

A career ranging from Navy pilot to colonial bookbinder

By Frank Shatz

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Bill Dell, Capt. USN (Ret.) of Williamsburg, could have easily served as a poster boy for Navy recruitment.

"I was raised in the deep-South, Little Rock, Ark., and service to one's country was commonplace," said Dell in an interview with the Gazette. "After high school, my brother Jack gained an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. I was still in high school and at the beginning of my senior year, our then-Governor Orville Faubus, in a heinous act to stop the integration of the Little Rock High Schools, closed them."

Dell completed high school at The Marion Military Institute in Alabama and obtained an appointment, just like his brother, to the Naval Academy. He graduated in 1964 and shortly after attended Flight School in Florida and Texas. He was designated a Naval Aviator and started his 27 year career in the Navy.

His specialty was anti-submarine warfare. He was a member of two patrol squadrons, piloting his Lockheed P3-B aircraft over the oceans of the world. Some of the patrols kept him and his crew in the air 12-hours at a time — Dell accumulated more than 5,000 flying hours during his career.

Dell served as officer in charge of the Anti-Submarine Warfare Center in Bermuda, as commanding officer of Training Squadron 28. He also played leadership roles at various other branches of the U.S. Navy.

I asked Dell whether he had some role models he intended to emulate. Interestingly, he named his wife, Suzanne, the daughter of a U.S. Coast Guard captain, and members of his own family as examples to follow.

"All of them instilled in me core beliefs in the value of honesty, ethics and integrity in one's daily life," he said.

After dodging Soviet-made SAM-2 surface-to-air missiles over Vietnam, landing crippled aircraft and Suzanne moving their family 23 times, Dell decided to retire.

"The Navy offered me awesome responsibilities, where risk included human lives, not just profits or reputation. I experienced moments of high emotion and exhilarating flights when you are completing a successful mission with a well trained, dedicated crew. There are also scary moments of landing a damaged plane or flying through enemy fire," he said.

After completing his military service, Dell worked for The Points of Light Foundation, a nonprofit, non-partisan organization with a mission to tackle serious social problems.

Eventually, the time arrived to settle down for good.

“We choose Williamsburg at the suggestion of our son, a medical doctor, and his wife, both graduates of William and Mary. In the almost 18 years we have been residents of the Burg, we can safely say we made the right decision,” Dell said.

Settling in Williamsburg, he quickly decided to get involved with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. “I love to learn and teach,” he said. “I thought, I would enjoy working in the Historic Area. An opening came up in the print shop. I was hired, worked as a Colonial printer and then learned the book binding trade.

“I thoroughly enjoy interpreting in front of school groups and occasionally travel to my grandchildren’s schools to promote American history and Colonial Williamsburg,” he said, “I believe President Reiss’ recent initiative to double the size of Colonial Williamsburg’s Teachers Institute will reap huge benefit in increasing visitation to CW.

“Families tend to vacation where their children want to go. Honing our elementary school teacher’s American history skills and providing necessary tools to enhance telling the story of the founding of our great nation will undoubtedly peak the interest of our young students in visiting the cradle of our democracy.”

Shatz is a Williamsburg resident. He is the author of “Reports from a Distant Place,” the compilation of his selected columns. The book is available at Bruton Parish Shop and Amazon.com.