



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

News Center

News Articles Collection

2006-10-06

50-Year NPS Legend Alf Cooper stages upbeat "retirement"

Honegger, Barbara

Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/40732>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>



■ ADMISSIONS & REGISTRAR

Requesting transcripts, applying & preparing to attend NPS

■ ACADEMICS

Schools, departments, programs, & curricula

■ RESEARCH

Programs, News, publications, annual reports, centers & institutes

■ INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

ITACS services, new user information, publications, training, resources, tools & assistance

■ LIBRARY

Services, catalog, resources, tools & assistance

■ ADMINISTRATION & SERVICES

Human Resources, policies, housing, service-related information

■ ABOUT NPS

Facts & figures, rankings, community & campus information, NPS News

Resources For :

■ NEW STUDENTS

■ CURRENT STUDENTS

■ INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

■ FACULTY & STAFF

■ ALUMNI & FRIENDS

■ GOVERNMENT & INDUSTRY

[NPS A-Z](#) | [CALENDAR](#) | [DIRECTORY](#) | [GIVE TO NPS](#)

SEARCH



Home >> [NPS Public Affairs](#) >> News

50-Year NPS Legend Alf Cooper Stages Upbeat "Retirement"

Friday, October 06, 2006

Story by Barbara Honegger, Senior Military Affairs Journalist

Faculty, friends and family converged on the Naval Postgraduate School Quarterdeck Sept. 29 for a jaunty and humor-filled "retirement" ceremony for beloved physics professor Alf Cooper, whose half century of competitive research, teaching and sportsmanship while always remaining the perfect gentleman have made him a living legend.

"Retirement" in quotes because, as Cooper quickly points out, "I want everyone to know I'm *not* going anywhere. I will be a *very* active professor emeritus."

As each took the mike from master of ceremonies Prof. Emeritus Kai Woehler, lifelong colleagues reached for greater and greater superlatives to describe the historic and exciting career that Cooper himself called "an exercise in serendipity."

Cooper is the longest serving faculty member in NPS history, through the terms of over 20 superintendents and presidents. He has mentored 145 master's and 14 doctoral students, many of whom have achieved flag rank, and served for 33 continuous years as graduation grand marshal -- in addition to 11 years as marshal -- for a total of 176 commencement ceremonies.

"And you were *almost* the youngest (faculty member) on hire," quipped former Provost Richard Elster. "Sorry, Alf. One other was younger than you, by 70 days."

"Literally and figuratively, Alf Cooper has led the NPS faculty for half a century," said faculty council chairman John Muttly, who gave the ice breaker: "I don't understand why he isn't going to make a career of it here. In all seriousness, one of the most important things about Alf has been his willingness to accept the mantle of leadership. He's led the faculty three times as chairman of the faculty council, and served 13 years on the faculty executive board. If you think of faculty as cats, Alf is one of the best cat herders we've had."

Except for Cooper himself, computer science Prof. Emeritus Doug Williams stole the show with hilarious recollections of his and Cooper's exploits and early times together, when they met at 16 playing opposite sides in a rugby match and went on to co-coach the NPS/Monterey rugby team for 18 years. Williams was from Edinburgh and Cooper was from Dublin.

"As a friend for 58 years, there's another side to Alf you haven't heard about -- like the time we spent together at San Quentin..." he quipped, leaving a pause to allow for peels of laughter "...when we played soccer with the NPS soccer team -- against the inmates. Alf's a scholar athlete known for his scholarship and fair play, who's broken his nose in each of the sports he's played and somehow still managed to maintain his good looks. And when he'd sing 'Danny Boy,' it would silence even the most raucous crowd."

But the last word was Cooper's, who took delight in the captive audience of colleagues, friends and family, taking them on a philosophical ride through his "exercise in serendipity."

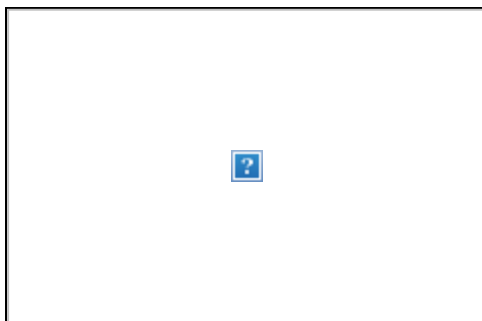


"Life is a ray-tracing program," he said, as a true natural philosopher, which he pointed out physics used to be called. "We divide it up in time steps and assume everything will go on the same way, forever," he continued, "but that's not true. And when we get to the next edge we adapt the principles we know to make decisions on how to go ahead. My program was initialized in 1932. That was the year the electron and positron were discovered in Rutherford's lab, and the year I was conceived by my parents. In 1951, the year Walton received the Nobel Prize for the first artificial nuclear disintegration, I entered the Dublin University Physics department, then headed by Rutherford's student Walton. On graduation, he called me into his office and said, 'If you can let the journals pile up on your desk until they fall off into the waste basket, you'll have what it takes to make it in an academic career,' and offered me a position in Belfast as a research assistant to work on my doctorate. There, I met and worked with Professor Norman Olsen of NPS, who was on a year's sabbatical. It wasn't long before he wrote, 'We have an opening for an assistant professor at NPS. Would you like to come?' And I said yes. When I arrived in New Jersey and got to New York, and took a bus across the country, and arrived at NPS, (Professor) Herman Medwin said, 'I'm so glad to see you. Class begins at 9:00 tomorrow.' And ever since, I've never had enough time to prepare for a course...Thank you for my career. For it's not been my career – it's *ours*."

And the rest, as they say, is history.

During the ceremony, Cooper was represented with the Navy Superior Civilian Service Award, originally received at commencement exercises Sept. 22, for his "...great skill, leadership and flexibility in research, academic development and service to the school and (physics) department."

Among many gifts, physics Prof. Daphne Kapolka presented Cooper with a book on optics called *Fire Within the Eye*, a fitting title given his trademark wink and sparkle.



Speaking of a gleam in the eye, twenty of Cooper's immediate and extended family came from across Northern California to be at the ceremony.

"Alf and I met in this very lobby," said Cooper's wife Gail, niece of then NPS Dean Roy Glasgow, the equivalent of today's provost. "I don't know what took all these people so long to recognize Alf's potential," she winked. "I recognized it 45 years ago."

Beginning Oct. 1, Cooper will teach courses on waves electro-optics in the information warfare and electronic warfare curricula, and is putting together three courses

using Blackboard for possible independent study.

About the only thing missing from the ceremony was "Elf" Cooper passing the baton by singing "Danny Boy." Maybe we'll get him to do that in his "retirement."

[CONTACTS](#) | [COPYRIGHT/ACCESSIBILITY](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [FOIA](#) | [DOD/NAVY LINKS](#) | [INTRANET ACCESS](#)

This is an official U.S. Navy website.

All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS [Public Affairs Officer](#).
[Contact the Webmaster](#)