



All the Best Podcast

81. The USS George H. W. Bush (CVN 77)

Featuring Captain Robert Aguilar, the Commanding Officer of The USS George H. W. Bush, a Nimitz class nuclear powered aircraft carrier

Capt. Aguilar: January 15th, 2009. Dear Hushang and Shahla. The commissioning of the USS George H.W. Bush CVN-77 this past weekend was an overwhelming day, not only for me, but for the entire Bush family. The honor and privilege of being associated with this magnificent aircraft carrier and her crew, are still hard for me to put into words. Barbara and I are thrilled that you were able to help us celebrate the day. I hope you and all your guests enjoyed being part of one of the Navy's greatest traditions. I'm especially glad the two of you could come a day early and join us for the private tour and lunch on Thursday. Your very, very generous donation touched me more than I can say. In addition to helping make last Saturday a perfect day, you helped make CVN-77 a better ship. I can tell you from firsthand conversations with the sailors, that they are very grateful for the computers, books, movies, etc., that your donations helped buy, and will make their many hours away from home a little easier. Thank you for being such a big part of a very special day in my already wonderful life. All the best. George H.W. Bush.

George: In the first place, I believe that character is a part of being President.

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

ATB Podcast - Robert Aguilar

Sam: This is "All the Best." The official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here, we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All the Best."

George: I remember something my dad taught me. He said, write your mother, serve your country, and he said, tell the truth. And I've tried to do that in public life. All through it.

Barbara: You are a human being first and those human connections with children, with friends, are the most important investments you will ever make.

George: We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children. A world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. This is "All the Best."

Captain Robert Aguilar graduated from Texas Tech University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in chemistry. He was commissioned in July of 1992 and designated a naval aviator in June of 1995. Over the course of his career, Captain Aguilar has completed nine deployments to all corners of the globe. And has served aboard the USS Independence, the USS Kitty Hawk, the USS George Washington, the USS John F. Kennedy, and the USS Ronald Reagan. In 2015, after completion of Navy nuclear power training, he was assigned as the 25th Executive Officer of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, followed by a tour as commanding officer on the USS Mount Whitney, where he sailed more than 44,000 miles. Then on May 1st, of 2020, Captain Aguilar assumed command of the Nimitz-class USS George H.W. Bush CVN-77. Captain Aguilar, how're you doing today? Thanks for joining me on "All The Best."

Capt. Aguilar: I'm great. It is a little bit of an overcast day here in Norfolk. But I would call that a fine Navy day.

Sam: For those listening, the Captain's sitting on the bridge right now where he would normally sit when you are out at sea. Is that correct?

Capt. Aguilar: That is correct. This gives me a perfect vantage point of not only where the ship is going, but also the flight operations that are occurring on the deck.

Sam: Well, Captain, our theme on this podcast is service. And your distinguished career seems to have been based around that core principle from the beginning. What inspired you to serve your country starting with your commissioning in 1992?

Capt. Aguilar: So, as far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be an officer in the military. My father and his brothers both served in the army. My father didn't have the opportunity to make it a career. But there's been a tradition of military service in my family, on both sides. My mother's father, part of the greatest generation, served in World War Two, in the Pacific. And fortunately, he never had to make the landing on Okinawa, which he was scheduled to have been part of. I always just wanted to be part of that. I don't think it was a conscious decision. Just sort of, that's what members of my family did. Somewhere about the fifth grade, I decided I wanted to fly. And that sort of changed the entire dynamic. I wanted to be a pilot. And I think that probably came from a friend of mine at the time, who talked about wanting to be an astronaut, because the shuttle was big that time, in the early 80s. Astronaut was the thing to be, right? And he said, "Well, to be an astronaut, you had to be a pilot." Wasn't really that interested in being an astronaut, but flying sounded like the thing to do.

