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## Athletics, academics helped alum prepare for life as Navy commander

Looking back on his four years at Oakland University, Wesley Brown remembers the rigors of life as a student athlete.

As a member of the swim team, his days would start with a series of pre-dawn laps in the pool at the Aquatic Center. Then he was off to classes – a full load as a double major in English and Russian Language and Civilization. In between homework and study, he'd hit the weight room and then head back to the pool for swim practice.

"I had to learn time management quickly," Brown said. "Every hour was accounted for and schedules were planned right down to the minute. It gave me the structure and discipline to stay on track with all the things going on in my life."

It wasn't an easy life, Brown admits, but it helped him prepare for a career as an officer in the U.S. Navy. Since graduating from Oakland in 2000, he's traveled throughout the nation and the world, rising to the rank of commander.



*Wesley Brown aboard the USS Oscar Austin, of which he currently serves as executive officer.*

Over the past year, Brown crisscrossed the country, training at various Naval schools with the goal of becoming an executive officer of a Naval destroyer. He achieved his goal in September when he was appointed executive officer of the USS Oscar Austin.

The experience was something of a refresher for the married 39-year-old father of two, who had spent the previous five years working at the Pentagon as a liaison to foreign embassies.

But that's not to say he's never experienced life on the high seas. He's spent much of his career sailing throughout the Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa on various antipiracy and multinational support missions.

### Out at sea

Brown says it took some time to find his footing after leaving OU. An internship at a publishing company convinced him that he didn't want a conventional 9 to 5 job. His military career began when he was accepted into the Navy's surface warfare program and spent 13 weeks in officer candidate school in Pensacola, Florida.

After six more months of training, he reported to his first ship, the USS Cole. Brown and his crewmates were tasked with repairing damage the ship had sustained in a 2000 terrorist attack that drew international headlines. After completing this assignment, Brown spent two-and-a-half years aboard Coastal Patrol ships deploying out of Bahrain as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

On April 24, 2004, aboard the USS Firebolt, Brown was on patrol securing an oil terminal in the Persian Gulf when a trespassing vessel exploded as part of a coordinated terrorist attack. Calling the ordeal, "one of our worst days," Brown recounted the attack that left three sailors dead and four wounded:

"I saw the explosion from the bridge. We had seven sailors in the water and no idea in what condition. We had one rescue swimmer and no additional boats. I told the captain he had to let me help the rescue swimmer. I entered the water, swam out to the wreckage and towed back what was the body of my leading petty officer and two others whose injuries weren't life-threatening, while the rescue swimmer focused on the others. Hardest 400-yard swim of my life."

After returning stateside, Brown earned a master's degree in national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. By 2009, he was back at sea working as the operations officer aboard the USS Mahan. The ship



*Brown's official U.S. Navy photo*

plied the waters of the Red Sea and Gulf of Oman, along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula, as part of an antipiracy coalition between U.S. and British forces.

“There were a lot of pirates out there who would take control of ships and hold the crew and cargo for ransom,” Brown explained. “Our mission was to protect the ships until they got safely to port.”

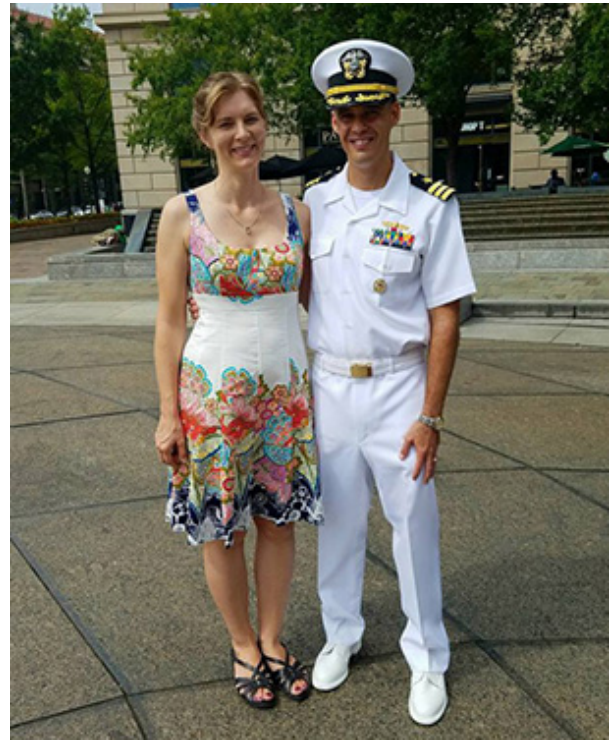
Following a brief stint aboard the USS Enterprise providing support to ground troops in Afghanistan, Brown was sent to the Pentagon to work with foreign embassies on a variety of navy-to-navy operations.

