Navy Birthday Ball Marks 243 Years of Service Above Self

WASHINGTON – Hundreds of Washington-area Navy personnel and their guests celebrated 243 years of "honor, courage and commitment" at the U.S. Navy Birthday Ball Oct. 13 at the Ronald Reagan Building, hosted by Navy League national headquarters.

The event featured a performance by the U.S. Navy band and remarks from Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. John M. Richardson and Tammie Jo Shults, a former naval aviator and now a commercial pilot, who gave a riveting account of the teamwork, training and "steel-caliber nerves" that helped bring Southwest Airlines Flight 1380 in for a safe landing April 17 after the plane suffered a catastrophic engine failure at 32,000 feet.

The CNO and his wife, Dana, and Shults and her husband Dean, joined Navy League National President Alan Kaplan and his wife, Marnie, in the official party for the evening, along with Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Russell Smith and his wife, Amy, and Undersecretary of the Navy Thomas Modly and his wife, Robyn.

The remarks and dinner in the Reagan Building's cavernous atrium were followed by the ceremonial cake-cutting with Richardson and Smith being joined the youngest and oldest Sailors in attendance, toasts to each of the sea services and "those in harm's way," and dancing in the adjacent ballroom with music from DJ Chad.

Rear Adm. Brent Scott, chief of chaplains of the Navy, offered the invocation.
"From the core of our soul, help us find faith in something bigger than ourselves, where toughness of spirit and strength

of character emerge to carry us, alongside our families, through the storms that head our way," he said.

During his introductory remarks, Kaplan noted, "Our organization is honored to host the 243rd Navy Birthday Ball. … It takes a special person to become a Sailor. Sailors are not born, they are forged. Tonight, it is our honor to thank you, your spouses and your families for the sacrifice, dedication and for all your service. … You will always be our organization's North Star, lighting our way and inspiring us with your lifelong journey, forged by the sea," echoing the event's theme.

Richardson opened his remarks with a few words of thanks to the Navy League, noting, "The Navy League really has taken this to whole other level. What a great night to come together and remember what the Navy means to our nation."

He also asked that those in attendance remember those who would be marking the Navy birthday from the far corners of the globe, where they were conducting the business of protecting the nation's interests.

"It is a maritime era, this is a maritime century, a maritime economy, … and the stakes for us have never been higher," he said. "While we are here enjoying this wonderful meal in tremendous comfort, even luxury, it always is helpful to think about those 65,000 Sailors who are deployed on about 95 ships, protecting our security."

That is at the very heart of the notion of "forged by the sea," Richardson said.
"They are out there deterring bad behavior, deterring those who would want to take us on, building alliances and partnerships, responding to crises," he said, be it by providing hurricane relief in the Carolinas, assisting with drug interdiction efforts in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, participating in the Trident Juncture exercise with

NATO allies in Northern Europe or Valiant Shield in the Pacific, or operating in the Mediterranean: “an increasingly hot part of the world. … We do our job by being forward, by being at sea and we are at sea tonight.”

The experiences at sea, being far forward on deployment, “are the experiences that forge us together to be much tougher, more capable versions of ourselves, inspiring us to levels of performance that even we didn’t think that we could do on our own,” Richardson said.

And he introduced Shults as “someone who embodies all of that. She is one of us, she is a naval aviator,” he said. “Drawing on her extensive naval and civilian flight training, Captain Shults and her team remained calm under extraordinary pressure and circumstances. She piloted her damaged aircraft and nearly 150 passengers onboard to safety in performing an emergency landing in Philadelphia.

“Being a captain means something, and you set the tone. And amid the toughest circumstances, she kept her cool. … We celebrate the Navy spirit embodied in Tammie Jo Shults. She did not give up her aircraft, and we do not give up the ship.”

Had either the Air Force and Army obliged, Shults might not have become “one of us,” as the CNO noted. Growing up in New Mexico, “you don’t see many ships there,” she joked, but the jets from nearby Holloman Air Force Base “drew my attention.”

Her desire to become an aviator, however, was rebuffed by the Air Force and the Army. So while the Navy was not her first choice, it did give her what the services would not: an opportunity.
“In March of 1985, I checked into AOCS (Aviation Officers Candidate School Class 16-85) in Pensacola, Florida. I got my head shaved, and I stared doing push-ups like everyone else. I loved it. I had found my people,” she said.

Shults entered the Navy at a fortuitous time, as more doors

were being opened to women for roles that traditionally had been male-only, something that would come later – many years, in some cases – for other service branches. She went on to become one of the Navy's first female F/A-18 Hornet fighter pilots.

"The Navy itself is too noble, with a mission too big, to cater to personal prejudice," she said. "The Navy was moving on, from the best armada of men to the best armada.

"The experiences that we have in the Navy we could have nowhere else," she continued. "For me, carrier landings and A-7 night bombing stand out as the challenges that groomed more than my skills. They forged a new set of steel-caliber nerves for me. As an instructor pilot, I wasn't allowed to teach guns like my peers. … I was sent to teach OCF [out of control flight] instead. This constant rehearsal of departing controlled flight and even a spiral served me well on April 17, when my Boeing wanted to depart flight."

Shults paused at the midpoint of her remarks as the harrowing audio of the air traffic control recordings that chronicled the battle to bring Flight 1380 in for a landing was played back for the audience, who then gave her a standing ovation when the tape concluded.

Twenty minutes into the flight from New York to Dallas, the 737's left engine failed over Pennsylvania, damaging the wing and the hydraulic and fuel lines, and sending debris into the fuselage that caused a rapid depressurization of the cabin. One passenger was partially sucked out of the plane.
"Everything was fine, until it wasn't," Shults said.

She was quick to credit her fellow crew for their teamwork in helping bring the flight back from the brink of disaster to a safe conclusion.

"A wise man once said, 'It is amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit.' I was blessed to be

part of an incredible team that day," she said.
While the flight crew battled to keep the plane in the air, the cabin crew assisted the passengers with their oxygen masks and assured them that "we were not going down. We were going into Philly," Shults said. "A destination gave hope. It changed the atmosphere immediately."

One passenger, Jennifer Riordan, died as a result of the accident, despite the heroic efforts of several passengers to first pull her back into the plane and then give her cardiopulmonary resuscitation. And though the plane landed safely, "and we returned 148 people to their loved ones that day," the fact that one passenger was not still weighs heavy on herself and the crew, Shults said.
"There is a time to weep and a time to laugh," she said. "A time to mourn and a time to dance. That day I understood those words."

Going forward, Shults urged those in attendance to, come what may, keep blazing a trail.
"It is my hope that when you get your head down deep into the details, or grow tired of your grueling schedule, or become weary of trying to balance saving the free world and still making it home in time for a family dinner, please do not let this one fact elude you: The ripples of your obedience in serving your country, a cause greater than yourself, it changes the very posture of the world we live in," she said.

"You certainly changed my world, by opening your ranks, allowing women to fly in the military. The Navy blazed this trail. … Your birthday quest? … I implore you to lead on. You know who you are, and where you are going. You set a good course. Please continue. Lead on."