I started then saying I wanted to be a pilot. And I said I wanted to be a pilot in the United States Air Force. Because if you wanted to be a pilot and serve in the military, where do you go, right? You want to be a business major, you go to the best business school. You want to be a pilot, I thought that meant you went to the Air Force. Little did I know fate would have different plans for me. I put in all my applications to the Air Force, both for ROTC and the Academy. And I'm still waiting today to hear back from the Air Force as to whether or not I can be a pilot for them. But a boon gold officer, those are recruiters from the academy, came alongside and asked me how would I feel about joining the Navy. And I said, "Did you read my application? It said pilot, not ship driver." And he said, "Have you ever heard of a thing called aircraft carriers?" That was about the time "Top Gun" came out. And I never looked back.

I put in my application and eventually got a scholarship. And that was actually my way to get to school. My father was a school teacher. And my mother, when she worked out of the house, did secretarial work. There wasn't a college fund for me. It was going to be a ship, either a scholarship or a navy ship. But that was going to be my way into my ultimate dream of flying. I graduated Texas

Tech University with a degree in chemistry. I got accepted into flight school. And I'd note that I was commissioned in July of 1992. And I have the privilege of having President Bush's signature on my commissioning document. That meant a lot to me. I became sort of politically aware in the late 70s, during the Carter administration. And I think that may have had something to do with focusing my direction towards the military. Of course, when the Reagan era came in, and the buildup of the military, strengthening our position, I was certainly very interested in that. In 1992, I got the privilege of being able to go to flight school. I got winged in June of 1995 and never looked back.

I got to be honest with you, I could have never, never in a million years, have thought that I would be sitting on the deck of the George Herbert Walker Bush, as the commanding officer. I feel like, in a way, I've come full circle. President Bush signed my commissioning document. It's his name on it, and maybe not his personal signature. And when I was a junior officer, I was on board for early sea trials and early flight deck certification. And sort of, in my career, as the commanding officer of the George Herbert Walker Bush is just... I just kind of feel like it's all come full circle for me, and in a way I could have never hoped for or planned. I've had a great career, 29 years to date. My retirement, I reach higher tenure in August of next year. I will look fondly upon the pinnacle of my career, which was being the CO of an aircraft carrier.

Sam: Well, we have a couple of things in common besides the USS George H.W. Bush. And that's the fact that my wife was also a Texas Tech graduate. She was the student body president and the feature twirler for her time there in Red Raider land. Now, I'm not sure which one was a bigger deal. She would probably argue she got more notoriety from being the feature twirler. So, Lubbock, Texas has always had a special place in our hearts. Now, you graduated with a degree in chemistry. Was the goal always to make the jump from chemistry to captain?

Capt. Aguilar: Well, so let me say, first, I am the first Texan to command the aircraft carrier, George Herbert Walker Bush. I take that as a really great privilege to be, not only the seventh CO, but from Texas. I'm a Texas boy through and through. The leap from chemistry to captain is curious, because when I was going through ROTC, the push was for new power. You know, being a chemistry major, having a technical degree. You know, my ROTC unit was very interested in seeing me and my roommate, who was a physics major, go the direction of nuclear power. Yeah, I chose chemistry because there wasn't

a lot of math, frankly. And when they suggested nuclear power, I was like, "Yeah, no. No, thank you." I knew what I wanted to do, and it was fly. And they told me there wasn't a lot of math in flying either. And it turns out they lied to me about that.

I got the opportunity to go to flight school and had a very great career flying. I spent a majority of my time in the cockpit. And for someone whose life dream it was to fly, that's all you could ask for, right? In the late fall of 2006, a really good friend of mine gave me a phone call, and said, "Hey, have you seen the results yet, for the command screen list?" And I said, "No, I haven't. I'm still waiting." And he said, "Well, unofficially, congratulations. You're going to be the CO of a squadron." You know, nobody was more surprised than me that I was going to get that opportunity. And I thought that was the cherry on top of an already wonderful career. I got to command a squadron. I did two deployments. One as XO and one as CO, in my squadron. And from a aviator's perspective, as a commanding officer, I think you can't ask for more than that, to take a squadron to sea as an XO, and then again as a CO, and lead your officers and sailors on a combat deployment.

