

National Capital Commandery

An Interview with Dr. William S. Dudley, Naval Historian and Maritime History Consultant and former Director of the US Navy's Naval History Center

“History is a mental resource that you carry in your mind so that it is there when you need it. And, logically, if you haven't read or studied it, this could be the one resource you don't have when it's most needed.”

These were the words of Dr. William S. Dudley when I interviewed him on 15 June 2021, in Easton, Maryland, for an oral history as part of the Library of Congress Veterans History Project under the auspices of the National Capital Commandery. I have admired Dr. Dudley's work for years since I met him through our mutual membership in the Naval Order. He is a maritime heritage consultant, speaker, and author whose latest book is *Inside the US Navy 1812 – 1815*. He has also co-authored *The Naval War of 1812: America's Second War of Independence*, and *Maritime Maryland: A History*. He edited the multi-volume series on *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* and *The Early Republic: Essays on the Naval and Maritime History of the Early United States*. He is also an advisor to the Annapolis Maritime Museum.

Dr. Dudley graciously talked with me for about 90 minutes regarding his education, his naval service during the Cold War, and his 27 years with the Naval History Center (now the Navy History and Heritage Command) in Washington, DC. His career is one of service to the nation in terms of preserving our maritime history and appreciating those who have served, as our interview revealed.

Dr. Dudley, those who know him call him “Bill”, was born in 1936 in Brooklyn, New York; the eldest of three sons. His father followed a 30-year career as a stock broker; his mother a homemaker. He attended Williams College, graduating in 1958 with a degree in history. In 1959, in a time when young men were subject to the draft, he joined the Navy. Why the Navy? “Because I think I was born to the water. I was sailing with my parents when I was three years old. I lived near the beach. I went swimming every day in the summer if I could...I taught sailing to youngsters...I decided that my maritime background dictated that I had to be in Navy.”

Navy Experience and Graduate Studies

Bill entered the Navy in 1960, and after completing Officers' Candidate School at Newport, Rhode Island, was commissioned as a surface warfare officer. He was assigned to the USS *Cromwell*, DE-1014, a Dealey-class destroyer escort, homeported out of Newport. The ship was designed as an anti-submarine warfare ship to be employed as a convoy escort against Soviet submarines.

Bill's first assignment aboard *Cromwell* was as her communications officer. Then he went to the Anti-Air Warfare School in Dam Neck, Virginia and became a Combat Information Center officer, interpreting radar, sonar, and radio communications for tracking submarines. When the *Cromwell* took a cruise around South America, Bill was chosen as liaison officer, visiting naval ships of Peru, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil. The experience instilled a deep appreciation for Latin American culture and history.

In the final months of his tour of duty, Bill enjoyed being the assistant communications officer aboard the destroyer tender USS *Yosemite*, AD-19, flagship of the Commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Force, Atlantic Fleet based in Newport. He also took on cryptographic officer duties. He recalled reading classified message traffic in 1962 about massive deployments of military and naval forces south into the Atlantic. He later found out that the deployments were part of the preparation for the Cuban Missile Crisis!

Bill left the Navy as a Lieutenant JG in 1962, becoming a history teacher at Brooklyn Polytechnic Preparatory Country Day School (a private boys' school). He joined the Select Reserve at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, with monthly weekend drills on the destroyer USS *The Sullivans*, DD-537, cruising on Long Island Sound. He obtained a master's degree in history by going to Columbia University at night, with the help of the GI Bill. He married in 1965 and bought his first home with a VA loan. "It was great!"

Reviewing his Navy experience, Bill reflected: "I became much more mature in the Navy. I learned that the world was not my oyster, as it were. I learned what it meant to obey a direct order without complaining about it and not asking questions. I think I became much more disciplined. I learned basically how to handle enlisted men, my fellow officers, with the protocols of being a naval officer, an important part of the navy's culture. And I think that all translates into civilian life where opportunities come up to lead or to manage a group, and all of these skills come together... So...it was very beneficial experience." His only disappointment was that state-side reservists who served during the Cold War received no designated service medal – not even an honorable discharge pin.

Bill left the reserves in 1967 to pursue a doctoral degree in Latin American history. He learned Portuguese and spent a year in Rio de Janeiro, with his young family, completing a dissertation on Brazilian military history. With a PhD, Bill, spent the next seven years teaching Latin American Studies at Southern Methodist University in Texas. By 1975, he felt his career was due for a change in direction.

A Career Change and a Move to Washington, DC

"I spent seven years at SMU, mostly good years. But as I figured out, it didn't seem to me that the Latin American Studies Program was going anywhere. Fewer and fewer students were showing up in the classes....The rise of Fidel Castro in Cuba, had been the stimulus for...money that was invested in Latin American studies to prevent revolutions, to understand what was going on....But by 1975, we were in a different era...I figured this discipline was not a good place to be and started looking for jobs."

He traveled to Washington, DC for the American Historical Association conference. There he met the senior historians of the Army, Air Force, and Navy. He asked about positions for historians and circulated his resumé. Just over a year and half later, in 1977, he accepted the position of Supervisory Historian at the Naval Historical Center (NHC) Research Branch, Washington, DC. Bill confided that he had boned up on naval history for the interview – and it has been his passion ever since.

In 1989 he was elected President of the Society for History in the Federal Government – the organization for historians across all federal agencies and the armed services. He and Ben Frank, the Marine Corps Senior Historian, presided over the Military Classics Seminar – a monthly meeting at Fort Myers, Virginia, hosting military history authors to talk about their books. Through such activities, Bill cultivated relationships with historians throughout the federal government. After the events of 9/11 took place, the late Dr. Al Goldberg, historian for the Secretary of Defense, decided to write a book on the attack on the Pentagon. At Bill’s request, the Navy Department (NHC) became the executive agent for the project. The title was *Pentagon 9/11*, published in 2007.

