



ABRAHAM LINCOLN CARRIER STRIKE GROUP PENNY PRESS

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The Making of a Mustang

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PHILIPPINE SEA — Yeoman 1st Class Cassondra Jaycox stands outside of an office, nervous, her palms sweating as she goes over her answers and does some last-minute studying. Despite all of the nerves, there remains that steadfast confidence, a steely look in her eyes, and a fire in her soul. She knows, that this is her mission, and that once she set her mind to it, she would achieve it. She will become a Mustang, an enlisted Sailor who joins a commissioning program to become an officer in the U.S. Navy.

“I had to receive my commanding officer’s endorsement, submit a personal statement, and go to interviews,” said Ensign Cassondra Jaycox, who is now USS Abraham Lincoln’s (CVN 72) Personnel Officer. “The interviews were intense, because I picked people that would not simply write me a favorable review because they worked with me previously. A captain and a few commanders sat on the board. I was really nervous, standing outside the door and shaking. I wanted to impress them, and it was nerve-wracking.”

Long before Jaycox began putting together a package, she was a Yeoman 2nd Class, trying to complete her degree and see what was next in life. However, a mentor that changed the course of her life soon appeared.

“I had a great admin limited duty officer (LDO) in my first command, and he’s a mentor of mine to this day,” said Jaycox. “I was doing homework one day at lunch, and he asked me what my plans were. I told him I just wanted to get my degree and finish my contract, and he asked if I knew that I could commission as an officer.”

As the conversation continued, Jaycox’s mentor explained that her degree in human relations could lead her to a career in the Navy.

“He sat me down, and we looked at the options available,” said Jaycox. “At the time, I was working on a bachelor’s degree in business management, with a focus on human resources. I learned about limited duty officers, and the potential to utilize my passion for administration to become an admin LDO.”

Although her first attempt at commissioning was not successful, it led her to meet even more influential people who helped her in her goal of becoming a Mustang. More than that, it solidified her drive.

“I applied for Officer Candidate School (OCS) at my four-year mark, but did not get in,” said Jaycox. “Afterwards, when I transferred to Washington, D.C., I met a lot of admin LDOs, people that really took an interest in me and helped push me in the right direction. They made sure my career was on the right path for what I wanted to do.”

Although there were plenty individuals who supported Jaycox, there were many who doubted her as well. Luckily for Jaycox, the doubt only pushed her to strive for greatness with greater and greater tenacity.

“I was told that I wouldn’t make chief, and I wouldn’t commission, simply because I hadn’t been out to sea yet,” said Jaycox. “But that didn’t stop me. Nobody was going to tell me what goals I could, and could not, achieve.”

Her unwavering determination soon paid off, as she was able to leverage the experience she gained since her last attempt in her next attempt at commissioning. Chief Yeoman Jaycox commissioned in her eighth year of service, as an admin LDO.

“I submitted a package right before my eight-year mark, and here I am, loving it,” said Jaycox. “I loved what I was doing as a yeoman. I love the administrative part of things, and that’s why I decided to wait until I could commission as an LDO, to ensure I’d still be doing what I loved.”

As a newly-commissioned Mustang, Jaycox used her prior experience as a Yeoman to enhance her more recent training as an officer.

“My main focus is administrative, as LDOs are very specific in their duties,” said Jaycox. “With my yeoman background, I do a lot of what I used to do as an enlisted Sailor, but more on the managerial side. The personnel side has been a new experience for me, because I was a yeoman and not a personnel specialist (PS).”

As a Mustang, Jaycox always carries the knowledge of what it means to be an enlisted Sailor, and uses that to help her in assisting her Sailors and accomplishing the mission.

“I don’t think I would be the officer that I am today if I did not experience the Navy as a junior Sailor,” said Jaycox. “As a mustang, you have a better understanding of your enlisted team, because you were there. You were the E-1 or E-3, on the deck plates, getting the job done and working with leadership. It’s having that hands-on experience.”

Jaycox, who started out as a seaman recruit at boot camp like many Sailors aboard Abraham Lincoln, holds the rare distinction of spending time as a junior enlisted Sailor, a chief and as a commissioned officer.