Little bit of a twist, then we had Tomodachi that occurred within the first 30 days of that deployment. We spent the first 30 days supporting the Japanese government during that horrible event, then we went on to do the rest of our deployment. Nobody was more surprised than me when I found out that I was going to be eligible to perhaps command an aircraft carrier one day. And the irony is, I had to go to Nuke Power School to do it. How do you get from chemistry to captain? Well, you got to go to Nuke Power School, apparently. I did, and that was probably the hardest thing I've ever done. But I made it. So, that chemistry degree, little did I know, would come back to play 25 years into my career.

Sam: Captain, can you talk about the core mission of the ship and what sets apart the CVN-77 from other carriers that you've been a part of?

Capt. Aguilar: Well, there's a couple of things that set us apart. The first thing is that we are the last Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. CVN-68, the Nimitz, started off this illustrious line of ships back in the late 60s, followed by the Eisenhower, which I had the privilege of being the executive officer of. The Bush followed the Reagan. We're the youngest and last Nimitz. We are named after a president who I would say most of the sailors on board of the ship actually can remember

from when they were young. Right? All of our other ships are named after individuals who served this country and are now deceased. So, many of our sailors can remember President Bush. I think that's sort of unique, right? We can carry our remembrances of the namesake of our ship with us. He's known for his service to the nation.

One of the things I love most about President Bush is that, one, he was a naval aviator, just like me. Two, he served his country in a time when his country needed him the most. And he was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. And I actually have in my office, still images of his rescue after being shot down while attacking that radio station at Chichi-jima. I look at those pictures every day. And I think, I've got the frame of him in the life raft, and then there's the frame of him, just before he disappears from view of the camera, and he looks up into the camera. There's no telling what was going through his mind. It was probably, get that camera out of my face. But there's no way he knew what lay before him in that moment, how he had been plucked from certain death, and would go on to lead our nation through some very interesting times. And I just love that about the namesake of this ship. The other picture of him I have in my office is a lithograph of him wearing his naval aviation jacket with his gold wings on one side and the seal of the President of the United States on the other. To me, that caps a lifetime of service.

Man, I want to be like him. Maybe I don't want to be president, but I've had the opportunity to serve, and our sailors are getting the opportunity to serve their nation, just like their namesake. There's a lot of pride, I think. A lot of the sailors who commissioned the ship are back, this time as more senior enlisted or more senior officers. And they all say the same thing when I ask them, "Why did you come back?" "And it's because," they say, "It was a special ship." Their time as a junior sailor was really special to them. Now they're going to come back as more senior officers and enlisted sailors, chiefs, and lead the next generation and train them up. There is something different about The Bush. And some of it is intangible. But I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that you don't have to reach back too far to see the man. You know, on the Ike, President Eisenhower, great individual, there when his country needed him. But by the time I got on board of the ship, he was just a president in the history books. I think that is a really unique part of why The Bush is so special to its sailors.

Sam: Captain, I know you've talked a little bit about this already, but does the namesake affect the overall DNA of the ship in any way?

Capt. Aguilar: Well, I think it does. Not only is there Herbert Walker, as President, but then we also have George W. And then we've got service from Governor Bush in Florida. What an amazing family legacy to have two presidents, you know, father and son. I don't think that's been done since John Adams. Again, we, as sailors on board this ship, we know them, right? We grew up with them. We saw them on TV. We followed their career, whether you were a Republican or a Democrat. They were in the public eye. And at times, during some of our most critical moments, you know, of the last two decades. As vice president, he saw us come out of a slump, you know, when our national honor was challenged. We had suffered a stunning defeat at the hands of an enemy that we did not necessarily recognize. He led us through the economic upturn, he and President Reagan. And then saw, during his term, positive growth and a positive turn for our nation. And then President G.W. Bush saw us through the 9/11 attacks, and through all of the events that led us to where we are today.

So I think there is something about being part of the ship, and feel like you knew the individuals just because we see them on TV, right, and read about them. And I think that goes into feeling like we're connected to them. I'm jealous of the first two COs have this ship, who actually got to meet them. I've never had the privilege of meeting either president. But I get to command the ship that is named after Bush Sr. and feel like, in some small way, because of the way my career has gone, that I am connected to them in an esoteric way.