The Center for Naval History (NHC)

From 1995 until 2004, when he retired, Bill was Director of the NHC and Director of Naval History, meaning he was the chief historian of the Navy, reporting directly to the Director of Navy Staff. He became a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES-2: the equivalent of a Rear Admiral). As Coordinator of Navy Museums, his responsibilities included oversight of 12 Navy Museums and over 100 decommissioned Navy ships (many of them are museum ships). Bill wore “several hats.” He was also Curator for the Navy, and Coordinator of Navy Libraries, with an NHC staff of 100 people, both civil service and military. “It was a multi-tasking job that never ends.”

He described how he and his staff responded to changing priorities on a moment’s notice: “...if the Secretary of Defense decides that we have to make up a new push, now we have to dramatize the museum displays at the Pentagon...It’s an ‘all hands on deck’ evolution. ‘Oops, stop whatever you were doing. Focus on this.’ ‘But, but, but...’ ‘No, no, nope...When it’s done, you can go back to what you were doing.’ And when it came to the Marine Corps it was the same story. The Marine Corps under Commandant Ray Davis commemorated the anniversary of its roles in the Korean War in 2000, the 50th anniversary of the Invasion of Inchon and the Chosin Reservoir battle. All of a sudden, the Marines want a display on the Washington mall and we were involved. That’s where all the energy had to go....all of a sudden, the urgent becomes the important.”

Nevertheless, Bill regards his time at the NHC as “fabulous.” One of his significant accomplishments was as the series editor for a three-volume compilation of the naval documents of the War of 1812. A fourth volume is in progress under a new editor. He also established the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the NHC, headed by Dr. Robert Neyland. The move reinforced US ownership of the Navy’s underwater shipwrecks and sunken aircraft, including wrecks of the Confederate States Navy. From 1991 to 2004, Bill represented the Navy, under State Department auspices, on the CSS *Alabama* Scientific Committee, an official French-American group established to recover artifacts from the CSS *Alabama* that was sunk in combat by the USS *Kearsarge* off Cherbourg in 1864.

Another major accomplishment occurred in 2000. The NHC persuaded the Secretary of the Navy to hire an independent contractor, History Associates, Inc. of Rockville, Maryland to conduct an in-depth assessment of US Navy history facilities and activities to develop a strategic plan for

improvements in communication and coordination among museums, teaching institutions, libraries, archives, and research centers. One outcome: the Chief of Naval Operations created the Director of Navy Installations to coordinate with the Director of Naval History in supervising Navy museums. The plan resulted in the NHC becoming the Navy History and Heritage Command in 2008, with increased funding, more staffing, and the appointment of retired captains or rear admirals as directors.

In reviewing his years in the NHC, Bill expressed an admiration for civil service employees. “When I hear people denigrate the civil service in general... I say ‘That's not true.’ ...I've been a defender of the civil service for a long time. But my examples come from working at the Naval Historical Center. They do their jobs - they respond to direction. They want to do a good job...They want to do it for the Navy...for their co-workers. My feeling is it was a place of high morale, even though we weren't getting the support I think we needed because the budgets were so small. And I'm not talking about increased pay. What most professional workers want are improved conditions so they can do their jobs properly. That I think is what we had lacked for some time. And I'm pleased to say that I think that conditions are improving at the Naval History and Heritage Command.”

Concluding Remarks

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked Dr. Dudley what he most wanted people to know, based on his experience. In reply, he spoke about the significance of naval history to the nation, and his veneration for our military veterans.

Regarding naval history: “I hope that people will recognize that government historians take on many missions. And the issue is, how do you ‘do’ history? ...the historical task is something that often requires a talented, diverse group to accomplish. Whether it’s a history of the Department of the Navy or any other service, it's a collective task, and one has to interact with colleagues. So yes, people write history, but there is no one person that can do this completely, successfully, absent others. You need librarians, archivists, curators, editors and you need the civilian community, which is out there writing history as well. We have to bring it all together to write a comprehensive history of what the Navy is doing at any particular time. This applies as well to any other department of government.

How do we get people to understand better what the Navy stands for? I think it’s the historians who will provide that answer. ...historians are beginning to be recognized as people who can help formulate policies based on the past. The institutional past is really a record of good and bad decisions. If you only look back on the good decisions, if you’re the decision-maker, you are not getting the full story. You have to look at the bad decisions, the poor decisions, and the fact that sometimes there are no decisions when there should be.”

Regarding veterans: “Folks need to recognize that we identify with our service experience more than almost anything else we’ve done. This includes the friends you made and the lessons you learned. Most of us have a love of service. And, to me, it's most important, as an American citizen, to highly recommend that public service, in some form, be required of all citizens, so that

they will come to understand what sacrifice means, what other people are doing for the nation, the common good. I am saying there should be some form of national service because I think that all of us who have served and have seen sacrifice by others, understand that. This could be perhaps an injury we suffered ourselves or an experience that had an impact, that brought us the love of country, the friendship of comrades, which comes from service in the military, especially. The supporting actions between friends who go through these crucial experiences, whether it's battle, or bureaucratic cooperation, creates a bonding experience. You all accomplish something that you feel is a benefit for the country...To me, that's part of a life well-lived.”

I'd say Dr. William Dudley is a sterling example of a life well-lived, wouldn't you?

By Judy Pearson, Ph.D.