“I’ve had experience as a leading petty officer, in the Chiefs Mess, and now in the wardroom,” said Jaycox. “I remember feeling that sometimes, leadership didn’t quite understand our position. Now, I go into the wardroom and advocate for those that are in the same place that I once was. You can relate to the junior Sailors more easily, because you were one of them not long ago.”

Lt. Cmdr. Gloria Boykin, Abraham Lincoln’s Admin Officer, had similar experiences, years before Jaycox had enlisted.

“I wanted to be part of a change,” said Boykin. “As a legalman (LN), I did a lot of research in cases, rights and laws. I spent a lot of time working with my chain of command to ensure they had the right information. But I didn’t have a voice in that role, I was just there to give people the answers they needed.”

Boykin often found herself frustrated when faced with a lack of understanding from those who could not relate to her situation.

“When I was enlisted, I remember some officers would come in from different backgrounds, different communities,” said Boykin. “They truly did not understand what it was like to study for an advancement exam, have collateral duties, come to work every day for hands-on jobs, and then also raise a family. It was frustrating, working for someone who did not understand what it was like to be in my shoes.”

Now, as the admin head of department aboard Abraham Lincoln, Boykin puts her past experience to use as she strives to not only get the mission accomplished, but to be there for her Sailors as well.

“To me, being a mustang means that I am there to work for my Sailors,” said Boykin. “I know my Sailors would say that they work for me, but I like to say that I work for them. I work

for them in that I am their voice in the wardroom. I am there to show them that there is a way to achieve their goals, to be somewhere greater than they are right now. I want to give my Sailors someone that they can look up to, knowing that it can be done, and that I understand what they are going through.”

Jaycox, who benefited from a positive role model similar to Boykin, often shares her passion for her new role with her peers.

“You meet so many great people, and talk about your experiences as a junior Sailor and the transition from enlisted to officer,” said Jaycox. “I love it. I say that a lot, but I truly love what I do. You never take anything for granted.”

Jaycox doesn’t shy away from displaying her enlisted heritage, or conversing with her junior Sailors about her path from seaman recruit to ensign.

“You’ve worked hard, to go from E-1 to O-1.” said Jaycox. “I proudly wear my silver enlisted surface warfare specialist and enlisted aviation specialist pins, because I worked very hard to earn them. I see the reaction from Sailors who are caught off guard by my silver pins when I’m in uniform, asking me why pins are silver when I am an officer, and I gladly tell them the story.”

Jaycox also has advice to share for those looking to follow in her footsteps, or strike out on a commissioning path of their own.

“My biggest advice is to keep working hard,” said Jaycox. “I was told that I wouldn’t commission without leading Sailors at sea, but that didn’t stop me. I worked really hard in every position I earned, and I took those challenging billets, taking on more and more responsibility. I made myself stand out. Do your research, set your goals, and keep working towards them.”

Jaycox, who has dealt with negativity and pessimism from others throughout her career, also has advice when the mission to commission appears impossible.

“Don’t let people put you down, or tell you that you can’t do this or that,” said Jaycox. “Prove them wrong. One of the things I said at my commissioning speech was don’t let anyone stand in your way. The cynics will try to bring you down all day and tell you that you can’t achieve your goals. I say ‘challenge accepted’, and I will work even harder to get to my goal.”

After many years as a mustang, Boykin also has some time-tested advice for those looking to make the transition.

“Keep pushing forward,” said Boykin. “If commissioning is your goal, your vision, then keep your eyes on that prize. But when you get to that goal, don’t stop there. Continue to reach for better things.”

Jaycox echoes Boykin’s statements, and encourages those aspiring to commission with some words of inspiration.

“Keep pushing towards your goals, and keep working hard,” said Jaycox. “It’s worth it, the hard work is worth it. Do not give up.”

For those looking to commission, more information can be found in OPNAVINST 1420.1B, or by speaking with a mentor about the various paths to commission, such as the U.S. Naval Academy, Officer Candidate School (OCS), limited duty and warrant officer programs, and the Seaman to Admiral (STA-21) program.