



For More Than 75 Years, NAS Patuxent River Has Brought the Navy, Newcomers, Progress and Pride to Southern Maryland

PAX RIVER:
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For 75 years, residents of Southern Maryland have enjoyed the sounds and sights of freedom thanks to the establishment of the naval air station and the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School at Patuxent River.

In the wake of World War II, St. Mary's County experienced a financial, technical, cultural and social sea change that continues to change the landscape of this community. What was once a rural, agricultural community has slowly transitioned into a bustling center of commerce, technology and growth.

Locals find opportunities with the county's largest employer and enjoy the benefits of technological and financial progress; newcomers come for the work and stay for the scenery and strong sense of community.

Story by Crystal Brandt

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A U.S. Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II STOVL aircraft flies over Solomons Island while returning to Naval Air Station Patuxent River following airborne gunfire testing.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND



A team from NAVAIR simulates the operation of the future MQ-25 during a demo of the Unmanned Carrier Aviation Mission Control System at NAS Patuxent River.



A trio of Tritons parked at Naval Air Station Patuxent River are on track for sensor testing.



An airman signals for the start-up of an E-2D Hawkeye.

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All in the family

Erin and Mike Hanson of California fit both examples. Erin was born and raised in Callaway and comes from a family with deep roots in support of NAS Pax River. Her grandfather, Woodrow Wilson Calvert, worked as a civilian in the public works division from 1942 to 1974 where he helped in the construction of many of the original structures on base.

"My family has a long history here," she says. Erin's mother began her civilian career on base in 1979 and supported the logistics division until 2013; her father joined the Navy in 1971 and completed tours on the USS Enterprise and USS Constellation aircraft carriers. He went on to work with a defense contractor in support of the Test Pilot School before becoming a civilian employee. Erin began her career with a small-business support contractor 10 years ago as a project analyst and now serves as civilian project lead for NAWCAD 5.OX in the AIRWorks Division.

While family affiliations with the base persist, the lay of the land seems to be in a constant state of change. Erin says her parents recall when Route 235 was a two-lane dirt road.

"In the last 15 years I've personally seen a huge expansion in new schools and businesses within the community, many of which are likely the result of all of the new business being brought to the area by the demand of the programs on base," she says.

"Without Pax being here, I don't think I would have been provided the opportunities that I've had to expand my skill set and grow in my career," Erin says. "I also would not have met my husband, who moved here for work in 2009 as a UAV instructor/operator for the Maryland Army National Guard."

Her husband, Mike, is active duty in the Guard and supports Pax for an unmanned aerial vehicle platform at Webster Field.

Sense of pride

Like Erin, Michelle Bekel was born and raised in St. Mary's and has lived here her entire life. In college, she studied sociology. Upon graduation, she landed a job as a defense contractor.

She now serves as a foreign military sales business financial manager for the EA-18G Growler aircraft, supporting Australia.

Bekel has watched the area change and grow with NAS Pax River. She remembers when Route 235 was single lane each way and the base was relatively small. "As the employment on the base increased, so did my resentment for the traffic and infringement," she says. Military folks were considered "not from the county" and the divide between locals and perceived foreigners was broad and commonplace. Over time, however, she, along with many others, realized that "what I once felt was intrusion was very beneficial to the county. I saw how the influx of a variety of people brought great profit to our local businesses and community."

Bekel also appreciates the personal impacts the base has had on her life.

"Obviously, the largest impact is that it's my livelihood. But second to that, it has given me a sense of pride. I'm not only supporting my own country but a foreign one as well. Being responsible for a small part in a large organization for our country's defense and that of our closest allies is a pretty hum-

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Pax River by the numbers

- \$3.6B estimated value of the facilities at NAS Pax and Webster Field
- 740 separate buildings
- 10 hangars
- 8.4M square feet of facilities
- 5 runways
- 11,800 feet length of longest runway
- 4,000 square miles of restricted airspace
- 5,000 square miles of controlled airspace
- 200 aircraft
- 9,800 civilian employees
- 5,700 contractors
- 2,400 active-duty military personnel
- 300,000 annual visitors

Source: NAS Patuxent River Public Affairs Office

1937 The Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics decides to consolidate aircraft testing and chooses the Cedar Point community in St. Mary's County as the site of the new base.

