



**Rear Adm. Boynton Braun**

*Officer in Charge of the Dahlgren Air Detail*

Part 2

**INTRO MUSIC**

**Introduction:** Welcome to the Dahlgren Centennial Celebration - A Century of Innovation. We hope that this and our many other products, events and offerings will showcase what Dahlgren has accomplished during its last 100 years.

Throughout our history, we've interviewed some of the most prominent minds, leaders and innovators that have been here, and we're opening up the vault to share them with you this year.

Today we are honored to listen to the story of Rear Adm. Boynton Braun. Adm. Braun was an aviation officer and first came to Dahlgren in 1929. At one time he was the Officer in Charge of the Dahlgren Air Detail. He also discusses living on the base in the 1930s.

**Brooks:** What were the personalities of your younger air officers? One has visions of spirited young men who had off hours with their airplanes. Was there any wild times?

**Braun:** No, commanding officers around here when I was here did not permit cross-country flights. In other words, they could not take an airplane off.

**Brooks:** I was wondering because the age of barnstorming was coming to a close.

**Braun:** Well, they didn't have barnstorming here when I was here. I understood that sometime during the '20s that some young pilot took an H up and flew into a bunch of wild geese. The people around here were very much incensed and orders came out from then on that you had to stay away from the wild geese, the ducks, and the swans. Couldn't disturb them.

**Brooks:** Well that's interesting because it seems this was pretty far removed for younger officers from civilization

**Braun:** Well, a lot of them didn't like it. Of course, they always like to get a car and see how fast he could take to get to Washington. One young fellow around here, he made it 3 hours one time. We said he was going to kill himself. He later did in an airplane crash, but not here. It's an hour from here to Fredericksburg and 2 ½ or 3 hours from Fredericksburg to Washington. The roads were really bad. They had a lot of narrow bridges. Only one car could pass at a time when traffic was coming in one direction using that one, and they had to wait in





the other direction until there was opening for them to get through. The roads were curved. Now, when I was here in the '30s, in addition to the MARK 15 bombsight, we had a low altitude attachments which went with the MARK 15 bombsight which was intended to be used for bombing submarines. You could get down low where the bombsight could still compute the dropping angle to release the bomb. With that, you could also use it for navigation. Magnetic gyro compass. You could set up a magnetic course and you get away from wavering of magnetic compass. Excellent for navigating. Then, in addition to that, they had the stabilized bombing approach equipment which went with the bombsight. That was an automatic pilot which I always thought was wonderful because a pilot was in on the testing of it from the very beginning. We had to write up the pamphlet on that of low altitude bombing tactics. Then when I left here and went to the Fleet, I went to the Control Squadron. We had the MARK 15 bombsight, and that, with the stabilizing bombing approach, I thought it was a wonderful pilot.

**Brooks:** Did Dahlgren have the responsibility of your air group testing various aircrafts?

**Braun:** Yes, every airplane that had the machine gun or drop bomb was sent down here, and we had to put it through tests. With the control planes, we had to see that the angles of fire for the guns was such that you wouldn't shoot up for the wings and to see if they could actually handle the gun in the air. For fixed guns and fighters, we had to fire them and test them. For any plane that was used for dive bombing tactics, they had the grasshopper legs on it which kept the bomb from being thrown into the propeller. The bomb was right in this fuzer light. When you released it and it was too steep an angle you would hit the propeller. In order to prevent that, these grasshopper legs would come down and keep the bomb out far enough so it would clear the propeller. We had to test each of the planes for dive bombing. We had to go up to 15,000 feet to get into the terminal velocity. We would have to do every kind of maneuver we could do when we released the bomb to see if we could hit the propeller. Nothing ever happened.

**Brooks:** You never had any accidents?

**Braun:** Never had one.

**Brooks:** That seems like a good way to terminate your career rather quickly.

**Braun:** It would. The bomb would certainly explode, and if it took your propeller off, you would loose your power and loose control. So they never had any trouble I've heard of when the ejecting device didn't work.

