



**WALTER MASON**  
***Public Works***  
***1938-1974***

<p><b>Introduction</b></p>	<p><u>MUSIC</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Today we are honored to listen to the story of Walter Mason, whose work spanned from 1938 to 1974. During his tenure at Dahlgren, Mr. Mason worked in Public Works, so many of his stories relate to early base development and living at Dahlgren in the 1940s.</p> <p>Let’s listen to Mr. Mason...</p>
<p><b>Walter Mason</b></p>	<p>Well I came to work at Dahlgren in February of 1938. I came in at the regular entrance level as a Classified Laborer. I went to work the first day in the Carpenters’ Shop, which was known then as the Construction Department, and worked there for about eight to ten years. Then the Public Works Department was organized by the Civil Engineer Corps of the Navy, and I went to work in the Public Works Office as a Planner and Estimator, rose to be the Director of the Planning and Estimating Branch, which was located in the Maintenance Control Department of Public Works, became the Assistant Director of Maintenance Control, later became the Division Head of the Facilities Management Division and also the Public Works Staff Head. And I worked there until I retired in October of 1974.</p> <p>In the meantime, during the World War II years, I joined the Navy Seabees, served in the Pacific, came back in 1946 to my job in the Carpenters’ Shop and, as I said, stayed there until about 1949, then went into the Public Works Office.</p> <p>The Mason family has been in King George for many, many years.</p> <p>I was born here, just two and a half miles from the base, grew up here, and spent my entire life here. I was born two years before Dahlgren was born. When I came to work at Dahlgren, it probably was somewhere between three and four hundred employees. Immediately after World War II began, Dahlgren</p>





began to grow in leaps and bounds. I don't know what the personnel count was when I left to go into the Navy. I do know—and you have to remember now, this was the in the early days of World War II—when I first went to the Richmond recruiting office to sign up in the Navy, I met all of the qualifications, and as I was leaving, the recruiting officer said, “There's one thing you have to do since you work for the Navy in the Defense Department. You have to get a release from your Commanding Officer or else we can't accept you.” Bear in mind now this was early, very early in World War II, and each base was trying to increase their staff, rather than let them leave to let go into the armed services or with contractors or anybody else. So I got back and wrote a letter to my commanding officer, and in a couple weeks he called me up one morning and said, “I want you to come to the office. I want to talk with you.” And he said, “I called you in to tell you why I'm not going to release you: because your job here is more important than what you would be doing in the Navy, and we need to increase our staff rather than lose our people. So, for that reason, I'm not going to release you.” But in a year or two, that was relaxed, and I no longer needed the release, so I enlisted in the Navy Seabees and went to active duty in 1944, came back in 1946 to my same job.

The railroad to Fredericksburg was built right in the beginning of about 1942. The railway used to run down to the Yardcraft area, and when the barge would bring a gun in from Naval Gun Factory in Washington or from the Norfolk area or whatever it's coming from, it would have to sit at the Yardcraft area until the tide reached the same level so that the railroad reached the level that the railroad track on the barge would match the railroad track on land so they could unload the gun up off the barge, which meant sometimes it had to sit there for several hours. So the Navy decided to put in what is known as a tide bridge. And that was a bridge that you drove down piling, put concrete abutments on top of it, set the frame, which was huge I-beams, on top of those concrete abutments, and the railroad track was mounted on top of those I-beams. It worked on hinge so that when the barge came in, if the tide was high, you could raise the tide bridge with the railroad tracks on it to member with the railroad tracks on the barge. If the tide was lower, you lowered the tide bridge down. So you could always unload the gun immediately; you didn't have to keep the tugs and the barge there waiting.

And I went from \$18.52 a week from a Classified Laborer to what was known as a General Helper, which was \$21.77 a week, and then I was promoted a Joiner—the Navy at that time called their carpenters “joiners”—I was promoted to a Joiner third class, which was \$36.12 a week—good raise! And then from Joiner, I joined the GS breed family, and I went in GS as a GS-11 and retired as GS-13.





Well, on the base at that time. The percentage of civilians and military were probably about equal, probably about 50/50. They gradually begin to phase out the civilians. And I might mention back in the early days of World War II, as soon as World War II began, we went from a five day week to a six day week plus a lot of overtime.

Well the first Technical Director on Dahlgren was Dr. [Russell H.] Lyddane. Dr. Lyddane was Technical Director for—I don't know the exact number of years, but for several years. And he was followed by Barney Smith.

