

Navy command stays in the family

By MELISSA WOOD, The Virginian-Pilot
© August 10, 2001



Cmdr. James M. Donovan Jr., left, will be relieved by his wife, Cmdr. Katherine M. Donovan, today during a change of command ceremony at the Naval Ocean Processing Facility Dam Neck. "Our situation is unique," she says. Photos by Vasna Wilson / The Virginian-Pilot

Jim and Kathy Donovan agreed that they won't kiss.

It just wouldn't be proper protocol.

When one officer passes command to another, it's usually accompanied by a crisp salute and a hearty handshake.

But today, in what may be the first time in Navy history, an officer will hand over his command to his wife. In a 10 a.m. ceremony, Cmdr. Katherine M. Donovan, 40, will relieve Cmdr. James M. Donovan Jr., 47, at the helm of Naval Ocean Processing Facility Dam Neck.

The pair has a history with the unit, which employs about 250 sailors performing highly classified undersea surveillance using sonar data gathered up and down the East Coast.

In fact, the command's chief petty officers have been known to mumble about a "Donovan dynasty," Jim Donovan said with a smile, and last week, they gave the couple a pair of shiny gold and red velvet paper crowns.

The Donovan era started in 1994, when Jim Donovan came to the facility as its operations officer. When he left, Katherine Donovan spent a tour of duty there as the executive officer, or second in command.

Her husband returned to take command of the unit in 1999, as Katherine Donovan worked on the staff of an inspection and survey board at the Little Creek amphibious base.

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At first the Navy brass wasn't "too keen" about his wife taking over from him, Jim Donovan said.

Officials were concerned that his wife might not start with a fresh slate or might be reluctant to expose any mistakes he might have made during his tour, Jim Donovan explained.

Jim Donovan went to bat for her. "It sounded like discrimination to me that she would not get the job only because she's my wife."



Despite the change of command, the Donovan family photos in the office will remain, reflecting 14 years of marriage.

The couple met as lieutenants in Iceland in the mid-'80s. They became friends, then started dating, trying hard to be discreet about the relationship.

They transferred to Norfolk, and Jim bought Katherine an engagement ring and proposed a few days before Christmas.

During the past 14 years, they've learned to take turns at choice jobs, while balancing their goals, said Jim Donovan, who began service as a seaman recruit 28 years ago.

When they both were assigned in Wales, Katherine Donovan was asked to take a detour to serve as an administrative officer so they wouldn't be assigned in the same department.

Not having shipboard duty during their careers has helped, Katherine Donovan said.

At different times, both were offered good positions in Bahrain and Seoul, South Korea. They turned those down because it meant being apart from their children, Kelly, now 12, and Patrick, 10.

They've held the same type of job simultaneously, as executive officers, with Katherine at the ocean facility and Jim in Iceland. Being 3,000 miles away from his family for an entire tour of duty was too hard for him to ever do again, he said.

He gave up an earlier opportunity for command in Bremerton, Wash., after much family discussion.

"We even considered each taking a child with us," Katherine said.

Ordinarily, Jim's next job might be "across the street" as chief of staff for the ocean facility's headquarters

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command. But it wouldn't be appropriate now, with his wife slated to head the ocean command. So he'll head to a position as chief of staff for the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Area Master Station Atlantic at the Norfolk Naval Station.

Their change of command ceremony today will include a few modifications in etiquette, they said.

Kelly and Patrick, along with about 30 out-of-town relatives, including Jim's two sons from his first marriage, their wives, and his grandchild, would normally be seated on either the incoming officer's or outgoing officer's side.

Instead, they've arranged some seats in the middle.