**Brooks:** Then you left in '37.

**Braun:** Yes.

**Brooks:** Was there ever any talk among the Navy professionals of any possible trouble with Japan?

**Braun:** Well, before I came here, we knew back in 1932 almost for certain. When we would start off on a cruise, a few of us were taken up to the Admiral's office. He said he wanted us to take every item an armored plane was supposed to have. He said, "you don't know when you're coming back here. You've got to have your stuff ready in case we got into a war in a hurry." We knew this was coming. There was no question about it. In addition to the bombs and the machine guns, we also had to test the full light which we could throw out of the plane, the ones that had regular ejectors on them, going down and hit





the water and torch off, and you could take drift angles to see how the wind was doing. It'd take several courses to figure out what the wind was. We had parachute flares and we had to take those up and drop them and then see how long they would burn. They had to burn a certain length of time or the whole lot was rejected.

**Brooks:** Did you ever have a flare or bomb too near an oysterman?

**Braun:** No. They were always very anxious if we dropped something because they had nice silk parachutes on them. They wanted to get part of that silk. We had one case of fire where somebody released a parachute flare and didn't abide by the rule of where he was to drop. He was supposed to drop them off this wide part here. He went up the river a little further and one of the flares drifted over the abandoned sawmill and went down while it was still burning and set that on fire and a lot of timberland around there. Of course, from then on, they had to comply with orders. They had to be over water and we had to know what the wind was before we dropped so that the flare would burn out before it could reach the shore line, but we never hit anybody. I've heard stories that folks were nearly hit by a falling bomb or a bomb would fall in somebody's yard from a pre-mature release or hang up, but I never heard of anybody getting hit or hurt.

**Braun:** But I do remember as a kid I read an article in *Popular Mechanics*, where Indian Head has fired a 12-inch gun down the river, and the projectile landed over the town of Quantico. That was one of the things that led to this station here. This station was 50,000 yards down the river, where they didn't have to worry about that. At Indian Head, they had a bank there and the gun was supposed to fire the projectile into this bank of dirt so they couldn't get over into Virginia. One of these projectiles went crazy and skipped over the top of this pile of dirt, and that's the one that landed over there in Quantico. Nobody was hurt. Of course Dahlgren, fired a gun down the river one time and the rotating band came off. The projectile lost its ejector and landed in somebody's backyard way down the river.

**Brooks:** As you say, the danger at Indian Head became the reason why Dahlgren was created. Also, once Dahlgren was developed heavy ordnance was tested here. It seems that the people who were living at Indian Head in Morgantown were not happy about having moving civilian ordnance to Dahlgren.

**Braun:** A lot of the original worker here had been at Indian Head for year. They were the foundation stock, so to speak, of the early Proving Ground there.

**Brooks:** So, as a result, they began to complain about the construction at Dahlgren. There was a controversy over the Captain's quarters. There was some discussion as to whether it was too opulent for a naval station at that time.

**Braun:** It's because they spent too much money for what they call the arcadian bungalows. I think they were supposed to be limited to \$10,000 and some of them ran over that. I think the primary cause of complaint of the people around here was that it took their working men from the labors of their farm work. They were offered these jobs at Dahlgren which were relatively easier than farming and more pay. So they took their source of workmen away from them. Of course in the earlier days here, up until the late '30s, this was a wide-open area. But as Dahlgren expanded in this while it worked good, it took more people, and people wanted to live near their work. So naturally, houses sprang up here and there, and it became more congested. Finally, it go so congested that they were almost hesitant about even





dropping dummy bombs in the water around here. There were boats everywhere. That's one of the things you pay for. This happens with even one of your big airports. They buy up all this land far from the city, build a big airport and the first thing you know, people are moving in building houses around there. Then they start complaining about the noise. Aviation has sort of a hard struggle trying to stay away from the complaints of people. People bring it on themselves by moving in there.