[Charles] Middlebrook was associated with the Norden Bombsight, and the time that you are speaking of was when the airplane hangar was located at the corner of Dahlgren Road and the road that goes down where I showed you, where the old Seaplane Hangar is located [Caskey Road], located right in that corner. It had a large concrete apron out front of it where they used to park and work on the aircraft.

In 1940, on a Friday afternoon as I was leaving the base and going home from work, I had some trouble with my automobile, and there was a garage located just off of the base that was open five and a half days a week, open a half day on Saturday. So I managed to get it there, and I left it. And the owner of that garage was a man by the name of Mr. Rollin Burgess. He also worked on the base, and he had this Ford dealership outside, and he also had an airplane. And his little landing strip was just off the station, right behind that little strip shopping center, that's behind—I don't know if you know where Chuck Rollins' service station is—but behind the building where you all are located. And they had a hangar there, and he gave flying lessons to those who were interested and wanted to take them. And I did. So on this weekend when my car had broken down on a Saturday morning, I found out what the problem was and what the part was I needed, but I had to get it from Fredericksburg, so I said to the son of Mr. Burgess, who was also a pilot, I said, "Let's take the plane, fly up to Shannon airport in Fredericksburg, and we'll catch a cab and go over and get the part." So we did, and when we got up, we saw this crowd around on the Maryland side of the Potomac River Bridge and remembered that they're dedicating the bridge today. And it was President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and the governor of Maryland [Herbert R. O'Connor] and the governor of Virginia [James H. Price] who were the main dignitaries there. So we flew around over the crowd, then Blue Burgess said to me, he was flying at the time, "How would you like to fly under the bridge under the high part?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." So we did and circled around and Blue said, "Now, how about you doing it one time?" And so I said, "Okay," so I did the second time [*laughs*], came around, and flew on to Fredericksburg, landed at Shannon Airport, got the cab, got my automobile part, brought it back. As far as we were concerned, that was the end of the story. But some people were looking into who it was and why we did





	<p>it, but there was never any bad outcome to it. It settled very well, and we realized it was a pretty stupid thing to do [laughs], but at the time it was fun.</p> <p>Yes, on the fortieth anniversary, <i>The Free Lance Star</i> reporter in Fredericksburg called me and said they want to do an article on the fortieth anniversary of the bridge, and they knew that I had flown under it. They'd like to take me down under the bridge, take a picture and do an article, and we did that in October of 1980.</p> <p>Well, my division was responsible for all construction contracts that didn't meet the military construction contract category, and at that time military construction was anything \$100,000 and above. I'm sure it's much different these days. So we developed the contract—I mean, the project, developed the project, wrote the background information, why the project was needed, what would happen if we didn't get it, and submitted it to a sponsor up in Washington. And I always enjoyed doing that. That was one of my favorite parts of what my division did. It was interesting work, and we worked so closely with the technical labs because there were so many projects related to their tasks that we would be involved in if there was some type of construction involved. And I had many, many tasks. Some I enjoyed, and some I didn't. As I said, I would—see a division head, I was Administrative Staff Head, and I headed Housing, and then when Dahlgren, the Navy decided they needed a Conservation Officer, I became the Conservation Officer. I got those kind of things that nobody else probably even wanted.</p> <p>Well now, the Public Works Officer, who was named Commander [Frederick A. F.] Cooke at that time, called me and said "I've got a job I want you to do. It's a difficult job, but I think you can handle it. All these people that are raising chickens on Dahlgren, they've got to go. We can't have a base with chicken houses sitting all around on it. What I'd like for you to do is go out and talk to these people and tell them they have to get rid of the chickens and tear the chicken houses down. And just handle it, and don't involve me in it." And I said, "But what if they give me a problem?" He said, "Use moxy on them." [Laughs] Okay, so I had the job to go and tell all these folks living in the housing area that were raising chickens—and there were a good number of them-- "Your chickens are going to have to go. You either have to eat them or sell them or do something with them and tear the chicken houses down. If you don't tear them down, we'll send out a crew to tear them down," which we did. So I would go out there. I would take a couple hours a day to go out until I covered the whole area. And some people were very reluctant to get rid of their chickens. I had one or two families tell me, "If our chickens go, we're going too. We're going to move." And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but this is the way it is. The chickens have got to go."</p>
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I met Commander [Deak] Parsons early in World War II when he was stationed here. I didn't know him well, but I talked to him a few times. Then in 1945, I was stationed on Saipan when the atomic bomb was brought in. The [USS] *Indianapolis* brought the uranium in for the atomic bomb, and it was assembled there on Tinian, and Captain Parsons came to Tinian and armed that bomb in flight aboard the *Enola Gay*. That was the first atomic bomb. But I didn't get to see him because, as I said, I was on Saipan, but a week later I was ordered to the Naval Air Station on Tinian to relieve a chief there who had elephantiasis and had to come back to the states. By that time Captain Parsons had departed the Tinian for—the states from Tinian, but the *Indianapolis* was just leaving. And of course you know the story of the *Indianapolis*, I'm sure. Well, the *Indianapolis* was commanded by Captain [Charles B.] McVay, who was the son of Admiral [Charles B.] McVay—the road's named after him—and the *Indianapolis* brought the uranium in, stayed in port in Tinian for a few days—and I'm just giving you this from my memory—it was ordered from Tinian to the Philippines. It was my understanding that Captain McVay was told that "you can run a straight line course, there have been no enemy submarines seen in this area for a long, long time, and just depart and go." Whether—the protocol is when the ship leaves port, the port director of that port notifies the port director of the port the ship is bound for that the ship has left this port, bound for your port, due at a certain time. In some way, communications broke down, as my understanding. And the *Indianapolis* was sighted by a Japanese sub, running a straight line course. The sub surfaced, shot the torpedoes at the *Indianapolis*. The *Indianapolis* was sunk, and those people who survived were in the water for two or three days before it was ever known they were out there. And they were spotted by a PBY patrol plane, which contacted the base, and they sent out rescue planes and boats to pick the remaining survivors up.

