPS and future Navy are in very good hands.”

As Sawyer steps into his new role, he says he’s looking forward to being a part of the university’s evolving impact on the future Fleet and force.

“I think Naval Postgraduate School is a world-class organization that brings together things you don’t find anywhere else,” Sawyer concluded. “Other civilian installations have world-class researchers and academics. Others have students like we have military students, but nobody brings it all together like NPS.”