

JUNE 2023



# DECK LOG

*Dahlgren Heritage Museum*



**Capt. Todd Copeland and Dahlgren Heritage Foundation President Ed Jones**

## Copeland Reflects on Three Years at NSA South Potomac during May 4th Event

*By Jeron Hayes*

When Capt. Todd Copeland was entertaining options for his next duty station, where he'd assume command in July 2020, he admits he wasn't familiar with Naval Support Activity South Potomac (NSASP). He was living in Sterling, Virginia, while working at Fort Belvoir and decided one weekday morning to leave early and drive to Naval Support Facility (NSF) Dahlgren to check things out. He recalls riding through the gates and strangers waving at him as he explored. He

admired the majestic trees and view of the Potomac River and made his way into the housing area, where he spied the historic Admiral's Quarters.

"I pulled over into the parking lot across the street to call [my wife] Heather and tell her how great it was – but I didn't have a cell signal."

Thus was the introduction to his tour that began in the throes of the COVID pandemic. He began navigating the uncharted territory of managing operations at two bases in two states while the bulk of the workforce was working from home and the medical climate was volatile.

Copeland was born and raised in the Orlando, Florida, area, and his father had served three years in the U.S. Navy aboard an aircraft carrier.

"I always imagined I'd grow up to be a stock market tycoon and live in corporate America making tons of money, driving a Lamborghini," said Copeland.

He is a product of the U.S. Naval Academy, the first in his family to finish college. It would have been his dream to attend the University of Notre Dame, the favorite of his Catholic-raised father Roger, but the academy offered an incentive Capt. Copeland couldn't resist – a free education. "I went through the Academy process with (former U.S. Representative) Cliff Stearns. I had the grades to go to Notre Dame, but there wasn't money for tuition, so I went to the Academy. It wasn't my dream - that was Notre Dame."

*[Continued page 4]*



FAM Curator Sarah Ernst and DHM Member Alan Dean

## Fredericksburg Area Museum Curator Visits the Museum

By Alan Dean

As part of our continuing efforts to expand our interactions with other museums, I hosted a visit by Sarah Ernst, the curator of the Fredericksburg Area Museum (FAM) <https://famva.org/>, in early May. Our docent Linda Baran, who also docents for FAM, recommended Sarah connect with us to explore possibilities of a collaboration. Sarah's hour-long visit included a discussion on the history of the museum, some of the technology highlights featured in the museum, such as a picture of the moth found in the Aiken Relay Calculator that disrupted a program that was running, and a detailed look at the current Pioneers of the 20th Century exhibit, The Story of the Wests. The Story of the Wests exhibit is being replaced by the exhibit featuring our next Pioneer, Dr. Charles Cohen.

We Invite You to Attend  
The Upcoming Forum  
“Through a Child’s Eyes”

Thursday, June 22, 2023

At the UMW Dahlgren Campus  
4224 University Dr., King George  
Reception Beginning at 4:30 pm  
Program Beginning at 5:00 pm

Panelists Elissa Steeves, Margie Stevens, and John Morton, led by moderator Ed Jones, will reminisce about their experiences in growing up on base.

You will also get to see the UMW student-created exhibit “The Dahlgren Way: King George County and the Naval Weapons Laboratory (1945-1974)” and find out about the next exhibit in the “Pioneers of the 20th Century” series, which features Dr. Charles Cohen.

Visit us on the web at  
[www.dahlgrenmuseum.org](http://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org)

Look for us on Facebook and  
Instagram too!



Niamh Connell

## Cataloging Collections from Attics and Basements

By Alan Dean

Over the past few years, the Museum has been receiving donations of artifacts, pictures, and papers from the families of people who worked on the Base. Due to higher priorities in museum goals of becoming a museum without walls, the folders, envelopes, and boxes of items remained largely untouched. Now, thanks to a generous grant from the Community Foundation Virginia Heritage Fund, we have begun the challenge of cataloging the items in

each donated collection. Starting in May, Niamh Connell, a rising senior at St. Mary's College in Maryland, returned and donned her white gloves to catalog these items using a common set of attributes designed to make the collection records easily searchable by museum staff to support current and future exhibits. This process requires unique accession numbers to be assigned to each collection and each item in the collection to be identified with a unique number. In addition, a brief description of the item is entered, and a picture of the item is taken. To complete the process, each item of the collection is then placed into acid-free archival folders and then the whole collection is placed into a labelled banker box and moved to the museum's climate-controlled storage unit. Special care is taken with photos being carefully removed from the plastic sheet protectors, which tend to stick to the photo, and placed in acid-free archival tissue. Niamh will be with us until August to complete as much of the task as possible. Look to the September Deck Log to see how much progress is made.

### Considering Donating Items to the Museum?

Email us at [dahlgrenmuseuminfo@gmail.com](mailto:dahlgrenmuseuminfo@gmail.com) to share information and make an appointment.

### GUIDED BUS TOURS

We are offering four more tours of Naval Support Facility Dahlgren (followed by a guided tour of the museum!) this year, all on Saturdays. Tours leave from the museum promptly at 11 a.m. All tours are free, but you must register to attend: visit <https://dahlgrenmuseum.org/events/category/all-events/> for details. Donations are always encouraged!

#### 2023 Tour Dates:

July 15 \* August 19

September 16 \* October 21

*[Copeland continued]*

The Naval Academy turned out to be a great fit for him. He considered himself an introvert who'd played volleyball and ran cross country in high school and was thrown into a group of valedictorians at the Academy, and he found a broader social scene. "Which I needed," he stated. "I see my kids at school now and see so many of the same issues I had." Adjusting to the new environment was a constant struggle, but "I made friends that last a lifetime."

