STS Careers Podcast – Prof. Andrew Gregory talks to Royal Navy Lieutenant Commander, and former BSc History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science student, Rubin Nash

Rubin graduated from the BSc History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science course in 1998, and joined the Royal Navy in 2000. This interview took place in 2017.

AG Right, this is Prof Andrew Gregory doing an interview and podcast with Rubin Nash, who's one of our alumni students. Rubin, would you like to tell us what you did and when you were at UCL?

RN Good afternoon, Andrew, I was at UCL in 1995 as an under-grad, and graduated in 1998. And I did was what then known as the History of Science, Philosophy of Science, Communication of Scientific Ideas. Since then, I joined the Royal Navy as a Warfare Officer entering Britannia Royal Naval College in January of 2000. So if you can do the maths, you can see how long ago that was now.

AG Which makes you a very salty old sea dog no doubt. So how did you come to choose this career in the Royal Navy?

RN Actually, it is a direct result of having studied on this course, because one of the essays I had to do on my third year, when at that point, I suddenly realised that I was going to leave university within six to nine months and probably needed to do something. One of the essays I did for one of the courses was about short take-off and vertical landing aircraft.

It was looking at the impact of novel technology on warfare, and as I was doing the research into this particular essay and looking at Harriers, of which we had an abundance at the time as our primary fighters coming off our through-deck cruisers. I thought, well, this could be a jolly good career. And so I started looking into further from that, but it more or less gestated from that essay I wrote, which I think I got a B for.

AG Excellent. So what sort of responsibilities have you had in the navy throughout your career?

RN They vary dramatically, and it'd be more appropriate to say what responsibilities I've had in the military because I've done what we call joint jobs as well. When I first joined as a Junior Officer, for the first four or five years I was effectively driving warships. So I'd be on the bridge and I'd be the one executing the Navigator's plan to get the ship from A to B. Fine, the Navigator did that plan, not a problem.

But my responsibilities at that point were something called Charge, which is with a capital C, and I had Charge of the ship on behalf of the Captain. So I was responsible for everyone's safety on board that ship for those four hours. I was responsible for making sure the ship was safe navigationally, I was making sure we didn't contravene any of the rules of the road, which are effectively the Highway Code you operate on the sea.

I was responsible for various initial military actions as well for the self-defence of the ship. I wasn't at that point a fully-trained Warfare Officer, I was a Junior Officer. So I hadn't done tactics courses that would enable me to use the main weapon systems, but I could direct the close-in weapon systems to be used against any threats we had, and that was my job especially at night when everyone was asleep. And therefore, everyone else's reaction times were going to be slower.

So you'd stand up for four hours, and then eight hours later, you go back up again for four hours during a peacetime watch. And then you'd be running a small team of three or four people on the bridge, and you would also be running the Engineers, down in the engine spaces, making sure they were giving you the engines you needed to do to effect all of that.

So quite challenging, especially as a Junior Officer, and at the time, we were navigating on paper charts. Whereas now, everything is digital. So a lot of your capacity was taken up actually trying to figure out where the ship was, no GPS then either, trying to figure out where the ship was and then applying all the corrections and then doing everything else and leading and managing a team to achieve the aim.

Later on, I became a Navigator myself and had to do that navigation plan responsible to the Captain for making sure that, again, this is all sub-warfare stuff. But this is when you started to actually understand warfare more directly such that when we practiced going to action stations, I would manage the entire bridge team on behalf of the principal Warfare Officer in the ops room to get the ship in the right place, to go and fight where it's meant to be.

So again, a level of responsibility a bit higher, more people to manage and lead. And actually, at that point, a great deal of responsibility for making sure my team knew what to do, which brings with it another level of risk. After that, I went to Afghanistan, which is why I say military as opposed to naval, which was a very different job.

And I was suddenly responsible for people's lives in a very very kinetic way because every time I sent my team out on patrol, it was with a question mark of "are they going to come back"? And I'd wait up for them very nervously at times thinking "are they coming back from this particular patrol"? I'd seek out assurances that the patrol they were going out wasn't just a go out and try and engage the enemy.

Because that wasn't why mean my team were there, and then came back again, back into the navy where I became that central point for the Captain as the principal Warfare Officer, and my job was to fight the ship. So if you consider the ship a weapon like a knife or something, it belongs to the Captain, it's his to polish but it's mine to use.

And I actually ended up doing that off Libya in 2011 when we were sent as a task group with the French to go and enforce an embargo which the UN had set up. And then latterly try and stop Gaddafi actually killing or engaging civilians in his civil war.

AG Okay, and what rank and responsibilities do you have now?

RN I'm a Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy, which for those who are more familiar with the army, it's the equivalent of a Major. Although, Lieutenant Commanders are more senior clearly because it's the navy. At the moment, I'm working in the Naval Command HQ for a Commodore who's a full Colonel equivalent.

He's responsible for all the tactical development and evaluation within the navy to achieve what we need to achieve, and he's also responsible for the departments which do all the analysis of our weapons and sensors etc. And my job is to take a lot of that information and questions that he gets asked by the Fleet Commander and put together briefing papers for him.

So it's very academic to a certain degree. It's collating information, it's ordering the information, it's getting evidence based for that information, prioritising it and then reducing it to a form which a Commodore can digest quickly because they don't have time to read 30 page submissions. They've got to have it in two A4 sides.

So that's where my responsibility sits at the moment in terms of the navy. My previous job was probably the most responsible I've had, which was the Operations Officer of HMS Bulwark, and she was in the news last year for being out in the Mediterranean doing the migrant rescue. And I was the Ops Officer at that time.