1942 Construction of a new base begins on a 6,400-acre expanse of prime farmland, giving birth to a "boomtown" atmosphere. Thousands flooded from all over the country. Today, the site encompasses more than 14,500 acres.

1943 U.S. Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Maryland formally commissioned on April 1, less than one year after construction began.

1948 Formal recognition of the Test Pilot Training Division.

1954 NAS Pax River adds the first steam catapult and arresting gear to its carrier deck simulation facility.

1955 Development Squadron VX-6 established for scientific operations in Antarctica, also known as with Task Force 43 on Operation Deep Freeze.

1958 US Naval Test Pilot School established.

1961 Navy celebrates the golden anniversary of naval aviation.

1975 The Naval Air Systems Command reorganizes the NATC as a development testing site.

1979 First F/A-18 Hornet arrives for evaluation trials.

1983 Lt. Colleen Nevius becomes the first female Navy test pilot.

1986 Naval aviation celebrates its 75th anniversary.

1992 New year, new operations: Inception of the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division and Flight Test Engineering group.

1995 Official operations for Naval Air Systems Command begin.

1997 NAWCAD officially opens the DoD's newest High-Performance Computing Distributed Center. The Naval Air Systems Command stands up at Patuxent River after having moved from Virginia.

2014 Capt. Heidi Flemming becomes the first female commanding officer of NAS Pax River.

About the Base

NAS Patuxent River is the U.S. Navy's principal research, engineering, development, test and evaluation, and fleet support activity for naval aircraft, engines, avionics, aircraft support systems, and ship, shore and air operations. The naval air station is the headquarters for Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR), Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD), Naval Research Laboratory, and Flight Support Detachment Air Test and Evaluation. Operations at Webster Outlying Field, 12 miles south of NAS Pax River in St. Inigoes, and the Navy Recreation Center Solomons in Calvert County are overseen and managed by the base.

For an up-close look at Navy aircraft, visit the Patuxent River Naval Air Museum located just outside of Gate 1. The museum is the only museum in the country devoted to the unique role of research, development, test and evaluation in the advancement of naval aviation, including the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School.

The museum's collection represents the complete timeline of naval aviation and is the only museum in the world to display both the X-32B and X-35C Joint Strike Fighter concept demonstrators. Visitors to the indoor galleries and outdoor flightline will find more than 30 aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles and drones involved in flight-testing at NAS Pax River and can fly the museum's sophisticated flight simulators using actual fighter aircraft cockpits.

Did You Know?

Cedar Point in St. Mary's County was selected because of its crucial climatic and geographic conditions for testing aircraft in a maritime environment; remote coastline location and sea-level altitude; varied climate; distance from air traffic congestion; adequate isolation for classified testing; and size (large enough for weapons testing).

During development, the unofficial name of the new base was Naval Air Station at Cedar Point or simply Cedar Point. However, officials decided to officially name the site as Naval Air Station Patuxent River to avoid confusion with the Marine Corps station at Cherry Point, N.C.

Construction of the station eventually employed 7,000 workers. The draw of well-paying work attracted so many people that the Marines had to take over security in 1942, including fingerprinting and background checks of the construction workers.

The 1959 graduating class of the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School included four of NASA's first group of seven astronauts, including Lt. Col. John Glenn. Today, the school continues to turn out gifted and talented graduates who go on to the nation's space program.

Members of all the armed forces as well as the U.S. Coast Guard are stationed at NAS Pax River.

The base was used as a filming location for the film *Random Hearts* (1999) starring Harrison Ford and directed by Sydney Pollack.

What's in the air? It's a bird, it's a plane ... or is that a helicopter?

Here is a list of current programs at Pax River.

F-35 Lightning II
Joint Strike Fighter
E-2D Advanced
Hawkeye
F/A-18 & EA-18G
MV-22B Osprey
P-8A Poseidon
AV-8B Harrier II
EA-6B Prowler
E-6B Mercury
T-6 A/B Texan II
T-34C Turbomenter
T-44 Pegasus
T-39 Saberliner
TH-57 Sea Ranger
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U.S. Navy photo by Liz Goetter

The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

FEATURE

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bling but incredible feeling. I'm definitely more well-rounded and respectful," she says.

