

Navy SEAL Captain Talks Leadership

Del. Native, Salesianum Graduate Tells Group of His Work Around World

Written by Sean O'Sullivan

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WILMINGTON -- The man who commands half of all the U.S. Navy's elite SEAL teams began his remarks to a gathering of Leadership Delaware by saying that perhaps the group had the wrong person.

"I fell short," said Capt. Timothy G. Szymanski, a Delaware native and graduate of Salesianum. Because, he said with a smile, when he was 16 living on 20th Street in Wilmington, he wanted to be an astronaut. And when he didn't get into the Air Force Academy, he had to settle for the U.S. Naval Academy and life as a Navy SEAL -- a job that has taken him around the world, including to Iraq and Afghanistan and into the corridors of power in Washington.

Szymanski, 49, mentioned briefly but did not go into detail about the anti-narcotics missions in South America that he was involved in or his work in Iraq protecting civilian officials or in Afghanistan with the SEALs. But he gave a hint of what he was involved in by saying his team studied the enemy and, in the case of al-Qaida, discovered it was "more of an enterprise than an entity."

He said they came to the conclusion that they had to operate like it to defeat it.

"It takes a network to defeat a network," he said.

While it was widely reported that a Navy SEAL team took out Osama bin Laden, Szymanski did not talk about that operation.

Szymanski's remarks to the nonprofit Leadership Delaware, which was established in 2008 to recruit and mentor the next generation of leaders in Delaware, dealt generally with leadership. He told the crowd of about 200 gathered at the Wilmington Country Club that after 27 years in the Navy, he had a few things to pass along. "Character counts," he said. And when you are a leader, "invest in human capital."

Szymanski enlisted in the Navy in 1980 after graduating from Salesianum, graduated from the Naval Academy in 1985 and completed his SEAL training in 1989. Through his career, he rose through the ranks and several commands to his current position as commander of Naval Special Warfare Group Two.

He told the program's graduates, "leadership takes practice, discipline and sacrifice." Without practice, he said, you lose your edge. In the SEALs, he said, "we call it 'earning your trident every day.'"

Leaders invest in their people, lead by example, train themselves out of a job and "delegate until you are uncomfortable," he said.

And, personally, Szymanski advised, "under-promise and over-deliver."

Leadership Delaware was founded by Terry A. Strine and his wife Sandy Strine in 2008. And while Strine was the chairman of the Delaware Republican Party for many years, he created Leadership Delaware as a nonpartisan organization. To that end, Delaware First Lady Carla Markell was one of the featured speakers Thursday.

Fellows, generally aged 25 to 40, are recruited to participate in forums over a 10-month period, where they hear from Delaware political, professional and corporate leaders.

Thursday marked the end of the program for 22 fellows in the "Class of 2011" who work for a variety of Delaware businesses and institutions, including the city of Wilmington, the Delaware Attorney General's Office, Christiana Care, AstraZeneca, Barclays and United Way Delaware.

LEADERSHIP DELAWARE 2011 GRADUATING FELLOWS

Eric M. Anderson
Kevin Bacot
Thomas G. Bain Jr.
Mary E. Borger
Rebecca C. Faber
Ranie Good
Christopher J. Graham
Valene Harris
Emeka Igwe
Jacqueline M. Ivy
Matthew L. Lenzini
Dr. Vinay Maheshwari
James Anthony McClain Jr.
Charles R. McLeod III
Paul Laurence Miller
Donald W. Nicholson Jr.
Melissa Russell
Michael J. Sicuranza
Kenneth Simpler
Melodie A. Spotts
W. Daniel Young
Elena Zerfus

Below is the commencement address delivered at our December 1, 2011 graduation from Captain Timothy G. Szymanski (Naval Special Warfare Group Two).

Good Evening. Thank you for having me. It is truly my privilege to be the commencement speaker for the Delaware Leadership Class of 2011. I must say, you guys must really be hurting for speakers this year - all the good ones are either booked up or you are harvesting all the talent and keeping it right here in the First State.

I met Master Chief Chuck Baldwin back in August when he inquired if I might be interested in being the guest speaker at this event. His exact words were, "We believe your highly successful naval career, coupled with your Wilmington connection, will be unique in providing the graduates with a military/local leadership perspective."

Let me tell you that you may have picked the wrong guy. The young 16-year-old Timothy Szymanski from Wilmington, Delaware was full of drive, determination and ambition. I was going to go to the United States Air Force Academy, become a test pilot on the way to ultimately becoming an astronaut. I missed, I failed, I fell short. The mid-aged Timothy Szymanski had to settle for the United States Naval Academy and being just a SEAL and currently commanding half of all the SEAL Teams – the world's most elite Special Operations Force!

Seriously, it is my pleasure to be here with all of you this evening.