So I helped plan for those missions with the Captain and with the Engineers who did the internal side of things, and I think that was the peak of my responsibilities, responsible for an entire department to try and get them ready for war fighting. And also for this migrant rescue piece while also running the programme for the ship, from the daily programme to the yearly programme and being one of the Captain's heads of department. That was quite stressful.

AG And how do you feel that doing a degree in Science and Technology Studies that has helped you prepare for those responsibilities?

RN It's gone in cycles. So initially for my interviews, we call it the Admiralty Interview Board. It takes about three days to actually get through everything they throw at you in that regard.

There was quite a lot of academics on that. So I was able to draw on my experience of collating information and prioritising information and seeing where the evidence base was and trying to remove my own biases from it, which I definitely learnt from doing the communication of Science part of the course.

You have to actually, you've got all these bits of information in front of you. You have to know which ones are true and which ones are not, which ones are important and relevant and put those forward. So it definitely helped with getting into the navy initially. Thereafter for the next few years, not necessarily as much because I was doing much more vocational driving of warships, hands-on stuff.

But then when I went back to more tactical life, if you like, where actually, I wasn't just fighting the ship, I was also writing reports on how the ship had been fought and making recommendations. Again, I was able to draw on that, bring it together, that information, the prioritisation, yes, all of that which I've spoken about before. But this time, also some analysis.

So okay, we've got this fact and that's great, what's the 'so what' of that and what's the 'and so thereafter', that first order analysis and then second order afterward. And certainly again, that was first introduced to me during this degree, particularly in the communication of scientific ideas as part of it, again, for the same reasons I alluded to before.

Logic, interestingly, also plays a certain part in how the navy does its business and how a Warfare Officer needs to structure himself, and we were taught a modicum of logic or introduced to logic certainly with Hasok Chang's course right in my first-year. Where actually, he demonstrated that logic could be erroneous, and it's a bit like a black box. You've got to put the right stuff into it to get the right stuff out of it, but that it could be also be useful, and to try and structure how I go about my daily business.

So that was very useful as well and I have applied that through my career, or I've tried to anyway, some would say with some success, some might not agree. I don't know, I'm still here after 17 years.

AG Okay, is there any specific way you feel that your degree in STS and your time at UCL prepared for doing your Admiralty Board interview?

RN Yes, very much so. So it was that. There was one piece in Admiralty Interview Board which we had to précis a paper into 100 words. So that tested my linguistics skills quite a lot and where I could cut out words and change tenses and all the rest of it, which I certainly learnt by doing essay after essay after essay and trying to get it down to that deadline. But again, also that filtering out what's the chaff, what isn't relevant in this paper to the Admiral, what does the Admiral need to know.

So what is the aim, what is the exam question and what's relevant to the exam question because they deliberately threw in a whole load of nonsense into it, and getting those nuggets and structuring them into a short 100-word piece of documentation was very challenging when you only have an hour to do it.

And yes, I drew a great deal on my time with STS because we had to do that quite a bit. A certain part of that was my fault. I would leave essays probably a little too late to actually complete as most students in my day may have done, but nonetheless, there was certainly, or rather because of that, I had to get to do it very well. And I came up with reasonable marks in the essays, so it must have worked. And that was a definitely a direct translation over the Admiralty Interview Board.

AG Is there anything else that you did at UCL that may have helped you with the navy?

RN Outside of the department, certainly. I could be facetious and say the social life, but I'd focus more on fencing, and fencing is a sport I've done for 30 years now, I think. But certainly when I came to UCL, I honed it further and was lucky to be part of a very successful team. We started the success that UCL has been having since the mid-90s.

But the key thing about fencing is that it controls aggression. It is all about knowing how you can apply lethality to your opponent. Okay, not literally lethality in the case of fencing, but you can translate it across to the navy, and that's been very useful in knowing when to control your aggression, when to be aggressive and when to step back and be more defensive.

I still do fence, I fence for the navy. I'm actually the Captain of the Royal Navy Amateur Fencing Association, and I'm also the President of the UCL Alumni Fencing Association - have to get the words right. I still come back to UCL on a weekly basis where they're very forgiving and welcoming of us oldies as we come back to fence, and they're a bloody good bunch. So please go along to fencing as well.

AG We do do some courses on the relation of science, technology and warfare. Is there anything specific out of those courses that's helped you during your career?

RN Actually yes. There was a very interesting case in 2011 when I was, I mentioned that we were doing embargo operations in HMS Liverpool off the coast of Libya. And one of the things we were embargoing was fuel coming out of the country so Gaddafi couldn't get money to fund his civil war, but also something called dual-use technology was coming back in.

And as soon as I was reading the orders that we had received, I was like this dual-use technology set off a memory in my head and I remember very clearly doing an essay which I was very proud of at the time in my third year on the Biologic Warfare Convention and how it's applied. And although it didn't get my highest mark, it was certainly my favourite essay.

And there was one bit in there on castor beans and Iran, and how Iran wasn't allowed to import these beans because it was a dual-use technology, and that was the first time I had come across the term. And looking deeper into it, incorporated this as a major part of that essay, it was because castor beans can very easily be used for something else. In this case, ricin as a biological weapon.

So there was a direct linkage from 1998 when I wrote that essay to 2011 when I was once again dealing with dual-use technology. Except this time, stopping them coming into a country. So I found that education piece quite good because I was able to tell other people what that meant because people around me hadn't necessarily had that exposure to the term.

Certainly it's not something that we in Britain do, because we have what's called a conventional military and we don't use asymmetric technologies. So when people were saying what is dual-use technology, I would be able to tell them and I was able to give them an example as well.
