

From Fleet to Lathe

Philip Duffy Charts an Artistic Endeavor

by Greg Lilly, Lifestyle Editor

Philip Duffy displays his wood turned pieces at local craft shows. He greets visitors as they admire the bowls, writing pens, serving platters, and pepper grinders. Philip answers questions about his technique and the wood he chooses. The stack of business cards on his table lists his name and contact information. Just under his name, in small print reads: Rear Admiral U.S. Navy (Retired).

"I served 31 years," Philip says. "I was a helicopter pilot and did all kinds of crazy stuff. As a helicopter guy, I did some rescue work. I trained astronauts to fly the lunar module. That led to some success at the command of a squadron out in San Diego." He may play it down a bit, but the San Diego squadron was the largest in the Navy, and he was the youngest Commanding Officer in the Navy at the time. "That was kind of a thrill," he adds.

He became the "Air Boss" on a helicopter carrier followed by command of "a wing of all the reserve helicopters in the Navy." Philip was headquartered in San Diego with squadrons up and down both the East Coast and the West Coast. "The whole Navy Helicopter Reserve commu-



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nity belonged to me for that year and a half," he says. "That was quite a thrill, a great job."

Promoted to Captain, Philip was assigned to command the ship that he had left as an Air Boss. "A lot of the crew I had worked with were still there," he explains. "That was great to be able to go back to the same ship." From there, he moved to the USS Tarawa stationed off the coast of Beirut. "I went from one ship to the other with a month off in between," he says. "That was a hard go at it."

Philip spent four tours with the Marines with the amphibious forces before his assignment to the Pentagon. "I worked in the Space Division for the Navy. I had a lot of interaction with the astronauts and their projects and programs. The funding came out of my office, where I was a deputy, working for an Admiral."

His selection as Admiral occurred and he was shipped out again. "To Hawaii," he explains, "to command the regional forces for the Navy in the Middle East. That was a very arduous tour - three years of very hard, long work. In 1987 to '90, the Iran-Iraq War was going on at the time. We were not directly involved as a combatant, but we were certainly supplying a lot of support forces trying to keep the Iranians from killing everyone out there. Of course, Iraq was a friend of ours in those days. But, three years of that was plenty. It wore me down, quite frankly. But, I got to see a tremendous amount of the world. I grew great respect for the Arab peoples and their challenges."

Rear Admiral Philip Duffy returned to Norfolk to command all the training forces for the Atlantic Fleet for the First Gulf War. "Then I retired and came to live here in Williamsburg," he says. "I had worked for a think tank up in D.C. and lived in Virginia Beach. I had to drive back and forth several times a month. If you ever drove to Virginia Beach on a summer Friday, you would know why my wife and I decided to move to Williamsburg. We've been here for 17 years now. This is a beautiful town."

Wood turning caught Philip's interest while he was on active duty in Norfolk. The base had a woodworking shop that he frequented. "My wife and youngest daughter," he explains, "showed me a picture of some chairs and asked, 'Do you think you can make one of these Weaver Chairs? We can use them as barstools.' I said, 'Gee I don't know. I'll have to ask Jack.' Jack was my mentor at the woodworking shop, a wonderful old guy, tremendously skilled." The next day, Philip showed the picture of the Weaver Chair to Jack, and Jack told him he would need to learn to use the lathe. "I went over and looked at it," Philip describes, "watched it spin, and thought: This is like a helicopter except that it's horizontal instead of vertical. I started turning and made two Weaver Chairs that are still in our kitchen. That got me started."

Philip found wood turning a "fulfilling and addictive process." From the use of the logical, problem-solving side of his brain in his Navy career, to the expressive and creative process of wood turning, Philip enjoyed the change. He has found that the craft challenges him every day. "Hardly a day goes by that I don't turn something," he says. "And I'm always trying new things. New, innovative ideas come to me all the time. I never stop learning. It's a wonderful hobby, a really fun thing to do, and I recommend it strongly to anyone with an interest in working with their hands."

With a basic idea of what he wants to create, Philip chooses the raw wood that should allow him to make his vision. His plan for turning

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the wood, how to mount it on the lathe, and the details in the design can change drastically once he starts. "All of a sudden, the wood doesn't want to do that," he explains. "It doesn't look right. Then you have to change what you thought you wanted to do with the piece. That sort of thing happens all the time and is influenced by all the things Mother Nature gave that wood including the color, grain, structure, and imperfections, and sometimes impurities too. It's not unusual to hit a nail or barbed wire or a bullet from a deer hunter embedded in the wood. All those things work toward ending up with a certain form."