Buildings—I mentioned about being relocated—the Seaplane Hangar, which was in service for many, many years down on the point in front of the machine gun battery was dismantled and brought back on land up here, and reassembled, put together. There was an area right down below where the Seaplane Hangar is located. At that time [it] was occupied by some of the workers that worked here on Dahlgren. There was a dormitory there. That building was cut into four different parts and moved over here right across from the Dahlgren Store. It's Building 909. It's now an apartment building. And so much of that was done back in those days. Where the Officers' Quarters are on Caffee Circle, there's a two-story, white Officers' Quarters, there were four small houses there. And they were moved in order to make room for these quarters to be built, spotted in different areas on the base, and there was a lot of that done back in those days. A lot of buildings moved around, shuffled around.





I don't remember any strong objections to it, but it did dislocate several people, particularly in that area back over there near Gambo Creek. There were a lot of folks living back in there. The government took that, and then eventually they took Mr. Burgess' airplane hangar and his runways, and he had to relocate over on [U.S. Route] 301. Some of those people that were relocated from the Gambo Creek area had their houses rebuilt over there on [Route] 614, called Fence Road, and then the government bought that property, they had to relocate again, so it was done a few times.

Well [Building] 492 was—the name it had was the Elsie Hut. And it was a top secret program that they were working on in there.

But we called it E-L-S-I-E, Elsie. Elsie Hut. It was used for a number of years for that. The director over there was Wes Meyers who came here in the early days of World War II as a naval officer, end of the war [he] got out and stayed here, as did many others. *[Video has been cut.]* Well, you know it really didn't begin until after the war. The Elsie. I guess they were there for three or four years.

Then somebody else moved in there. I heard that Public Affairs was in that building.

The Mailroom was in that building, and... It was the Mailroom and something else. It was the printing.

Print shop! Print shop was in there.

Well back in those days, base security in the early days, and up until probably 1960 I would say, was the Marine Corps. In the early days of Dahlgren, very early, there was no security. There was nobody at the main gate. You just drove down and drove in. We used to come down as kids, go to the movie theater, known as the recreation hall then, for free. And then they began to charge civilians five cents for the movie, and then it went to ten cents. It was just before World War II, but I guess by the time I came to work here was about the time they began to man the main gate with Marines. Then later they added the Marine gate right below here, right by the Fire Station, and one at the Ad Building. And there was a Marine posted at the entrance to Main Range, right on that corner. And then they went to private guards.

I knew [William E.] DeLoach—we called him Chick—very well. He came here as a young Marine, served his tour of duty here, got out of the Marine Corps, and went to work at the Main Range as a civilian, and worked there until he retired. I think, as Richard said, his son still works here, I believe. Young Chick DeLoach we called him.





