



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

Thomas A. Ulmer '96



To Thomas A. Ulmer for his decorated career as an officer in the United States Navy, his service to country and his dedication to humanitarian assistance operations.

"I go where the Navy needs me to serve," said Thomas Ulmer, with regard to his 13 moves during a 20-year career with the U.S. Navy. His most recent relocation to Alexandria, Virginia, should be longer in term—three years. Ulmer wouldn't have it any other way. The Navy is in his blood, as he's the fourth generation in his family to wear the uniform. His father served during the Vietnam War, his grandfathers during World War II, and his great-grandfather was a sailor during World War I.

"I've wanted to be in the Navy since I was a kid," he said. "I came to Penn State with a Navy ROTC scholarship. When I left, I knew that's where I was going, and I've been here ever since."

At the Pentagon, Ulmer is the deputy military advisor to the undersecretary of the Navy-policy. He serves as a naval strategist, a relatively new Navy subspecialty in which there are approximately 150 people working. "We

look to the future," Ulmer explained, "and ask ourselves, 'where do we see the world evolving? Where do we need to put our efforts into building partnerships, relationships and security co-operations?'"

Explaining that 90 percent of the world's trade is done on oceans covering 75 percent of the world and that the U.S. Navy can't cover it all at once, Ulmer asked, "how do we leverage our strengths with the strengths of our partners to be able to support that international trade and also protect the homeland?"

Ulmer has spent most of his career as a surface warfare officer, which is military speak for, "I drive ships." Those are mostly amphibious warfare ships. "We carry Marines to the fight," Ulmer said. "I've done two tours on the *USS Fort McHenry*. In 2003, I was the operations officer. In 2014, I was commanding officer with a crew of 365. We deployed with 300 Marines, their vehicles, tanks, armored assault vehicles and landing craft."

On a nearly eight-month deployment to the Middle East, he led the ship and crew that supported the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy and civilians from Yemen. His team conducted maritime security operations due to threats to the

waterways in that region. "There's a lot of shipping traffic there so we watched over the traffic to ensure its safety," Ulmer said. They also carried out training operations with five major countries in that region: Jordan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain.

"It's all about building that intra-operative ability; we have to be able to work with each other," he said. "I try to build a cohesive team. We start working with the Marines six months in advance; the same goes for working with other militaries. A lot of what I do is about relationships."

Much of Ulmer's naval career has involved humanitarian assistance operations. In less than two years, he responded and provided crucial assistance to four different international incidents: two typhoons that hit the Philippines, the 2004 tsunami that devastated parts of Indonesia, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita at home in the U.S., and the evacuation from Lebanon.

When word of the tsunami reached his ship, stationed in Japan at the time, Ulmer drove it to Indonesia where his crew unloaded 1.2 million pounds of humanitarian aid. "We were working with the World Food Program and USAID. The

devastation was overwhelming, but when you see the smiles on people's faces when you help—that's worth it," Ulmer said.

Midway through his command of the *USS Fort McHenry*, it and two other ships were moved from home port of Norfolk, Virginia, to Jacksonville, Florida, in order to more quickly react to incidents in the Caribbean or South America. "We forward posture so we're able to respond," he said.

Ulmer added, "We're trained to respond. It's about helping. We're there to say 'we're people just like you and we're here to help wherever we can.' In the end, that's what it's about—doing the right thing."

Ulmer and his wife, Rebecca '02, are life members of the Penn State Alumni Association. They live in Alexandria and share their love for Disney, travel and their alma mater with daughters Elizabeth and Phoebe (her initials are PSU) and dogs Nittani and Molly.