

# Meet John Wilson

**Former Sea Cadet from Bryce Canyon Division, Sherman Oaks, California**  
**Attended the U.S. Naval Academy ('87) and Cornell University ('02)**  
**Currently a Senior Scientist at the University of Virginia**

**Q: Tell us about your career path after leaving the Sea Cadet program.**

**Wilson:** After Sea Cadets and high school (James Monroe High School in Sepulveda, California), I attended the U.S. Naval Academy where I majored in Systems Engineering and graduated with the Class of 1987. I spent about five years on active duty in the Navy, including service aboard USS *Midway* (CV-41) during Operation Desert Storm. After leaving active duty, I worked as an engineer for about three years and then went to Cornell University where I received a Ph.D. in Applied Physics in 2002, specializing in astronomy instrumentation. Since then, I have worked at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, where I am currently a Senior Scientist in the Astronomy Department. After leaving active duty, I also spent another 15 years in the Navy Reserve, mostly in Science and Technology units, and retired as a commander after 20 years of service.



**Q: What is your favorite Sea Cadet memory?**

**Wilson:** My favorite Sea Cadet memory was my six-month trip aboard the USCGC *Glacier* (WAGB-4) for Deep Freeze '81-'82 to Antarctica. I was fortunate to be one of two Sea Cadets selected for the voyage which occurred during the middle of my junior year in high school. I essentially worked as a junior enlisted person and rotated through the various departments on the ship, from working with the quartermasters on the bridge to helping scientists core ice in Antarctica to forecasting the weather to tracing pipes in the engine room. It was an amazing opportunity and one of the highlights of my life to this day. We also visited numerous countries throughout the Pacific Rim.

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**Q: How did you become involved in the Sea Cadet program?**

**Wilson:** I had become an Eagle Scout at a young age, and I was interested in a new challenge. Since I had always enjoyed the water, the Sea Cadets seemed like a nice fit.

**Q: What do you do as an astronomer?**

**Wilson:** In my current profession as an astronomer, I specialize in building instruments, particularly spectrographs, for telescopes. I particularly enjoy that my niche area sits at the intersection of engineering and science. Not only do I have to be adept at multiple areas of engineering and science, but I need to be a lifelong learner. I really get a lot of joy when astronomers find the instruments that I have worked on, helpful for their research.



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**Q: What impact did USNSCC have on your life?**

**Wilson:** The Sea Cadets certainly confirmed for me that I loved the sea, enjoyed traveling to new countries and that I should indeed attend the U.S. Naval Academy. Once at the Academy, I was able to take advantage of numerous Sea Cadet experiences to help me feel more comfortable and confident with the rigors of life there, especially during Plebe year and when we had opportunities at sea. Just as importantly, Sea Cadets provided me a lot of early leadership experiences that I have built upon throughout my adult life. Being a good leader, especially amongst peers, is not easy, and requires practice. Lastly, I was extremely fortunate to be mentored by two amazing leaders in the Bryce Canyon Division — Bill Bryan and Gordon Meighan.



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**Q: Do you have any advice for Sea Cadets considering a military career?**

**Wilson:** Take advantage of all the opportunities the Sea Cadets offer for experiences with different facets of the military so you can learn what military life is like and what a career might entail. Having these experiences under your belt, you can make a more informed decision about going into the military after high school or college.

**Q: Any last words on what you learned from the Sea Cadet program?**

**Wilson:** My Sea Cadet experiences introduced me to challenges and opportunities that many young adults don't have the chance to have. Through these experiences, I learned to jump in and participate, keep an open mind, take advantage of opportunities, have confidence, and learn effective leadership skills. These are all important skills to have, regardless of one's profession, that I have honed and used consistently. 🌀

**What is Operation Deep Freeze? Operation Deep Freeze is the codename for a series of U.S. missions to Antarctica. The first mission (1955-56) prepared a permanent research station and paved the way for more exhaustive research in later Deep Freeze operations.**