Let me first start by recognizing and thanking Gov. Pete du Pont, First Lady Carla Markell, Terry and Sandy Shrine, Charles Baldwin, the entire Board of Directors of Leadership Delaware, and most of all the class of 2011 Fellows.

As I did my research for preparing my remarks, I really struggled with what would be my message. What did I have to offer from my Wilmington, Delaware and naval background that would resonate with this class? I cannot pretend to know the strategy and vision for Delaware or what progress or hardships it may be experiencing. However, I do know that after 27 years of service, and several opportunities to lead and command at every level, that focusing on leadership development and character improvement is a vital component to any successful strategy...because leadership matters and character counts! Terry and Sandy, this is a wonderful initiative. Please keep it going because Delaware will be in good hands with a consistent program that invests in its human capital.

So, I decided I would frame my remarks around three areas: my Wilmington, Delaware background, my role in Naval Special Warfare and what I've learned that may apply to the Class of 2011.

First, my background, I was born right here in Wilmington at Wilmington General Hospital. I had six brothers and two sisters, and I was sixth in the birth order. My next oldest brother and sister are twins. Many of them still live here locally in Delaware or nearby in Elkton, Maryland. My mother was a homemaker and my father was a city fireman who worked two other jobs to put all of his children through Catholic grade school at Christ Our King. We resided just across the Brandywine on 20th street, two blocks up from Salesianum High School, from where I graduated. My brothers and sisters attended

a variety of high schools from Padua to Delcastle, to St. Marks, to Howard to Sallies - and some of my brothers attended more than one high school as ambassadors of goodwill.

This speaking opportunity gave me a chance to reflect on an area of my development that I never really gave much consideration until now – my childhood and teenage years. As a Navy SEAL, I work alongside and lead a group of common men - with uncommon drive, to serve a cause greater than themselves who are determined to be part of a legacy to defend our nation and our freedoms. I often wondered where I got that drive and determination to serve something bigger than my own self-interests. I think I can summarize my childhood and teenage formation in three key areas.

First and foremost, my family, specifically my father, was instrumental in developing my sense of service. He served a tour as an enlisted man in the Navy aboard a minesweeper at the close of the Korean War, as did his father who served on the USS Arizona prior to its sinking at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. At the peak of my dad's fire service, he was a captain and served at several city fire departments. I vividly remember visiting him with my mother and other siblings to get haircuts, slide down the fire pole and climb on the trucks. We walked proudly in the annual fire-day parade and I even picketed with him during a strike in the early seventies. I can't remember exactly for what reason, but I believe it was about hours, wage compensation and benefits. In later years as a teenager, I visited him alone or with another brother. It was amazing to watch him interact with his men.

The second influence is friends. I ran the streets with the Ogdens who were a family of six boys and whose father was a city policeman, the Joyces who were a family of six boys and whose father was a public schoolteacher and many other local families whose fathers were also public servants.

And the third influence is teachers and coaches. I am eternally grateful to Mr. John Rusnak, for whom I wrestled at Salesianum. He taught me a lot about wrestling, but he taught me much more about life, example and leadership.

The next phase of my development and experiences as a leader is my naval background. I attended the United States Naval Academy after a year at the Naval Academy Preparatory School in Newport, Rhode Island. To expound on this experience would take too much time. Suffice it to say, this is where my goals in life shifted from flying and being an astronaut to becoming a SEAL. After graduating in May of 1985 from the Academy and marrying my wife, I served aboard an amphibious ship - the USS St. Louis - in Sasebo Japan, as my class standing did not afford me an opportunity to enter the SEALs straight out of the Academy. After qualifying as a Surface Warfare Officer, I was selected for lateral transfer to Naval Special Warfare and completed Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) Training in Coronado, California in Class 161 in August of 1989. I have served in Naval Special Warfare ever since.

I have driven mini-submersibles from submarines, commanded a Special Boat Unit in Panama escorting submarines through the Panama Canal, and conducting foreign military exchanges with the special forces of Central and South America and conducting other counter-narcotics training and exchanges. I commanded SEAL Team TWO from October 2002 to 2004 and deployed to Iraq, where we had the most

strategically important mission at the time: to protect the top five interim Iraqi government leaders at the height of sectarian violence determined to prevent a fledgling government from taking root. I also commanded a Joint Task Force in AFG from December 2007 to June 2008, whose mission was to capture/kill Taliban, Al Qaeda and other insurgent elements most highly valued individuals or leaders. Additionally, I served on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on two tours, with my most recent tour advising and preparing the Chairman for his interagency discussions on Afghanistan and Pakistan. And currently, I am the Commander of Naval Special Warfare Group TWO, which is responsible for preparing, deploying and sustaining the four East coast SEAL Teams. In all of these roles, I developed as a leader and at each level learned that I didn't quite know as much about leadership as I thought I knew in the previous role. However, I did learn that there were principles common throughout all levels.