Exciting times

Linda Nelson of Leonardtown is an example of a newcomer who has lived here long enough to now consider herself a local. Originally from Southern California, Nelson moved to Pax River with her ex-husband, a military officer, in the 1980s. When her marriage ended, she decided to stay in Southern Maryland with her children.

"The local community was very supportive of us, and I felt it was a good place to raise children," she says. "I was right!"

Nelson worked on the base and retired after 28 years.

"I worked on BRAC in the mid-90s and was fortunate to learn about all the capabilities and unique facilities we have here at Patuxent River. We stood up the Aircraft Division during that time and

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Two Tours at Pax River

During his more than 20 years in the U.S. Navy, William "Stu" Nagel had the opportunity to serve two tours at NAS Patuxent River.



The Great Mills High School graduate and Piney Point native started his journey with the Navy in April 1983. After completion of basic training at Recruit Training Command in Orlando, Fla., he attended and graduated from Personnelman Class "A" School in Meridian, Miss., in September of that same year.

During his career he was assigned to the USS South Carolina; Personnel Support Detachment at Patuxent River; Fighter Squadron One Zero Two at Naval Air Station Oceana, Va. (where he participated in Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom); Naval Air Systems Command/Naval Aviation Maintenance Office at NAS Pax River; USS Scout at Naval Station in Ingleside Texas; and a final tour at Personnel Support Detachment in Corpus Christi, Texas. He retired in September 2003.

After working in the civilian sector for a few years, Nagel returned to continue his service to the Navy in July 2005 as a contractor at Training Air Wing Four as a project manager.

The decorated Navy veteran has received numerous awards and accolades as a government service employee. In June 2008, he was sworn into service as a Department of Defense Career Civil Service employee and eventually was detailed to take over a critical position at CTW4 as the first GS Student Control Officer.

Most recently he was selected as the Chief of Naval Air Training Civilian of the Quarter for his personal and professional contributions to the naval aviation training enterprise.

Nagel lives in Texas, is married and has four children.

--Lt. j.g. Elizabeth Feaster, CNATRA Public Affairs Officer

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became a world-unique site for aircraft [research, development, test and evaluation]. How exciting is that? The cutting-edge aircraft RDT&E always makes me proud of our teams. Working with so many bright, inventive people made the work enjoyable," she says.

Nelson also has observed the changes in the county with appreciation.

"I love how the people of St. Mary's have maintained their 'small-town' feeling, despite the influx of big-box stores and thousands of new residents," she says.

"The expertise of so many people, working together to support the warfighter, always kept the work interesting and challenging,"

- Linda Nelson

Erin Hanson shares the sentiment.

"The networking and connections are truly invaluable, and it creates a sense of community. For a place that's exploded in terms of population size, the community still feels very close as so many people interact with each other throughout their time serving on Pax," she says.

A sense of pride and respect is a common theme among residents, old and new.

"The expertise of so many people, working together to support the warfighter, always kept the work interesting and challenging," Nelson says.

Partners with the community

A layer of the base's presence that might not be so obvious is its support of the community, Nelson says.

"It's another aspect that always made me proud to be a Pax employee, especially the partnerships with local schools, science fairs and special events. We all benefit from those partnerships, today and in the future. Pax needs people with all types of skills to meet the mission," she says, adding that "working at Pax River is an exceptionally cool experience!"

She is not the only one who thinks so. Nelson met an Indy car driver's pit crew chief once and told him about her team's work at Pax River. "He said, 'That's like a

dream job for engineers.' Yes, it certainly is!"

Tom Anderson of California is one of those engineers living the dream.

He and his wife, Jennifer, relocated to Southern Maryland in 1987 for Tom's job as a Department of Defense aerospace engineer. Jennifer, a musician, is the founder of Music Time Studio, and her work there has brought a music program to children in the community.

She teaches early childhood music and piano and flute lessons. Jennifer echoes Nelson's sentiments. She agrees that the area is a great place to raise children.

"Many of the families of my students are in the area because of NAS Pax," Jennifer says. "On the down side, many families move out of the area after a few years. I jokingly tell those families they need to find a replacement student for my studio before they can move!" •



Disk Enterprise Solutions, Inc. is proud to have supported the US Navy and the Patuxent River Naval Air Station for the last 17 years. We are honored to be a part of this Naval aviation legacy and thank all our Veterans for their service to our country.

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