Sam: So I am lucky enough to have been able to visit the CVN-77 on many occasions. And it was amazing to see all the different tributes to my grandfather throughout the ship. Captain, can you tell our listeners about some of the ways my grandfather's honored onboard?

Capt. Aguilar: Well, the most obvious one is the statue that is in bronze, that is larger than life, of him scrambling to get to his airplane. And every aviator who's ever served on an aircraft carrier knows that feeling of excitement and dread, as they're ordered to their airplanes. You know, I think, again, to know that the namesake of your ship went through all of the same experiences that you did as the most junior aviator on board, I think is inspiring. So we have that statue. It lives in the hangar bay. When you come through the ceremonial quarterdeck, that's one of the first things you see, in addition to our magnificent ship's bell. I'm really excited to be able to put it back where it belongs. It has been in storage because our ship has been in the shipyard. But now we're getting to the point where it's time to bring it back out and make it part of our

experience as we now run to our battle stations over the next several months, leading up to our deployment next year.

Additionally, we have a photo wall outside of the captain's import cabin, that has some excellent pictures of both presidents and the larger family during the different events that occurred as part of the commissioning. I love walking by those pictures and seeing just the tremendous sense of gratitude that President Bush visibly displays seeing a ship named after himself. I can't even imagine what that would feel like to be a living president and have a ship named after you, I think is truly an honor. Most folks have their ships named after them posthumously. He got the great honor of being able to see it christened and out to sea, doing America's work. Those are the two immediate and most visible signs of the President on the ship. We have books, the one by Jon Meacham, and the one by Doro Bush Koch, on the shelves, both in the captain's cabin, and in the officers' lounge area, as well as the ship's library. So, I've worked my way through one and I'm working my way through the other. It's another way, it just makes me feel like I almost know the man, even though it's not true.

Sam: The USS George H.W. Bush CVN-77 has the ability to accommodate 6000 crewmates. Captain, with that group looking to you for leadership, what do you do to lead and inspire such a large team?

Capt. Aguilar: It's nice of you to think that it's all me. I really set the priorities and set the goals, and then I have 20 talented department heads who do the heavy lifting. I try to inspire folks to perform to a high standard by doing the same myself, I look for ways to ensure that we're taking care of our sailors, our people. My priorities are very simple. It's sailors, safety, and then operations. And there are some folks who might think that's backwards, but if I don't have trained, qualified, ready to deploy sailors, we don't get to operations. If we don't do it safely, and by safely, not only physical safety, but also an environment where sailors feel like they contribute to the mission and want to come to work, we never get to operations. If I can do the first two really well, then the sailors are going to take care of operations for me, because that's what they joined the Navy to do. I've made a career out of those three things. And I want every sailor to have the opportunity to be as successful as I am. I literally believe that I have a sailor on board who could be a future carrier CO.

There's a long road ahead to get there, but I can point to peers of mine, who started out as a junior sailor and made their way through the ranks to command

an aircraft carrier. And I want every sailor to feel like they have that opportunity. I start by taking care of my sailors and providing them the tools, the time, the training, in order to ensure that when we are called upon, we'll be ready. It's really at the deck plate level where my chiefs and junior officers interact on a daily basis with junior sailors, that the magic happens. You know, I tell folks, be the leader you wish you had. Make your part of the Navy the best you can make it. And take care of your people. I'm a firm believer in servant leadership. President Bush believed in duty, honor, and family. And I believe that my three priorities, sailors, safety, and operations, certainly is within the spirit of those three concepts.

Sam: Sir, you took command of the USS George H.W. Bush on May 1st, of 2020, amidst a national pandemic. I can only imagine how challenging it has been to keep everyone safe during this time, with new protocols, social distancing recommendations, and the climate seemingly changing daily. Captain, how has the ship and crew fared throughout this challenging time?

Capt. Aguilar: You know, we were certainly building that airplane as we flew it on some days. You know, I came in just as the concept of quarantining was starting to hit the national awareness. We had already, as a Navy, started to take precautions to ensure that our ships that had to deploy were able to do so. I like to believe that in bad times, good leadership can make it bearable. It was really a leadership challenge at all levels. And as I tell every sailor when they check aboard this ship, I consider every sailor a leader. If you're wearing a uniform, the day you check in on my ship, I expect you to lead. You know, sometimes, the most junior person present sees something that I don't. And that gives them an opportunity to demonstrate situational leadership, to ensure that I have the information that I need to make a overall decision.