“We coordinated sales of military equipment between governments so that everyone was using the same equipment and could work together more seamlessly on missions,” he said.

Last December, after being promoted to commander, Brown was back in the classroom training to become an executive officer, the second-highest ranking officer aboard a guided-missile destroyer. After finishing school, he was assigned to the USS Oscar Austin, based in Norfolk, Virginia, the same place he met his wife, Alisha, during his first division officer tour.

As the ship’s executive officer, Brown’s primary function is to carry out the policies and orders of the commanding officer and keep the ship running on schedule. He’s expected to serve in this role for 18 months, in preparation to become the ship’s commanding officer.

“If I successfully complete my executive officer tour, I’ll be selected to fleet up to the command officer position for a follow-on 18 months,” Brown said. “There’s no higher responsibility in the Navy for a surface warfare officer than commanding a warship.”



*Brown and his wife, Alisha*

While athletics helped him develop the physical and mental resilience to succeed in the military, Brown says that the writing and communication skills he learned as an English major have also served him well.

“I write every single day at my job,” Brown said. “I write operations plans, schedules, evaluations of sailors who work for me. I communicate up to higher headquarters.”

Brown says his literary interests influenced his academic pursuits in college.

“I grew up reading Cold War spy novels and Tom Clancy,” he said.

When he came to OU, Brown combined his passion for literature with a focus on Russian studies. The summer before his junior year, he spent a semester in a study abroad program in St. Petersburg. He and four other OU students were paired with host families.

As Brown recalled, some of the host families spoke English with varying degrees of proficiency. His host family spoke no English at all.

“I spoke every word of Russian I learned in two years of classes in the first 30 minutes of sitting in their living room,” he said. “After that, it was total immersion.”

Along with the other OU students, Brown attended language classes, tours and cultural events throughout the summer. The group also visited Moscow.



*USS Oscar Austin*

“I walked in Red Square, viewed Lenin’s Mausoleum and watched an opera in the Bolshoi Theatre,” said Brown. “It was quite a summer for a kid whose only other international travel was to Toronto to see *Phantom of the Opera* in high school.”



## **'A coach's dream'**

A native of Bloomfield Hills, Brown excelled academically and athletically at Andover High School prior to joining Oakland's swim team as a walk-on. His time at Oakland was marked by transition, as the university moved to Division I athletics and changed from the Pioneers to the Golden Grizzlies.

"I started as a Pioneer in Division II and finished as a Golden Grizzly in Division I," Brown said. "It was an exciting time for the entire campus."

Longtime Oakland swim coach Pete Hovland remembers Brown for his smarts and competitiveness. With his 5 foot 7 frame, Brown may not have possessed the prototypical build or natural athletic gifts of other swimmers, Hovland recalled, but he made up for it with grit and determination.

"He was a coach's dream," Hovland said. "He loved coming to practice and working hard. He had leadership qualities and was an extremely bright kid."

While moving up the ranks in his Naval career, Brown devoted himself to new athletic endeavors. He's competed in more than 50 triathlons and recently finished his second Ironman Triathlon, a one-day event consisting of a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bicycle ride and 26.2-mile run.



*Brown swimming for Oakland University*

His former coach wasn't surprised.

"He always trained hard and when we would go on a 10k run along Paint Creek Trail, he was always one of the best runners," Hovland said. "He was dedicated and had the entire package. You could tell he had the makings of a triathlete."

Brown says the lessons he learned at Oakland will stay with him for life.

"You're not always going to swim your best time," he said, "But you have to keep swimming, and pushing toward the finish line."