

Navy History and Heritage

Navy Ceremonial Guard

On 19 May 2023, this reporter had the privilege to attend the graduation ceremony for the Navy Ceremonial Guard at the Navy Ceremonial Center of Excellence, Joint Base Anacostia Bolling, on the banks of the Potomac River, adjacent to the nation's capital. Four sailors graduated from the Alpha Company Training Platoon into the Marching Platoon. In the Marching Platoon, each will learn the skills to fulfill one of the four functions on the Navy Ceremonial Guard: Casket Bearers, Firing Party, Drill Team, and Color Guard. As a highlight of the ceremony, each team conducted a demonstration of their specialty for an audience of their peers and visitors.

The Color Guard demonstrated opening the ceremony and later, demonstrated how they parade the colors. Eight Casket Bearers demonstrated how they carry a casket and fold the flag draped over it. The audience learned that the Casket Bearers lift weights to build the strength to carry caskets seemingly with ease. The drill team demonstrated their amazing dexterity with Springfield rifles. The Firing Party showed the onlookers how they give a rifle salute, but without actually firing their weapons, since the ceremony was held indoors.

These young people practice for hours each work day so that their precision movements become flawless. The Navy Ceremonial Guard conducts their duties with pride, professionalism, and teamwork at significant government and military commemorations and funerals throughout the Washington, DC region. Today, CDR Alexander McMahon oversees the training and assignments of the men and women of the Navy Ceremonial Guard, assisted by SCPO Emily Boyle, who organized and narrated the graduation ceremony.

History (from the Navy Ceremonial Guard official pamphlet)

With the seat of government in Washington and the presence of nearby Arlington National Cemetery and the Washington Navy Yard, it was clear to Navy leadership that there would always be special events, high visibility funerals, and state funerals necessitating the participation of Sailors.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Washington Navy Yard held the largest number of Sailors of any command within the national capital area. These men would be put into service for the various funerals and ceremonies in the area for many years. Initially, Sailors from the Receiving Station (nicknamed "Salvo" because of the gun factory at the Yard) were used for ceremonies after 1904. These personnel participated in events for the White House and Arlington National Cemetery, among others. While these Sailors were all expected to master infantry landing party skills, including close order drill, they were nowhere near as sharp as the dedicated ceremonial elements which the Army and Marine Corps had created. In 1931, the Navy began a successful experiment with a designated ceremonial detail of Sailors. Two years later, in 1933, the Navy Ceremonial Guard was established as a permanent unit at the receiving station, with LT L. K. Scott as its first officer-in-charge. In 1935, the unit's name was changed to match that of security units at other Navy bases, the Seaman Guard.

Just after World War II in 1946, LT Biagio O. Furnari, a former enlisted Sailor who had served as a POW, was assigned as officer-in-charge, serving until 1948. He returned to the Guard as a lieutenant commander for his second tour as OIC in 1953. The barracks and dining facility now serving the Navy Ceremonial Guard are named in his honor.

Various changes came to the Guard in the 1950s. Like the other services, the Ceremonial Guard established a Drill Team during this time. Additionally, the command's name was changed back to the U.S. Navy Ceremonial Guard in 1951. With the closing of Naval Station Anacostia in 1959, the Guard was moved to an old seaplane base, then known as the Anacostia Naval Air Station (present-day Joint Base Anacostia Bolling). While many Sailors have gone on to varied careers in the Navy after serving in the Guard, several former Guardsmen are worthy of note. Delbert Black, who would become the first Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON), served with the Navy Ceremonial Guard early in his career. SA Edward W. Nemeth is immortalized in images of John F. Kennedy's funeral, where he marched behind the caisson carrying the President's personal flag. In more recent years, ET1(SS) Brian A. Moss, who had just transferred from the Guard to the Pentagon, was killed in the attack on September 11, 2001.

The Navy Ceremonial Guard has grown from a rag-tag assembly of men awaiting transfer from the Naval Gun Factory to a highly polished shore command of over 200 Sailors. While the name and locations of our home have changed, the Ceremonial Guard remains focused on its founding values: to provide funeral honors to past and present Navy service members and to provide ceremonial support to the President.

Submitted by Dr. Judy Pearson