The first principle I think is important to understand is that to become a good or effective leader takes a combination of education, training and practical application. The intense leadership education and training this Class of 2011 Fellows have experienced over the last year in this program is on par with the best leadership schools or programs offered in both the civilian and military communities. However, the most important part of the "combination" is practical application. Leadership takes practice, discipline and sacrifice. The education and training, like a muscle, will atrophy without practice. Conversely, the more you practice, the sharper your instincts and judgment becomes. Stephen R. Covey, the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, calls this "sharpening the saw." In the SEAL Teams, we call this "earning your Trident every day." You have to practice your "operational art" every day to maintain your edge. Leadership is no different. The message here is you have to lead and practice that leadership from this commencement forward, which takes self-discipline and sacrifice. Additionally, leadership applies to all aspects of your life – in your family life, in your business or work, in your community and in this great state.

Another important principle from military leadership that has wider application is the two basic tenets of leadership – mission accomplishment and taking care of your people. Let me first start with "taking care of your people." Much like this elite Leadership Delaware class is focused on developing, tutoring and mentoring young Delawareans for future leadership roles in your business and work, in your community and possibly politics - great leaders develop all those around them - with particular focus on their subordinates. In Special Warfare, people are our most precious resource. Approximately ninety percent of our budget is invested in educating, training and developing our people. We develop our SEALs to be problem-solvers, to be extremely adaptive in ambiguous or uncertain situations. We have not been able to decisively pinpoint where this happens in their development or which is the trigger point or "ah-hah" moment. If we did, we could make millions. I believe it is the acute focus we place on developing discipline in good habits, teaching them how to think vice what to think, instilling perseverance and determination, and appealing to a common cause.

There are many ways to invest in your human capital: Train yourself out of a job, lead by personal example, get to know your people and their family, delegate until you are uncomfortable, train, empower and trust your people to perform and act, give credit to others liberally, particularly when you

or your team is successful, and only take personal responsibility during the failures and dark times. Most importantly, “take care of their needs and their welfare.”

Next are the mission and its accomplishment. This is the tough one that I wrestled with as far as how it would apply to the Leadership Delaware program, as most of you (Fellows) will go your separate ways and not have the strict regime of the two-day monthly forum in which to unite. In the military, particularly in the Special Operations community and the SEALs, it is relatively easy to get what we call “unity of effort” on a tactical mission, as we all live, eat, breathe and train together. We have a common understanding of the enemy and situation; and clearly understand what is expected of us. This becomes much tougher as the missions move up in complexity at the operational level where we may have to work with other units; and even tougher when we have to work with coalitions and interagency partners. This situation is more closely related to your Fellow’s situation. As in national strategy, the elements of our national power are diplomatic, informational, military and economic. These have to work in harmony to achieve our national objectives. This is no different at the state or local level. There are many pillars to a state’s power - politics, information, infrastructure, education, commerce, services, etc. They have to work in harmony to achieve the state’s objectives.

This is how mission accomplishment applies to your current situation at this commencement. If you as young Delawarean leaders continue in your service to your business or work, in your community and in the First State, it will take your leadership to bring the elements of your disparate power into harmony. This is much easier said than accomplished. However, it can be done but it takes your “leadership.” As SEALs and special operators we have learned much from our enemy - Al Qaeda - which is more of an enterprise than it is a single entity. Its power is in its decentralization and commonality of purpose or ideology. We learned early on that we were going to have to operate like it - to defeat it. Our mantra is: it takes a network to defeat a network. Department of Defense and the Agencies have moved well past their pre-9/11 stove-piped equities in order to dismantle the Al Qaeda network. This same methodology can be applied to building a network.

There are a few key principles to building a network to build a great state. First, as discussed earlier, is developing a common picture or understanding of the situation amongst the network, and then an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of each other’s organizations. It is very important to understand that unity of purpose does not mean unity of perspective. Diversity is important to the network building process. Second, stay connected and over-communicate. Third, don’t concern yourself with which organization gets credit and be transparent in your interactions. Transparency equals trust. Finally, be bold and decisive when it is time to act. This is how the mission gets accomplished!

In closing, thank you for inviting me to speak at your Leadership commencement for the Class of 2011. You have all completed a very intense and demanding leadership course. Terry and Sandy, the programs mission to develop, tutor and mentor young Delaware leaders is well on point with this class. For you, Fellows, and as we say in the military, “From whom much is given, much is expected.” Terry’s initial vision, if I understand it right, was to prepare you to lead Delaware from many diverse callings but

unified in purpose - to make Delaware a better place to live with a prosperous future. Therefore, your challenge is to take the tools you have been given, put them into practice, build upon the relationships you have fostered here, and pursue the vision of making Delaware the best it can be. I am proud of your accomplishments and am honored to have been in your presence.

Thank you and God bless this Class of 2011, God bless Delaware and God bless America!