

The Dahlgren Way

By Ed Jones, President of the Dahlgren Heritage Foundation

Nearing the end of a long career at the Navy base at Dahlgren, Jim Payne wrote about his memories as a young boy in 1918 when the Marines first marched through the isolated farmlands and marshes of King George County. They were on their way to begin testing guns at the brand-new Navy base. It must have been an exciting spectacle for a boy whose family roots in rural King George went back generations, but it was much more than that. The arrival of the military at what came to be called Dahlgren would change Payne's life, as well as the character of the community around him, for decades to come. And it all began with a loud boom!

The Dahlgren base was started 102 years ago when King George was nearing its 200th anniversary as a county, thanks to one important feature of geography -- the Potomac River. The marshy shores, full of muskrats and crabs, provided an unimpeded, over-water range of more than 50 miles toward the Chesapeake Bay. On October 16, 1918, a detachment of Marines fired the first shot. A 153-pound projectile was blasted 24,000 yards down the river from a 7-inch, 45-caliber tractor gun. Thousands of more shots would follow over the next century, as Dahlgren became the premiere test range for the Navy. The booms are still being heard today, but now with a mix of new technology that includes the electromagnetic railgun (which uses no gunpowder) and new laser-beam weapons.

But there's a lot more to Dahlgren than the boom of guns. The Navy base has displayed a century-old ability to reinvent itself in ways that meet the needs of defending America. In doing so, Dahlgren became what then-Secretary of the Navy John Warner described as a "crown jewel" of the nation's defense. Multiple commands on the base now deal with everything from cyber defense to space surveillance to shipboard defense systems. Along the way, Dahlgren created a community of military members and civilians that has fundamentally impacted King George County and its neighbors, adding billions of dollars to the local economy with a labor force of 12,000 federal employees and contractors. All that surely was beyond the wildest imagination of a 5-year-old boy watching the Marines arrive in 1918. "Most people and equipment came by water," remembered Payne, "but some of the Marines came by road in their huge trucks." It made a "big impression" on him.

After all, life on the farmlands and marshes of King George was pretty basic. There was no plumbing, no electricity, no telephone. Yet Payne harbored sweet memories of early-20th-century King George. He recalled that the farmers "raised everything we ate except sugar, flour, pepper and the like." There was plenty of seafood from the river and creeks. And as Payne remembered with pride, "There was no BIG BROTHER in Washington to look after us and no one to tell us how to run our lives."

The arrival of the Navy in King George would change all that. It did so for Payne, who during his long career on the base became a key leader in the HERO program, which deals with hazards to shipborne personnel from electromagnetic shocks. Over the decades, something called "the Dahlgren way" was born, as the base survived early threats of closure. Its seeds were planted in the 1920s, when Chief Scientist L.T. Thompson called for a "vigorous experimental program." As noted in "The Sound of Freedom," a history of the base from 1918 to 2006, "the Dahlgren way emerged in the 1930s, when the base's early directors envisioned the base as a self-sufficient center where concepts were quickly researched, developed, analyzed, designed, built, tested and evaluated without bureaucratic meddling from afar -- much to the occasional consternation of a few folks higher up the chain of command." And

though the Dahlgren way may now mean different things, there is no question that the spirit of creativity and the sparks of genius have always been part of Dahlgren's DNA.

Consider these highlights:

We may live in an age of drones, but the men and women of Dahlgren were testing unmanned aircraft back in the 1920s. They were developing bombsights and testing guns from the 1920s through the 1940s that were instrumental to the victory of the United States and its allies in World War II. They were making Dahlgren a post-war center of the Navy's use of computer technology.

Nor did Dahlgren lack for colorful leaders over the years.

Arriving at Dahlgren in 1939 as the new experimental officer, Lieutenant Commander William Sterling "Deak" Parsons would go on to a storied career in the Navy. In the 1940s, he was one of many key players with Dahlgren ties who worked on the Manhattan Project. According to "The Sound of Freedom," "he subsequently served as the 'weaponeer' aboard the Enola Gay during the Hiroshima mission, arming Little Boy [atomic device] just after takeoff."

Capt. David I. Hedrick, who assumed command of the base in 1941, annoyed some other officers on the base by running a side business of raising and selling chickens on the top floor of his elegant 1920s mansion that still stands on the base. As one civilian leader later put it, Hedrick was "slightly unbalanced." Legend has it that Dahlgren aviators used to enjoy buzzing the Captain's house, when he was entertaining guests, flustering the chickens.

In the late 1940s, Dahlgren entered the atomic weapons business by hosting a top-secret project called ELSIE that involved firing devices into concrete targets as a simulation for dropping them from 50,000 feet. According to "The Sound of Freedom," when the base's fire chief said he wanted to inspect the facility, he was told that "if it caught on fire to watch it burn and not let the fire spread."

In the 1950s, Ira and Gladys West arrived on the base to begin their careers as African American trailblazers. At a time when segregation persisted in the rural South, Ira became one of the first African American administrators on the base, while Gladys drew on her mathematics background to become one of the team members who developed the technologies that led to the GPS systems we use today. Among many recent honors, Gladys received an ovation on the floor of the Virginia General Assembly for her contributions to national defense. Her Dahlgren colleagues lauded her as King George's own "hidden figure" -- a reference to the title of a book and movie about the African American women who labored behind the scenes in the development of the NASA space program in the 1960s.

The legacy of the Navy at Dahlgren extends beyond the technology and engineering that have empowered our military. What I experienced as a civilian dependent living on the base for the first 18 years of my life was a community, both inside and outside the base, that exemplifies the very best of our country. Life on the base for me in the 1950s was what I might describe as an "enlightened Mayberry." The doors to our homes were unlocked, the movies cost 15 cents, the water-skiing on the creek was superb and the friendships were built to last a lifetime.

At a time of intensive racial segregation, the Navy made sure that at least some of those barriers were removed. Indeed, a number of the residents of an African American community, which was literally moved when the Navy expanded the base in the late 1930s, rose above that disruption in their lives to reap the economic benefits of working on the base. Life wasn't perfect. But what still lives on at the base and in the community is the culture of Dahlgren as a place where people can build careers of personal challenge and national service. It's a culture that encourages us to think of bigger causes than our own. That's what Dahlgren is all about -- building on its foundations in ways that reflect new and vital needs. The booms from guns on the base can still be heard 102 years after that first shot. They are more than leftover memories. They are the sounds of freedom.

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