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Sailor ends his career with taste of ‘Air Force blue’

By Mary McHale
AFNORTH Public Affairs

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – In some circles of the military, the term, “Retired on Active Duty” can conjure images of someone who is simply marking time until his retirement date arrives. But for the deputy commander of the 601st Air and Space Operations Center here, it meant he had the privilege of serving his country for one more year.

While Navy Capt. Dale Carson officially reached his high year of tenure – the maximum time someone in uniform can remain in the service – in 2009 and was required to retire, he applied for a waiver to stay on active duty. The waiver was granted, and he became a “Retired on Active Duty” officer.



He officially hangs up his uniform at the end of March 2010 after a two-year assignment in ‘America’s AOC,’ an integral unit under the Continental U.S. NORAD Region – 1st Air Force (Air Forces Northern umbrella).

The Naval officer was assigned to the 601st AOC in 2008, and said he didn’t know what to expect when he received the assignment to an Air Force organization. But quickly upon arrival, he was pleasantly surprised.

“I wasn’t sure what I was getting into. I was under the impression I would be working with ‘weekend warriors’ from the Air National Guard, but boy, was I wrong! From the time I arrived at this joint assignment, I have had the pleasure of working with some of the most dedicated, professional people in the field,” said Capt. Carson.

The 31-year veteran said he’s been enamored with the military since growing up in an active-duty Air Force family.

“I really enjoy the military atmosphere and always have,” he said.

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CARSON**

He pursued his passion for the atmosphere by applying for and getting accepted to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., where he majored in aerospace engineering.

“Math is one of my stronger subjects so I always knew what I wanted to study.”

What he didn’t know at that point but soon found out was he also had a passion for flying. He said after a year at the academy, the midshipmen would go on trips to various venues, exposing them to different aspects of the military – whether it be flying in helicopters and fixed-wing T-2 Buckeyes in Pensacola, submerging in submarines or mixing it up with Marines for a week at Quantico.

“Once I got the taste for flying in Pensacola, that’s all I wanted to do,” he said.

He added what really surprised him at the time was the limitless amount of flying slots that existed then. And that was even for someone with imperfect sight, which he was completely unaware of until his flight physical but received a waiver for.



“I had bad eyes but didn’t know it. I never had any problems flying, though.”

He recalled his time at the Naval Academy as challenging and rewarding, but lamented he knew a lot of people who ended up leaving early based on academic performance.

“There were long hours and auxiliary duties before and after class in addition to the academics,” he said. “Out of my starting class of 1,200, only 938 graduated.”

One of those auxiliary duties was mandatory sports participation, and the

captain took up crewing and learned to scuba dive. He said he still enjoys water sports today, especially scuba diving and spear fishing and plans to stay in the local area based on its access to aquatic amenities.

His academy tenure was also memorable for another significantly pleasant reason -- it’s where he married his high school sweetheart at the Academy chapel. At the time, there was a lottery system to select a time slot for a ceremony at the chapel, with retirements and weddings being the most popular. The wedding arranger who currently works at the academy said while they don’t have the lottery system anymore, they still can have up to six weddings a day at the chapel.

As his luck would have it, he received a lottery number that meant he would be the last event for the day, so the freshly-graduated midshipman and his bride could take their time with the ceremony.

“Our wedding was truly one of the highlights of my time at the Academy,” said Carson. “We now have three wonderful daughters and I am extremely proud of my very smart granddaughter.”

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CARSON**

From the academy, he relocated to Pensacola for classroom academics, and then went on to Naval Air Station Whiting Field in Milton, Fla., for intermediate flight training on the T-34 Mentor.

While there, pilots of different platforms would brief about the characteristics of a particular system to help graduates determine their choices. The captain said when the helicopter briefer gave his presentation, he felt there was a more tight-knit atmosphere aboard a vessel with helicopter-based operations as opposed to the anonymity aboard an aircraft carrier with 5,000 people assigned.

That's when the young ensign made his decision to fly helicopters.

In the career that followed, Captain Carson primarily flew helicopters. He did however, get to fly the C-26 Metroliner while stationed as an executive officer at the "Hub of the Med" – NAS Sigonella, Italy. From the "hub," he had the opportunity to fly around to different locations around Europe.

"It was a nice escape from daily work, flying to places like Germany, Greece and Spain," he said. He also completed deployments to the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea and Arabian Gulf. He said while there have been several highlights during his career, the pinnacle was probably his assignment as a helicopter squadron commander of HSL-44, a helicopter anti-submarine light squadron, fondly known as the "Swamp Foxes."



"To train the crews to go out and perform the mission was very challenging but also very rewarding," he recalled. "Throughout my career I've always felt it an imperative philosophy to take care of people first and learned early on to trust the advice and counsel of those surrounding me, especially my senior enlisted noncommissioned officers. They helped me through some pretty challenging times in my career."

Now as he winds up that career, he said he plans to job hunt and enjoy the area. "I live in an area where people go for their vacations, so why would I leave?"