I have a lot of fond memories of Dahlgren. I really enjoyed my work at Dahlgren. I had no intention of retiring at the time I retired but members of the King George School Board—Frank Churchill was one, Marlin Thomas—you may remember Marlin Thomas—was one—came and asked me if I would consider retiring and taking a job with the school system. And I told them both, “Well, I hadn’t entertained these thoughts at all!” And they came back a second time and asked me, and I said, “Well, I’ve been here almost 37 years. Maybe it is time I retire and do something else.” So I did. I made up my mind. I went out there as a facilities engineer. They had two or three different titles. One was Clerk of the Works. One was Facilities Engineer, so that’s what I went as. Well, I went as Clerk of the Works and became Facilities Engineer, working with the architect and renovating and building a new school building. We built a new middle school, we renovated the elementary school. I put two additions on the Potomac Elementary School. I went there on a two-year contract and stayed for seventeen years.

When I went to elementary school, which was located up in Owens, it was a four-room school building. I was the only student in the seventh grade. The others, my classmates, had not gone to class regularly and had fallen behind or some of them had stopped going entirely and had gone farming and fishing, so they left me in the seventh grade alone. And there was a state test that we had to take, and rather than administer it to one student there, they sent me to Dahlgren to take it with their students. That was my first encounter with Dahlgren School.

The story that Admiral [Boynton L.] Braun told me was when the roads were dirt roads. In the wintertime it’s this horrible condition that you didn’t get very far out before you got stuck. And they had these carrier pigeons here on Dahlgren, and when the ladies would go to Fredericksburg, the officers’ wives shopping, they would take about three carrier pigeons with them. The first bad spot in the road was just beyond Sheetz [on Route 301] out here, which was known then as Deep Bottom. If you got stuck in Deep Bottom, they released one pigeon and came back to Dahlgren. They would send this old fellow who was a teamster—he had charge of the mules and the horses—send him out with a pair of mules to pull them out, then they would go on. Well, the next bad spot was at Peppermill Hill. If they got stuck up there, they would send two pigeons back. Well that was a little far to send a team of horses, you know, so some of the officers had to arrange to get somebody up in that area to pull them out. The third bad spot was up on Route 3 near Sealston, around Muddy Creek. If they got stuck there, they had to send three pigeons back, and they had to get somebody up there to pull them out. Now, he didn’t tell me how they got back. I don’t know what they did for pigeons because they’d run out [*laughs*].





	<p>There used to be mules and horses, and they had a job description known as Teamster. And they had a couple of those who handled the mules and horses. They had a mule barn. That was down—I think I mentioned earlier—right near the Machine Gun Battery. But when Public Works was... Well, before that. In the early days, before World War II, they built a new carpenters’ shop [and] a new mule barn all next to the Public Works building. And they moved the horses and mules up to that mule barn. We had a janitor who came into the Public Works office at night to clean up. He would come in about four o’clock in the evening and worked there until about twelve at night. And he was scared to death the whole time he was in that building. And he would tell me some time the next day. He said, “You know, Mr. Mason, last night, around ten o’clock, I heard this clip clop clip clop coming up from the mule barn on through the parking lot. I looked out, and there was this white horse running through the parking lot.” And I said, “Douglas, we don’t have any horses down there now.” He said, “I know that, but I saw this white one. That’s not the first time I’ve seen him. [Laughs] I’ve seen him several times!” He believed it!</p> <p>They did all the grass cutting with horses and mules. They cut the whole golf course, all the fairways, with a horse-drawn mower. And the airfields.</p> <p>The early airfield was a grass strip when the hangar was located on Dahlgren Road up here. And then in the early ‘40s, about ‘40, they built Hangar 1, and that’s when they paved them, the runways.</p>
<p><b>Conclusion</b></p>	<p>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.</p> <p>We will continue sharing how Dahlgren is a one-of-a-kind location where innovation is heralded as the hallmark of each individual.</p> <p><u>PAUSE</u></p> <p>Tune in next week to hear from Dr. Jim Colvard, who worked at Dahlgren from 1969 to 1980. Dr. Colvard was a Technical Director at Dahlgren during a crucial time of development, and his podcast will focus on those experiences.</p> <p>Thank you for celebrating this century of innovation with us at Dahlgren.</p> <p><u>MUSIC</u></p>