As everyone knows, behind many good sailors is a spouse supporting them throughout their career. Copeland and his wife Heather met the way lots of military couples do – in a bar. This particular meeting took place at Coconuts in Pensacola when Copeland was training to be a pilot. Heather grew up with a dad who'd served in the U.S. Marine Corps, and her parents were both military brats, so she wasn't a stranger to the military lifestyle. Heather even pinned Copeland's wings when he graduated from flight school prior to their engagement ("Scandalous," he said with a grin). Their union has included two children, as well as the usual separations that military life can bring.

When he reflected on his days as a P-3 pilot, he said, "It's fun, it's hard, and the academic side was the least surprising part to me. It was the most fun thing I've ever done." Though he isn't qualified to fly now, he said, "Once a pilot, always a pilot," and he uses his knowledge and experience from his P-3 days in every facet of serving as a commanding officer.

Copeland spoke of having to reinvent himself every three years since putting naval aviation in his past. He has worked in other capacities, including in acquisitions and as a Congressional liaison, in high profile positions where, as he puts it, "I wasn't in the room where it happened, but I was in the room next to it." Regardless of the duty, he said his days as a pilot shaped everything he does. His memories as a pilot are never far away, as reflected in a story he shared during a ceremony held at NSF Indian Head commemorating the 20th anniversary of 9/11. "I was in the Middle East on that day, and we heard the cheering over our radios from our enemies. I'll never forget that." He lost classmates from the Academy on that horrible day.

When it came time for orders in 2020, Copeland was allowed to choose 17 bases and rank them in order of interest. "I wasn't expecting to be selected for command," he reflected, "but I did my research and ended up ranking South Potomac number one." The new role as NSASP commanding officer made both NSF Dahlgren and NSF Indian Head his responsibility. He inherited 17 tenant commands with a variety of issues. "I became a combination of chief of police, landlord, magistrate, and chief plumber, among other duties, as well as a community relations fixture."

*[continues]*

*[Copeland continued]*

Taking command of NSASP at the height of an unprecedented pandemic was a challenge. The Navy was literally working daily to keep its military and civilian workforce moving forward while adhering to CDC guidance and working to keep its personnel safe. Copeland's change of command ceremony was limited to no more than 50 people, and the ceremony itself was scaled back considerably in the interest of everyone's safety. The bright side to taking command during a pandemic? "It brought our family closer. We found things to do together." The family spent the summer in the 8-bedroom, 5.5-bathroom commander's quarters at Dahlgren and took advantage of living on the shoreline of the Potomac River.

In the fall, while his wife and son returned to Loudoun County, Virginia, to finish his son's senior year of high school, daughter Haley stayed at the home at Dahlgren and Copeland served "as her first college roommate" as she spent her first semester as a freshman at Penn State University attending virtually. When son Owen graduated in spring of 2022, he made his way to the College of William and Mary, and Heather moved permanently to Dahlgren, where she and Copeland became empty nesters.

Copeland genuinely loved his time at NSASP. During his tour, he had a hand in creating new events for housing residents at both bases that kept COVID from ruining the holidays, including reverse trick-or-treat and Santa parades. He entertained Maryland Governor Larry Hogan and attended holiday receptions at the Virginia state house hosted by Governor

Ralph Northam and later Governor Glenn Youngkin. He met regularly with federal representatives and their staff members and became a fixture in local communities, particularly the town of Colonial Beach, where he forged a friendship with Mayor Robin Schick. He welcomed his brother, a Hollywood screenwriter, for a visit on July 4, 2021, and watched as a theater full of kids, still wet from their visit to the Dahlgren Aquatics Center, stood and clapped as his brother introduced a screening of his movie "Spies in Disguise" at Dahlgren Theater.

Despite a request to the region that he be allowed to extend his tour at South Potomac for one more year, Copeland was told he was needed elsewhere. What's next for the Navy captain? He'll reinvent himself for academia as he assumes the role of commanding officer for the Kansas University ROTC program.

He'll serve as leader, mentor, and instructor during the tour.

"I genuinely wanted to stay here," he said. "I enjoyed every minute, and three years wasn't long enough. I couldn't fix the things I wanted to make people's jobs easier."

When he calls it a day with the Navy, what might lie ahead for Copeland? "I want to stop working. I want to enjoy the kids, enjoy travel." He recalled a situation recently where an employee associated with a tenant command passed away at work. "You realize life is short. I want to enjoy it." His parents, however, instilled a sense of public service in him. "I hope I don't run for Congress," he said with a smile.





P. O. BOX 816, DAHLGREN, VIRGINIA 22448

WWW.DAHLGRENMUSEUM.ORG

## 2023 - 2024 Membership

### President

Edward W. Jones

### Vice President

Robert V. Gates

### Treasurer

Dennis Quick

### Secretary

Jeron Hayes

### Board of Directors

John B. Ashton

Jon Dachos

Mike Hubbard

Gary Kendrick

Peter Kolakowski

Mike Purello

Stephanie Lyles

David Zook

Cathy Binder (ex officio)

Thank you for your support of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation! With your help we are educating the community on the Dahlgren story, running a museum, and working towards hosting more interesting and exciting events. We wouldn't be able to do any of this without you. We look forward to another great year, and we are thankful for your membership. Donate by mailing a check to: P. O. Box 816, Dahlgren, VA 22448 or visit [www.dahlgrenmuseum.org](http://www.dahlgrenmuseum.org) and click Membership.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Individual Membership \$25.00 \_\_\_\_\_

Family Membership \$50.00 \_\_\_\_\_

Corporate Member \$500.00 \_\_\_\_\_

Corporate Sponsorship \$1,000 \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to make an additional tax deductible donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like to volunteer at Dahlgren Museum and fundraising events.