



“I couldn’t sit still,” Paul Cozza says with a laugh, reflecting on the drive that shaped his career.

Guided by that instinct to keep moving forward, Cozza charted a path from West Point to the U.S. Army, into global logistics, and eventually to North Carolina, where he led the state’s ports through a period of growth and renewed momentum.

Cozza grew up as the youngest of four children, raised with a belief that his destiny was his own to shape. His father, a World War II veteran, instilled in him a respect for service. An older brother who attended West Point made the Academy feel like a natural next step.

“Military service was something that was really endorsed by my family,” Cozza says.

At West Point, Cozza studied aerospace engineering and trained as a helicopter pilot, going on to command an Air Cavalry Platoon. But beyond technical skills and rank, the military taught Cozza that how you treat people, how you build a team, and how you hold to your values under pressure are the things that determine outcomes.

After completing his military service, Cozza moved into the private sector. He started his career at AT&T, but a recruiter’s call later pointed him somewhere unexpected: CSX.

Cozza did not know much about the railroad industry, but CSX owned Sea-Land Service, which was then a world leader in global transportation logistics. “Sea-Land was a great company because they loved to challenge their employees,” he says.

Decades of building expertise across finance, operations, marketing, and sales followed. Business travel took him to more than 65 countries across the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Each new role brought more responsibility, and eventually Cozza landed in a CEO position with a Canadian global supply chain firm.

Then North Carolina called.

Cozza and his wife had a beach house near Wilmington, and when a colleague mentioned the state was searching for someone to lead its ports authority, he took notice. The Port of Wilmington was familiar territory from the outside, but he could see it was not competing to its full potential. Cozza had long questioned why North Carolina’s ports weren’t keeping pace with competitors in neighboring states.

The challenge was clear. So was the appeal.

Cozza was candid with the hiring team about one thing: he could handle the operational side. The political side, navigating the General Assembly, state agencies, and elected officials, would be unfamiliar ground. It turned out to be one of the most rewarding chapters of his career.

When Cozza arrived, the organization needed a reset. “The best way I could describe it is a turnaround situation,” he says. Years of underinvestment left North Carolina’s ports lagging behind competitors in Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Cozza says morale needed a lift, and so did the Ports’ public image.

His first order of business was not growth metrics, but stabilization and culture. He wanted people inside the organization to feel proud of where they worked, and people outside to see a ports authority that was worthy of investment.

The strategy worked. Over six years of Cozza’s leadership, container volumes through the Port of Wilmington increased 25 percent, and general cargo across the ports of Wilmington and Morehead City climbed 58 percent. Profits under Cozza’s leadership exceeded the total from the five preceding decades.

Convinced by the results, the North Carolina General Assembly rewarded the Ports with capital investment for infrastructure improvements. The success was a testament to something Cozza had come to believe is one of North Carolina’s greatest strengths: the willingness of state government and business to pull together in the same direction.

But ask him what he is most proud of, and he will not point to the numbers.

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“The best part for me was meeting the people and businesses around our great state,” he says.

For Cozza, the ports are not just a Wilmington story. Strong port operations support Franklin, the Charlotte region, and every corner of North Carolina that moves goods in or out of the state. Economic development, job creation, and better infrastructure are statewide wins, and he wanted every community in North Carolina to feel the benefits.

Cozza has not slowed down in retirement. He teaches supply chain management at UNC Wilmington, bringing both his global expertise and enthusiasm to students who are mostly seniors. He also coaches senior military personnel through the transition to civilian careers, connecting two of the worlds he knows best.

His advice to companies looking to hire veterans is straightforward: pair veterans with others who have made the same move, support their transition, and trust that the leadership skills military service builds are exactly what organizations need. “Every company I know wants to hire military,” he says. “The question is just how you integrate them well.”

When he is not in the classroom or mentoring the next generation, Cozza spends time with his wife of 38 years, his two daughters, and friends.

Cozza will tell you his career gave him a lot, but what matters most to him now are the relationships he built, the leaders he helped develop, and the knowledge that his work helped make North Carolina a more competitive and connected state.

That spirit of service and citizenship is exactly what has defined Cozza’s career and his impact on North Carolina.