

Base CO reflects on NSA Panama City assignment

By Public Affairs Officer Re-Essa Buckels | NSA Panama City Public Affairs

PANAMA CITY, FL – Cmdr. Kevin Christenson reflects on his leadership just days shy of bidding farewell to Naval Support Activity Panama City. Two years ago, Christenson was assigned as the eighth commanding officer of the installation. Since then, his philosophy has been rooted in the people.

People First

“We can’t do our mission without our people. We need to take care of our people,” Christenson said.

As a leader, he prioritizes the workforce needs, which in turn galvanizes their commitment to the installation’s mission.

His push for higher learning is also a motivating factor for base personnel and Sailors.

“I highly encourage that. That degree (and) those credits they earn (are) there’s to keep. Nobody can ever take that from them,” Christenson remarked. “All of (it) will go with them and it’s a win-win for the Navy.”

For Sailors, an education leads to promotions that translates to better job opportunities and advanced degrees post active duty.

It was more than 30 years ago when Christenson learned the value of an education.

Military Career

In 1988, at the tender age of 18, Christenson enlisted in the Navy and graduated from Benson Polytechnic School.

“If you really want something, nobody is going to hand it to you. You have to work hard for it and get it,” he added.

Later, he completed the Naval Nuclear Power pipeline. A rigorous program that he described as a gauntlet of challenges. But it was also a life changing experience that taught him the importance of integrity.

“It made a really big impression on me as a young man. It’s kind of like your word is golden until you break it,” Christenson said.

He went on to other sea and shore assignments that defined his leadership style.

“Leadership takes hard work and everybody is a leader even if you’re only leading yourself. You owe it to yourself to do hard work,” he explained.

Crises

Those words were put to the test having assumed the command of NSA Panama City just months after the destructive category 5 storm, named Hurricane Michael, which barreled into the Florida Panhandle in October 2018.

His first priority was continuing efforts to return the base to operational status during the four phases of recovery.

“For me fundamentally, when you talk about those crises, you (have) to suck it up and work hard,” Christenson said. “You might have to think a little bit more innovative and out of the box.”

But as the installation reaches the final phase of recovery, NSA Panama City and the entire world faces another crisis: coronavirus pandemic.

“Until you’re in it, you don’t experience the true pain,” Christenson sighed. “There’s been Sailors and civilians here who have gone through (Hurricane) Michael and now COVID-19.”

Christenson posed several questions: what’s the issue we need to tackle with COVID-19? Do we have a battle rhythm and can (we) account for (it)? How do we (keep) our people safe and (enforce) masks and (social) distancing?

Having answers to those questions rest on his shoulders in order to keep the mission going.

“I’m really proud of our folks on base and keeping the base safe compared to national and local numbers,” Christenson explained. “The numbers are really low and it’s (because we are) following the protocols.”

Wins

Looking back at both crises, he said those challenges were also bright spots for the command.

“What knocks us down and we get back up, I count that as a win,” Christenson added.

Under his leadership, the base excelled in the categories of shore operations, energy conservation, community relations, quality of life and support for Sailors and civilian personnel and their families.

The base has received numerous awards and honors, including:

- The Fiscal Year 2021 Retention Excellence Award (Golden Anchor)
- The 2020 Florida Department of Environment Protection Clean Marina Award, for the 11th year in a row
- The Calendar Year 2020 CNIC Personnel Excellence in Partnership Award
- The 2020 Seashore Galley Accreditation
- The 2020 Morale Welfare and Recreation Five-Star Accreditation, for the 7th year in a row; and
- The Fiscal Year 2019 SECNAV Energy Excellence: Gold-Level Award

And prior to COVID-19, the installation won the Community Service Excellence Award for a small installation.

“As a CO, those (achievements) make me super proud,” Christenson remarked. “The amount of time giving back to the community. It defines us and helps us personally in building good will for the Navy.”

Memories

As he prepares to head to the next assignment, he will have lasting memories with the people aboard the base.

“(I get) choked up talking about the people and how hard they worked during these challenges,” Christenson sighed.

He will also cherish leading the unique mission of NSA Panama City.

“It’s kind of a gem when you think about Navy bases,” he added. “Where’s the diving salvage mecca? Where do the innovators and scientists work that are in the Navy?”

With his time winding down, he hoped to leave a legacy of service.

“At the end of the day, I served the entire base. I work for everybody, whether it’s our military folks, our civilian (personnel) or tenant (commands) or whoever,” he explained.

After 32 years of service, Christenson is sailing off to what could be his final duty station with Commander, Navy Region Southeast Command in Jacksonville, Florida.

“You look at what you have left in the tank and how you can contribute ... I think that’s going to (impact) my decision and whether if this will be my last tour,” Christenson said.

Christenson will be relieved by Cmdr. Keith Foster during a change of command ceremony scheduled for 10 a.m., Monday, March 15.

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