A Philip Duffy style has emerged. The characteristics of his design set him apart. "I can look at a hundred different pepper mills and I can tell you in a heartbeat the Phil Duffy pieces. The kind of form they take; the size and shape of the knobs at the top. They don't look like anybody else's." He shows a bowl about twelve inches in diameter, the red-brown grain swirls, giving the bowl a sense of movement. "Notice the way the limb structure jumps out," he says. "I always try to leave some part of the tree alone, so the tree can still be identified in the piece."

Aside from his personal interest in developing his skill and artistic interpretation, Philip appreciates other people's reaction to his work. "I just like to do things that people enjoy," he says. "When they buy my pieces, I hope they love and enjoy it. The biggest thrill I have is when someone walks up to me at a craft fair

"I just like to do things that people enjoy. When they buy my pieces, I hope they love and enjoy it."

- Philip Duffy

and says, 'I bought one of your salad bowls four years ago, and I still use it and I love it.' I tell you, that makes my heart feel good. The fact that they paid good money for it, they use it, and it brings them some level of joy... that's just the whole essence of why I do turning."

Some of Philip's favorite woods include local cherry and walnut. "Cherry is a magnificent

wood to work with," he says. "I like walnut, but people don't seem to want pieces made out of walnut anymore. Maybe it's because of the blackness of the American walnut wood. Over time, walnut lightens and cherry darkens." He says that ash has a dramatic grain structure that he enjoys working with. Holly and pecan must be turned while green. "Once it gets dry," he says, "it's almost like concrete."

His plans for the future of his wood turning skills branch out to the artistic. "I'd like to do more hollow forms," he says. Hollow forms include shapes like jars, vases, and vessels where the inside is hollowed out, a difficult maneuver. "The shapes get to be pretty exquisite looking after you develop enough technique," he adds. "Those are the kind of pieces that leave the utilitarian world behind. They become more of an artistic endeavor rather than a craftsman endeavor. I've been turning for seventeen years, so I look forward to trying more expressive forms."

Tapping into both sides of his brain, Philip uses his Navy experience to chart his way into a powerful, skillful and beautiful technique of wood turning that incorporates both craft and art. NDN



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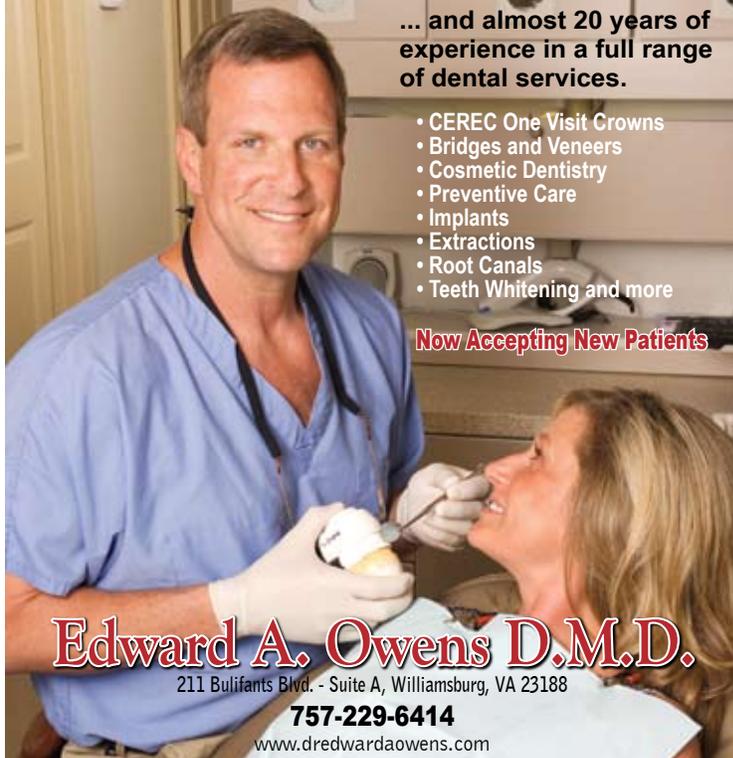


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