

Atlantic Division Assignments: Bermuda and Iceland

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In 1977, I was fortunate to be given two assignments in what until just the year before had been officially designated UMUC's Atlantic Division. Established in the early 1950's as the North Atlantic Division, it grew over time to include several locations including Newfoundland, Labrador, Iceland, and Greenland. In 1957, its name was changed to just the Atlantic Division as Bermuda was added and then the Azores in 1959. Over time, this independent division decreased in size and in 1976, CAPT Morgan Slayton oversaw the transition of the three remaining locations to oversight in the Statewide Division (Bermuda) and the European Division (Iceland, Azores).

My Term III assignment was at the Bermuda Naval Air Station on St. David's Island near St. George's. By 1977, I was a well-traveled Marylander after years in the European Division, but this was only my second Navy assignment. That it came in the middle of a difficult winter on the U.S. East coast was an unexpected treat. However, describing white sails in the sunset from the Officers Club windows in letters home won me no friends.

My assignment of two courses, Intro to Psychology and Abnormal Psychology, came with a surprise. In addition to Navy personnel, my classes included a significant number of Bermudians. My only other experience with non-military personnel as students had been in 1972 when I taught at SHAPE headquarters in Mons, Belgium. What I eventually learned was that Bermudians did not have access to university programs such as UMUC offered. Bermuda had passed its Bermuda College Act in 1974 that amalgamated three key institutions that were largely technical institutes focused on hospitality programs. An institute with a classic university education came much later.

My Bermudian students wasted no time in expressing their appreciation for their admission to UMUC programs. One way they demonstrated was in how well they did in class (albeit a bit shy in discussions) but also in the generous invitations I received to their homes while I was there. I learned a great deal from them about life on a 24-mile island including the realities of high prices and constant tourism. Island Fever demanded that families budget for at least one trip to the States each year where they could shop for clothing and other necessities at considerably lower prices as well as pursue destinations further than 24 miles.

It's been many years since those experiences and it's difficult to remember particulars but there are two that remain with me to this day. The first was the short walk at lunchtime from the Naval Air Station to a sandwich shop that featured lobster salad sandwiches. I made it often, never tiring of that delicacy. The other was the trip home at night from my students' homes back to the BOQ. One of my students loaned me a bicycle and to this day I can remember the distinct tree smell in the Bermuda

air, primarily from the iconic Bermuda cedar, offering a unique, spicy, woody aroma, often mixed with the sweet floral scent of Oleander (especially at night) and sometimes the fruity, resinous smell of fallen Surinam cherries, creating a signature island fragrance. It stays with me still.

In 2021, I returned to Bermuda and explored what had previously been the Naval Air Station, which was closed in 1995. I learned that many of the houses on the station had been rebuilt because they were not in the classic style of Bermuda homes. The High School where UM classes had been held was still in use as was the Bowling Alley and the Commissary. Finally, the BOQ had been renovated to provide single individual residences for men, an understandable benefit for many Bermudians struggling with the price of homes in paradise.

Two terms later in 1977, I found myself with an assignment to teach Child Psychology on Naval Air Station Keflavik in Iceland. From the moment I set foot on the tarmac I understood one of the realities of my stay. A view of the BOQ included numerous windows covered in aluminum foil, the practical solution to spending summers in a place where the Midnight Sun provides almost 24 hours of daylight between May and July.

My Iceland assignment stands out in my memory as one of the locations where the realities of life at the site fed the richness of classroom discussions and produced outcomes that would have been difficult to recreate anywhere else.

That effect began within a couple of days of my arrival when I was required to attend a briefing session for those assigned to Keflavik. The session emphasized two key concerns of Icelanders who reluctantly agreed to an American military presence on their island: the preservation of both their culture and their economy.

Culture discussions that came up in class were around issues such as the Icelandic government's resistance to the AFRTS Keflavik broadcast range (Icelanders living near the base were picking up soap operas) and social issues such as the reverse gender roles that dictated that women took the lead in relationships, not men.

At one time in the history of the base's relationships with the Icelandic government, the administration dictated how many Americans could leave the base on a given day out of a concern that Icelanders would be exposed to "unwanted" cultural influences. My students had much to say about having been considered an unwanted influence.

The issue around the Icelandic economy stemmed in part from the concern that Commissary goods were leaked into the Icelandic economy via those who lived off base. I was called into the Education Office at one point and notified that one of my unaccompanied students who nevertheless had a wife and child off base was caught leaving the base with diapers and was subsequently disciplined.

As in Bermuda, my students treated me kindly and often included me on trips to explore parts of Iceland. If such an event involved a picnic lunch, the procedure was as follows: the day before you agreed on everything you planned to eat off base which you listed on a form and took to the security gate to be approved. On the day of the picnic, the approved list was checked against everything in the car, and we were strongly advised not to share with a hungry Icelandic along the way.

At the time I was teaching Child Psychology in Iceland, Jean Piaget, a renowned Swiss psychologist was famous for his theory of cognitive development, which states that children think and learn differently than adults, progressing through four universal stages as they actively build understanding through interaction with their world. This concept revolutionized child psychology and education by emphasizing discovery learning. Rather than just discuss the theory, I designed an evening with my students during which they brought kids of differing ages to “play games” (conservation experiments) that illustrated Piaget’s four stages. For the Icelandic event, my 12 students brought 30 of their own and others’ youngsters. Pairs of students mastered each in the series of Piaget’s conservation experiments and one in each pair collected the data that fueled the follow-up discussions.

Tests of Various Types of Conservation		
Type of Conservation	Initial Presentation	Transformation
Volume	Two equal glasses of liquid. 	Pour one into a taller, narrower glass. 
Number	Two equal lines of checkers. 	Increase spacing of checkers in one line. 
Length	Two sticks of equal length. 	Move one stick. 

The youngsters demonstrated beautifully the different stages of thinking. If shown two glasses of water with equal amounts (as shown above), when the student transformed one wide glass by pouring it into a taller glass in front of him or her, a child who could not yet conserve concluded the taller glass was more. They made similar errors in estimates of the checkers and sticks when repositioned and in the other “games” they played. As participants’ ages changed, so did their observations, reflecting their cognitive development.

The best part of the evening for the students was quite simply that seeing was believing as well as to understand that the “errors” their own children made in their comparisons were normal and to be expected.

While I had no sympathy from family and friends during my stay in Bermuda, surprisingly many thought spending a summer in Iceland with its cold, wet weather was a chore. I recently found a letter I sent to my parents in response to their

commiserations. In it I summarized my Iceland summer as follows: “Sure it’s colder most days (50 degrees) and it rains more than at home, but I have no regrets about coming here at all. I’ve seen some fantastic sights, camped by icy mountain streams, timed geysers, buried my feet in smoldering volcanic ash, carefully navigated mud pots, admired beautiful snow-capped mountains and visited more than my share of impressive waterfalls. That’s not a bad record for a place rumored to be inhospitable and stark. I’d come again any day, but especially in summer with all that nice daylight!”

I visited what had been Naval Air Station Keflavik in 2021 and found nothing familiar. NASKEF was closed on 8 September 2006, and its facilities were taken over by the Icelandic Defence Agency as their primary base. In 2011, the agency was then handed over to the Icelandic Coast Guard. Since decommissioning, the air station site was finally redeveloped as housing and commercial development by the Icelandic government.