We explained the situation to our crew. We told them why it was important that we were to take the precautions that we did. And we tied it to service to the nation, just like a deployment. We tied it to mission accomplished, and that I needed every sailor to be healthy and deployable in order to get this ship out of the shipyard. I did not deploy at any point in time during the pandemic, but my sailors could be pulled to fill in other roles on other ships. This ship had to get out on time. And I'm proud to say that even through the pandemic, we are tracking to a nearly on time delivery of this ship back to the fleet. And it's all because the sailors understood, they wanted to be part of the effort. I don't think they enjoyed it. I know I didn't at all times. But they understood why it was

important. And it was just a steady drumbeat of service, sacrifice, and that's part of naval service. I believe that our sailors trusted us enough to comply, and we had relatively low rates of the virus on board this ship. I'm very pleased to say that for the majority of the time, I don't think we ever exceeded more than 10 sailors who were sequestered at any one time.

And then once the vaccination became available, our sailors saw the good that can come out of it. And we're better than 90% vaccination on board this ship. I think it's just explaining the importance of what we're doing, why we're doing what we're doing, the implications of their actions, even at the most junior sailors level, to help them understand the mission of our ship, the mission of our Navy, and how they contribute to that individually. In fact, when I finish here, I'm going to get on site TV as part of my weekly interaction with the crew for about 30 minutes, to talk to them about the topics of the week, and why we're doing what we're doing, and why it's important that they are contributing to the mission.

Sam: Captain, before we conclude, I have to say thank you. Thank you so much for being a part of this podcast, spending time with us, teaching us all about this amazing ship that you command. I'm going to end with this, what does the future hold for the USS George H.W. Bush?

Capt. Aguilar: So the future for the George Herbert Walker Bush is a very bright one. We are going into the middle of the next century, onboard this ship. These ships were not originally designed for a 50-year lifespan. But because of the engineering and the American shipyard workers who build them, we've been able to extend their service life and get 50 or more years out of an American aircraft carrier. So that puts us, you know, pretty much mid century for serving our nation. I probably will not still be alive when this ship is decommissioned. And I tell my sailors that the hard work that they're doing now, maintaining our ship, the effort they're putting into the preservation and material condition, that all of their blood, sweat and tears, means that one day their son or daughter may serve on this ship as well. And I think when you put it into that context, it helps sailors to feel more connected to this 100,000 ton lawn ornament, that without their service, would just be a big block of gray steel. But they make it a fighting vessel.

They will ensure that it meets its mission requirements. They will get us into the middle of this century as proud sailors, serving on a very fine warship. One of,

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right now, only 11 capital warships of the United States Navy. The future is great for us. And when we are called upon to do our nation's business, I have no doubt that this ship's crew, along with the Air Wing Seven, who is assigned, will acquit ourselves in the same tradition as President Bush. Ready to sacrifice all to ensure that our nation's business is done. But also knowing that our fellow shipmates will be there to save us, if necessary, pluck us out of the water if necessary, and endure all required hardships to ensure that this ship returns to home port, successfully flying our battle lands.

Sam: Well, Captain, I know you're excited to see the ship come to life. We are too. Thank you for your service and thank you for being a part of "All The Best."

Capt. Aguilar: Well, I'm looking forward to getting underway here in the not too distant future. It is my intent that before my change of command next year, to have a friends and family day cruise. And it would be an honor if you could find the time to come on board and maybe podcast from our ship underway, and talk to some of the sailors and get their perspective of your grandfather's ship.

Sam: Well, you don't have to ask me twice. I'll be there.

Capt. Aguilar: Great.

Sam: Thank you, Captain. Thank you so much.

Capt. Aguilar: It's a pleasure. Thank you.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate All the Best.

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house. Every house, all over America.

George: Preparedness, strength, decency, and honor. Courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America. The greatest country on the face of the Earth.