

Observance Month Spotlight Series: 'Mission Accomplished'

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PANAMA CITY, FL – Naval Support Activity Panama City recognizes Sailors and civilians in a series of articles during special observance months. For the month of February designated as Black History Month, the installation spotlights recently retired Fire Chief James Elston, Command Staff, NSA Panama City.

Elston grew up in Talladega, Alabama and joined the Air Force in 1968. He began and ended his half-century of service in Florida.

"I joined the military and (a career as a firefighter) was one of the options given to me," Elston said. "I thought it would be a neat idea."

He began his training at Eglin Air Force Base immediately after basic training.

After 20 years on active duty, Elston retired as the Deputy Fire Chief aboard Tyndall Air Force Base. From March 1988 to August 1989, he worked as a civilian for Air Force Research.

He was hired at NSA Panama City that August as the Chief Fire Inspector. In December 1993, he was promoted to Fire Chief.

"It was very challenging knowing you were the first black fire chief in the Department of Defense and Navy Region Southeast," Elston claimed.

As a manager, Elston treated everyone with dignity and respect. He strived to work in a diverse fire department. Under his leadership, there were no serious injuries or fatalities and only minimal fire damage.

Elston's motto was all about ensuring his staff returned to their family.

"Everyone goes home at the end of the shift, that's the way they came to work," Elston remarked.

Elston reminisced on the goals he achieved during his career, many of which focused on serving and taking care of his people.

"I was able to acquire a new firehouse and apparatus with associated equipment to protect the mission," Elston added. "I'm proud of that."

In 2015, NSA Panama City Fire Department became the first small engine fire department to receive accreditation.

Elston said there are several challenges that face minority fire chiefs.

"Still today it's very hard for me and blacks to look forward to moving forward knowing you have obstacles to overcome," Elston added. "We thought that was behind us, but it's not. It's hard on minority fire chiefs. We need more equality, but we're just not there yet."

Elston hoped there will be more black fire chiefs in the DOD.

Elston always reminded his employees to take care of their family. His job focused on giving them what they needed, including time off.

“Family is the heartbeat, without family, you have nothing,” Elston explained. “Family is the most important part of my life.”

After 53 years of combined service, he described his retirement on February 3, as real retirement.

“It’s time to do what I want to do,” Elston remarked. “This chapter is open.”

African-American and Black History Month is an annual celebration, which recognizes the significant contributions of African-Americans throughout our nation’s history, through their contributions in arts, entertainment, law, politics, sciences, sports and so much more. In 1976, President Gerald Ford issued the first African-American History Month proclamation, calling upon the Americans to celebrate this observance each February. Since that time, U.S. presidents have issued proclamations to pay tribute to African Americans.

To read more about Black History Month, [click here](#).

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