**Brooks:** It's true, but it's a very important point. Dahlgren's range was one of the big justifications for its existence. And that of course, you know that's definitely threatened now. The encroachment of civilian housing complexes have almost moved to the range.

**Braun:** People complain about the concussion of the guns. If you've ever been down to Colonial Beach when they're fired, you can see what a racket it raises down there because they get the blast from the muzzle.

**Brooks:** CDR Ward was Commander of Ordnance or Officer of Ordnance in Charge is what I think they used to call them at Dahlgren in the period you were here in the '30s.

**Braun:** Captain Leary was here when I started here at PG into the summer of 1930. Then when I came back in '34, Captain Schuyler was in Command. About one year later, he left and Captain Furlong came. Captain Furlong was relieved in two years by Captain Mike Robinson. That took up the time I left.

**Brooks:** I am trying to get an indication of the personalities of these men if possible. Do you have any personal reminiscences of their character?

**Braun:** Leary was a go-getter. Everybody had to work and do their jobs because he showed no mercy. But I've been with him before aboard a ship, and I thought the world of him. Schuyler was the studious type, I never considered him too practical. Furlong was a good organizer and a good leader. I liked him. When Captain Robinson took over, he was one who was good.

**Brooks:** Were any of them adverse to the air function?

**Braun:** In those days, there was more or less some hesitation about the value of the air part. Some of them wanted to lay down the rules and so forth. After you explain what it's all about you have no trouble.

**Brooks:** I was wondering if they wanted to perhaps subordinate the air function.

**Braun:** We had to play second fiddle, that's true; but we usually got what we wanted

**Brooks:** Do you remember any men you served with here at Dahlgren that you later associated with in war or in your future career?

**Braun:** Well, I was later with Admiral Leary. The other I saw after the war but Leary was the last one who was actually during the war.

**Brooks:** It took quite a philosophical battle as well as political to convince the Navy back before WWI of the necessity of having proving grounds per se for testing naval guns. The idea was at that time





the naval ship was the platform from which to conduct tests. Was there a feeling on the part of the commanding officers that being to Dahlgren may have been the end of your career?

**Braun:** No. Dahlgren was really considered a stepping-stone for anybody interested in gunnery. They all went higher up. No, I don't think it was any feeling like that at all in the Navy. They considered this an ideal station. If you were interested in gunnery, you were interested in what going on at Dahlgren, the proving Ground.

**Brooks:** So that would mean Dahlgren was recognized for its value.

**Braun:** It still is. I don't know all that's going on now except for what I read or hear. With all this new stuff they're bringing out, they're sending personnel out on the ship showing them how to use it and so forth. I'm sure the work here at Dahlgren still stands high in everybody's mind in the active navy.

**Brooks:** Yes, it does. I'm interested in knowing whether foreign officers visited Dahlgren in your time.

**Braun:** No, we had none. In those days the United States was not too much world conscious about other people. So we didn't have people down here. I suppose some visitors came, but I never met anybody from a foreign aviation detail.

**Brooks:** What I was leading to, I was wondering if the Germans or Japanese sent representatives down to take a look and see what was happening.

**Braun:** They didn't come while I was here.

**Brooks:** Following your Dahlgren experience, where were you assigned?

**Braun:** When I left Dahlgren, I went to a Control Plane Squadron on the West Coast. They were the Scouts. We could fly over 24 hours TDY. We'd stay in the air for over 30 hours.

**Brooks:** Were you on the West Coast when the war began?

**Braun:** No, I happened to be in Washington in the Bureau of Ordnance when they actually got into war. On the control planes, we would get a lot of flying on the West Coast. We would go to Alaska every summer and operate up there. Then in the spring and late winter months, we'd usually make a flight to the Canal Zone and operate out of there, on to various bases in the West Indies on up to the East Coast before returning to San Diego via Panama.

