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Virgin Islander Andrew Petersen Rises to U.S. Navy Commander, Eyes First Command Post

St. Croix native Andrew Petersen, newly promoted to O-5 Commander in the U.S. Navy, is preparing for his first command. He reflects on his upbringing, path to leadership, and the camaraderie of life at sea as the USS John F. Kennedy readies for launch.

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Andrew Petersen, a native of St. Croix and newly promoted U.S. Navy Commander

Andrew Petersen, a native of St. Croix, is among the United States Navy's newest commanders, recently earning his O-5 commission and now preparing to pursue his first at-sea or on-shore command. His promotion marks a notable milestone in a journey shaped by faith, perseverance, and a determination to "do something bigger than myself."

Despite growing up surrounded by the sea, Petersen admits his appreciation for it only deepened through military service. “I never used to be that much of a beach guy, really,” he reflected. Now, he says, “I try to soak it up as much as I can,” whether through the influence of the Navy or homesickness.

Petersen and his mother, Judy, shared their reflections with the Consortium about his career path. “Andrew has always been an optimistic child,” she said. “He’s a very supportive child...As a mother, he’s a model child. Believe me, he’s awesome, fantastic.” Both credit his Caribbean Christian upbringing for grounding him with discipline and values. “Good home teaching and good manners and stuff like that,” Petersen said, adding that perseverance to succeed and not disappoint “the people behind you” was a driving force.

After graduating from St. Croix Educational Complex, Petersen studied in Norfolk, Virginia, where he learned to adapt to challenges. “Going through college, having an accent and being a minority already, it’s already different challenges,” he recalled. “So me being able to succeed and learn about those early on throughout college made it very adaptable...for me.”

Judy Petersen initially discouraged her son from military service, especially since his siblings were already enlisted. “I said to him you have a brother and a sister in the military already. I don’t think you should do that,” she recounted, fearing for her children in wartime. But influences from siblings, naval officers in Norfolk, and even encouragement from his girlfriend’s father led Andrew toward the Navy. The 2008 recession also made the military appealing for job security. Ultimately, he told his mother, “I rather try it than to wonder what it would have been like had I tried it.”

Now, with four promotions and years of training and deployments in surface warfare operations, Petersen is focused on “taking command of whatever unit or shore command that is available.” He explained that being selected for command would likely bring another promotion, and that after O-6 — the rank of Navy Captain, one step below Admiral — “things start opening up,” Commander Petersen remarked.

For the moment, he is preparing for the maiden launch of the USS John F. Kennedy, the Navy’s second nuclear-powered Gerald Ford-class aircraft carrier. While he could not share deployment details, Petersen said he looks forward to going back to sea despite its challenges, such as unpredictable plumbing systems. The experience of being out in the vast ocean, he said, is unparalleled: “Sometimes, you just go outside on the flight deck and you realize that you are in the middle of nowhere. If anything were to happen, it is you and the crew.”

That reality fosters deep camaraderie. “You’re leaving people behind and you want to worry about them, but you can only do that to a certain extent because if you do that too long, you won’t make it,” Petersen explained. At sea, survival depends on trust and teamwork. “You gotta lean on each other, you have to. You’re living chow to chow, watch to watch, and that is how you get by throughout the day,” he said. “What people don’t understand is that all we have is ourselves out there, and all of us are very, very tight in getting through it.”