



New executive director excited for future at Weapons Division



Joan Johnson, Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division executive director, welcomes Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to China Lake on Feb. 2 as Rear Adm. Brian Corey looks on. (U.S. Navy photo)

When Joan Johnson left her job in industry to come work at Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division in 2000, the furthest thing from her mind was leading the organization as its executive director. But, just 16 years later, she's nearly three months into the top civilian job at the command and responsible for directing the work of more than 4,600 people providing cradle-to-grave support for the total weapon system.

"When I first came here, my plan was simply to bring my experience, and add value," said Johnson, who made a conscious decision to join the NAWCWD team mid-career. "I was then, and still today, mainly concerned about contributing to the mission."

Born in Los Angeles, Johnson's family moved to the Washington, D.C. metro area when she was 6. She grew up in Northern Virginia, graduated from the University of Virginia, and soon migrated back to the west coast to work in industry as a systems engineer. Through that work, Johnson became acquainted with Point Mugu and China Lake.

"We'd bring our systems to the labs and ranges at NAWCWD," she said. "I fell in love with the work and the culture. What I saw here amazed me – the big picture understanding of not just how a system works, but how multiple systems integrate together to create what we



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now call warfighting effects.”

Johnson said she was also attracted to the notion of supporting the mission for mission sake, and not worrying so much about the bottom line.

“This place is an engineer’s dream,” she said. “The folks here are incredible; they love what they do, and are completely committed to the mission.”

During her 17 years in industry, Johnson worked as a software engineer, systems engineer, project lead, and line manager.

“Our job here at NAWCWD is to deliver what the warfighter needs,” she said. “Having that industry perspective is important, as it provides an understanding of the challenges associated with being a prime contractor, as well as what drives behaviors and incentivizes performance.”

As accomplished as she is, with more than 30 years of experience working with the Department of Defense as well as private companies, and earning numerous awards for her work supporting naval and Marine Corps aviation, Johnson admitted to having some concerns about the ED job.

“I questioned whether I was qualified enough to give back to this incredible workforce what they deserve from a leader. Am I ready to perform at the level that everybody should expect of their ED,” she asked herself.

After much consideration, Johnson realized she had to practice what she had preached to so many engineers throughout the years.

“I always encourage people to try something they think they aren’t quite ready for,” she said. “Push yourself beyond your comfort zone, and then set the bar high.”

This was not the first time Johnson has broken out of her own comfort zone. In 2013, she was selected to lead the Weapons and Energetics Department, the largest department at NAWCWD.

“I didn’t have a weapons background but I was surrounded by talented, experienced people who wanted to contribute to mission success, and took the time to help me become an informed leader,” she said. “I was reminded that nobody does their job alone.”

Johnson recognized the work of NAWCWD leaders before her, and said she was better prepared for the ED job because of years of mentoring with Scott O’Neil, who held the position for 10 years before her.

“Scott and Rear Admiral Moran laid an amazing foundation that started to change the dynamics of the organization in a positive way,” she said. “With that foundation, Rear



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Admiral Corey and I are focused on thinking and acting boldly, and getting back to our roots - applying hands-on technical know-how and innovative thinking to respond to, and deliver warfighter needs quickly.”

“As the executive director, my goal is to build on that foundation, articulate the vision and a vector, then remove as many barriers as I can to let our smart people do what they know how to do.”

NAWCWD is not the only command with new leadership. Vice Adm. Paul Grosklags recently took over as commander of the Naval Air Systems Command, and Adm. John Richardson became the 31st Chief of Naval Operations. Since taking over last fall, both have issued direction for the way ahead. Johnson said NAWCWD is completely aligned with that direction.

“We’re focused on first understanding and then rapidly responding to the highest priority needs of the warfighter that fall within the sweet spot of our knowledge and capabilities,” she said. “We’re coming up with some innovative solutions, and we’re going to solve hard problems for the warfighter. We’re doing that with our uniquely qualified civilian-military team, and our one-of-a-kind facilities and ranges. We’re going to take risks and do some novel things. I’m excited.”

To follow the direction in Grosklags’ Commanders Intent, NAWCWD is aligning its resources to deliver capability to the fleet faster.

“We have a lot of capability here but we can’t be everything to everyone,” Johnson said. “We are going to have to make hard decisions. We have to focus our workforce on solving a few of the really difficult problems that the warfighters face so that they are ready to fight tonight and have the capabilities they need for the next fight.”

“I take my obligation to every person who works here very seriously, but I don’t take myself seriously at all; people don’t work for me, I work for them,” said Johnson, who is also committed to working with the local communities on quality of life issues on both sides of the gates. “I’m a family-first person so finding the right work-life balance is extremely important. I hope my husband, Stu, and I have demonstrated that you can raise kids, have a successful career, and find time to enjoy life outside of work.”

Self-described casual hikers, the Johnsons are a close-knit family who enjoy outdoor activities including camping. They have two grandkids living in Ridgecrest, who seem destined to be fourth generation Burroughs High School graduates, following in their paternal grandmother’s footsteps. With all four of their kids grown and out of the house, the Johnson’s now find themselves trying to keep up with a Labrador retriever (aka child #5).

Looking forward, Johnson said this is a great time to work at NAWCWD.



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“I am genuinely excited about our future, and I am committed to this place,” Johnson said. “Our alignment with the bigger Navy right now is outstanding, and there is so much support to reenergize the use of our Navy labs to develop products and solutions for the warfighter.”



Joan Johnson is the executive director for the Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division. (U.S. Navy photo)