**Brooks:** Panama played a large part in patrolling the Canal, didn't it?

**Braun:** They would go out every day. They were the Scouts.

**Brooks:** It seems the Germans were sort of sitting off the canal, I believe.

**Braun:** There were some, but I don't think they were worried too much about the Germans. Then we made one flight up the Hawaiian Islands. When we had boats in the plane, we had to land where we







**Brooks:** Do they know exactly the point of land where CDR Ward was shot? I remember Bob Talley went by his place once, and his son was finding shells that had been thrown ashore.

**Braun:** They found several that were well preserved. Of course, they were round shells. They found one embedded in the roots of a cedar tree on the riverbank.

**Brooks:** That would be a 32 pounder. That's what Ward was pumping into shore.

**Braun:** When I left it, it seems it only weighed more than 32 pounds. It was right heavy, I know. It was well preserved. They sent it down to Dahlgren. Dahlgren had it diffused. Then they found other fragments along there, too. You can see from the front yard where Mathias Point is.

**Brooks:** It's more or less a point bending in the Potomac.

**Braun:** The channel comes in close here. This coming up from the South. The Confederates were bringing in some artillery to use. They got the forks out. An important ship was coming along. They were trying to shelter it. That's why Ward and his party came. They were trying to do away with the shelling which they had to go through. In fact, Mr. Smoot was telling me, he lives up further here, and he still had the gunnery placement where they would bring the guns in here and shell the boats going along here because, again, they came in close. Mr. Smoot said his father had been in the sand gravel business for years; and they had an old pilot which handled all their ships that went up and down the river. He worked for the Federal people, and he said that before they got up here to Mathias Point, they would take bales of hay and straw and put on the outside of their ship because he said those guns were so doggone active at night that the only thing they could do was try to catch the projectile in a bale of hay or straw and of course if it had caught fire, all they had to do was cut the thing loose and let it fall in the water. But he said they were very accurate on their gunfire. There's a place down here, Machodoc Creek, owned by the Garnett's which is called Spy Hill. They get up there, and they can see way down the river quite a ways. Pretty good hill there. Of course. Most that was cleared land in those days. Then when they see a ship coming, a rider would get on his horse. Up there at Fletcher's Chapel, not far from St. Paul's church, the Confederates had a contingent and artillery. When the rider came saying the ship is coming, they'd take artillery down to Mathias Point or Mr. Smoot's place for shelling. CDR Ward's story was they came in there to see if they couldn't get those guns. The Confederates had some infantry up in there and hid mostly in the woods. When the landing party came to shore, they were met with some infantry. The Northern Federals didn't have anybody combatant with and then the Confederates would open up with a gun or two they had back there in the woods, and that's what hit CDR Ward.

**Brooks:** I imagine a lot individuals know a lot about the Civil War in the Northern Neck here. It was cut off pretty much after Bull Run or Manassas, however, you want to call it. Richmond decided gun harassment at Mathias Point here at Aquia Creek and the same thing up at Potomac in Stafford. A series of force there at Dahlgren sent an artillery against a series of force up there, but the Confederate Government decided to write off the Northern Neck as far as trying to hold it because it was too easily sealed off from Fredericksburg.





**Braun:** They did a pretty good job though.

**Brooks:** My great grandfather was from this area. He was in the 30th Virginia infantry. He came from a place called Shiloh down the road from here.

**Braun:** Shiloh, King George, County.

**Brooks:** He was in Company K Thirty Virginia Infantry and went out and was assigned to Longstreet's first corp. He would come back on rare occasions to visit. He was wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg. He was a fifer, a major fifer. He played at Stonewall Jackson's funeral in Richmond.

**Conclusion:** Thank you for listening to this week's Dahlgren Centennial Podcast, and hopefully you have learned another interesting aspect of what our people accomplish for the Navy and for our nation.

We will continue sharing how Dahlgren is a one-of-a-kind location where innovation is heralded as the hallmark of each individual.

Tune in next week to hear from Rear Adm. Wayne E. Meyer, the Father of Aegis.

Thank you for celebrating this century of innovation with us at Dahlgren.

**CONCLUDING MUSIC**

