

Alexandra Hammeran

COMM 413, Advanced Composition

Dr. Maxwell

April 7, 2019

The Life of Captain Wouter Sijtsma



Captain Wouter Sijtsma is a well-known figure across The Citadel campus. He is recognized for being fair and having an excellent sense of humor that he shares with the cadets and his colleagues. However, not many here know his story. In conducting this interview, I was granted the privilege of recording a portion of his life story, getting to know better the man who watches and guides cadets to fulfill their full potential from the sidelines.

Captain Sijtsma was born and raised in the city of Leeuwarden, in the Netherlands' province of Friesland. Leeuwarden is a medieval town with a long history dating back to the 10th century. It was formerly a royal residence and maintains a historic city center. Captain Sijtsma grew up there and was surrounded by the best that the city had to offer, including an opera house, cultural events, a pop group known as the Latches, and a building called the Hippo, which sold drugs. "We had everything there," Captain Sijtsma said, "everybody knew everybody." As a child, Captain Sijtsma was always outside: There was a farm in the city center designed to allow children to interact with animals, there were sports, and there was a heavy military presence.

The military was always a large part of Captain Sijtsma's life because he grew up during the Cold War. Within proximity of town, there was an Air Force base that housed an F-104 Starfighter. Captain Sijtsma recalled that it was an "interesting plane" because you could hear it all over town. "The howling of the machine would attract kids," he explained, "and that is what eventually made me decide to go into the Air Force." The defining moment was when he was walking to school and he spotted a column going through town. They had been escorting hawk missiles into the base, and he was struck by their impressive military bearing. He recalled the moment distinctly: "Now that was mighty impressive. So I thought, 'I want to do that, too.'"

His military career officially began in 1979 when he was drafted and trained to be a driver. However, his superiors soon discovered that he was good at languages and decided to transfer him into communications. His work in this position consisted primarily of intelligence gathering; because he spoke English, he was sent to work with the 601 Field Artillery Detachment, US Army, Lance Tactical Nuclear Missiles. After a few years the draft ended, and Captain Sijtsma was given the opportunity to choose which branch he would like to enter. "So, I thought, well, Army, lot of hard work, lot of walking. Nah. Military Police, nah, too strict. Navy,

six months at sea all the time, not very appealing either. The Air Force, now they look like a pretty relaxed bunch.”

This turned out to not be the case, as Captain Sijtsma learned a week later when he was issued his equipment and taken on a 20-mile march. Captain Sijtsma confessed that, while hard, the work was rewarding. He was able to engage in a lot of extra training and tasks that also necessitated extensive travel. “You get to see a lot of other countries, a lot of other people, and a lot of other things,” Captain Sijtsma said, “interesting times.” He was deployed several times to places like Africa, the Middle East, and Indonesia.



He also got to work with Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Warfare (CBRN). Part of this work involved collecting the undetonated explosives from WWII that remained littered across the countryside. Roughly 10

percent of explosives did not discharge prior to impact, and it was part of Captain Sijtsma's job to collect and diffuse them. "It's a big lump of rust, it doesn't do anything. If you can cut through the rust, you get to the core of it, everything inside is still brand new, except for the explosive component in it, which has crystallized. That's even more explosive than it was in the day," he explained. He was also involved in escorting Iraq citizens who had been harmed by Saddam Hussein's biological weapons into the Netherlands for treatment and study. "It was pretty gruesome," Captain Sijtsma said, "again, different times."



Another area that Captain Sijtsma has been extensively engaged in is NCO and Officer leadership training on a national and international level. The United States has a program called the International Junior Officer's Leadership Development Seminar (IJOLD) in which international junior officers are sent to the United States for a week-long training program to see

what their differences and correlations are, as well as to foster good relations between nations.

“So, we looked at that in the Netherlands and said, well, we should do that, too,” Captain Sijtsma said. They also included Senior NCOs in the program in order to give them time off and the opportunity to travel. The purpose of the program was to take these Officers and NCOs out of their comfort zones and get them to use their people more effectively. “People usually forget that leadership is the will of your followers to follow you, and if they don’t want to follow you, then nothing much will happen. But also, that you can do a lot more than you think you can do,” Captain Sijtsma explained.



When asked if he utilizes what he learned by working with and organizing these leadership programs at The Citadel, he replied, “Oh, absolutely.” He went on to detail his thoughts on The Citadel: “The concept of the Citadel is brilliant...we have Cadets leading their

own unit under adult supervision. Brilliant concept because that teaches you leadership. Peer leadership is the most difficult leadership there is because everybody knows who you are, and they know what your faults are. So, you can't hide, you have to be authentic." In order to further challenge Citadel cadets, Captain Sijtsma strives to remain unpredictable to force continuous adaptation. He learned from his time working in international leadership training that this is the best way to encourage leadership development.

From 2003 to 2005, Captain Sijtsma attended the University of Liverpool to obtain his Master's in Business Administration in an effort to further develop himself academically and personally. "The first class was horrible," Captain Sijtsma confessed with a laugh, "it took six weeks and I thought, okay, I need to get out of this place." However, he learned to refine his study methods and graduated within two years. He also attended the Paralegal program at the University of South Carolina. "I came to the US...and I needed something to do and, eh, I figured I would do something in law. It was great fun."



Following his completion of this course, Captain Sijtsma applied to teach at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina. He is known and admired by the entire Corps of Cadets because he presents challenges, maintains a sense of humor, and treats Cadets fairly. As one of

the Cadets whom he supervises, it was my pleasure to interview him and give others the opportunity to get to know him as I have.