**My Four Years in the Navy**

Recently, my daughter, an Army officer, was tasked with interviewing a military veteran as part of her major’s leadership school. She was to ask whichever veteran she chose a battery of questions. For convenience sake, she chose to interview me. Doing that over-the-phone interview and thinking about my years in the military caused me to recognize a need for more focused thought on the subject, to make sure I had things in the proper order, knew the right dates in which incidents had occurred, and so forth. I decided it might be good to do this in writing, so it would be recorded for my family members to read if they wished, and to just make sure it was all in proper order. I even ended up doing some online research about the ships I served on, and some of the relevant events of the times. The exercise cleared up some of the fuzziness of my own recollections and actually gave me a greater appreciation for my time in the service.

During my time of being a “hippy” and doing drugs constantly, I had an inappropriate relationship with a woman 10 years older than me, and then, when she woke up to the error of her ways, she dumped me. When I was anguished over that break-up, she talked me into “doing something with my life,” and challenged me to join the Navy as I’d sometimes said I’d do. So I enlisted in July, 1974, and spent three months in Basic Training at the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Florida. I think I graduated in September of that year.

From Boot camp, recruits are sent to what’s called an “A School” for training in whatever their “rate” will be, the equivalent of the Army’s MOS. When talking with the recruiter, I had told him I wanted to be a salvage diver, but he told me no one could enlist as such; you had to enter service in another rate, then ask to transfer to dive school after one year. When I inquired as to what rate I should enter as, he told me the Navy needed enginemen (diesel engine mechanics), so I agreed to go there, thinking it would only be temporary. I was sent to Engineman School at Great Lakes Naval Station, near North Chicago, IL. It was 14 weeks long, so maybe I finished in mid-December? I was great at the theoretical phase of training, and got something like a 98.6 GPA, even though during that time I was taking LSD and other drugs and practically high all the time.

One night a friend, high on PCP, tried to throw himself off the sixth floor of our building, and I had to fight three times to save him from that fate. Another time, three of us heard of a large quantity of marijuana, supposedly stored in the trunk of one sailor’s car, so together, we broke into the car, scared of being caught by the police the whole time. Once we got the trunk opened from within the back seat of the car, it turned out the story wasn’t true, and we found nothing!

From A School, I was granted a few days of leave, so I flew to LA to visit a sister and her daughter. While waiting in one of the airport bars, I sort of helped stop a fight between two men, and as a result, everybody bought me, the sailor, a beer. My flight was soon to leave, so I drank many of the beers in a big hurry. As a result, I boarded the plane quite drunk and ended up vomiting all over my uniform before arriving at my destination. Quite an embarrassment, but typical for that period of my life. I arrived in LA reeking of vomit and beer, carrying a walking cane that was actually a marijuana pipe, and a container with a live mouse that had been my pet during the school. Rather an odd-ball, even if I do say so myself!

When those few days of leave were over, I flew from LA to Anchorage and on to an airport near Yokosuka, Japan, to my first duty station. I was picked up by a Navy driver and vehicle and driven 5 hours to where my ship was moored. The USS Benjamin Stoddert, DDG-22, had left Pearl Harbor about a month before and gone first to Chin Hae, South Korea before coming to Japan. I got onboard at night and was shown the compartment where I would sleep and assigned a bunk and locker. According to official records, the destroyer arrived in that port in early December, and remained in Yokosuka for a few days, maybe 4. Each of the evenings, I went on “liberty” alone, not knowing anyone and not having any idea about what to do or where to go. I was glad when we finally went to sea and the petty officer in charge of my division showed me around and told me what my duties would be. That first day I felt fine all day, but then became sea-sick after eating the evening meal and listening to a long talk by the captain of the ship; that was a terrible experience.

However, on the positive side, I remember that when we got underway the first time, I was allowed to be on the fantail, and we saw a snow-capped Mt. Fuji in the distance. I was thrilled to be on a ship at sea for the first time in my life. The ship sailed to Sasebo, Japan next, and stayed there several days. I again went on liberty alone to bars, not knowing anyone or what to do with myself each evening.

From Japan, the ship sailed to Kaohsiung, Taiwan, where we again stayed several days. While there and off duty, I only went to bars. On the final night I bought some barbiturates from another sailor and took one or two capsules, had some drinks, and ended up passing out. I was dragged back aboard ship that night, unconscious, and had to be hauled up the long gangplank stairway on the side of a big repair ship, because my ship was moored to the other side of it. That caused my legs to be all bruised up from banging on the metal steps all the way up. I think I was left on the steel deck of my shop, the “A Gang” shop, to sleep it off. I was still under the influence the next day when I woke up but didn’t get into any trouble, my department head being an alcoholic himself. I suppose he had mercy on me because I was so new.

From Taiwan we sailed to the Philippines, where we put in at Subic Bay and stayed there as the New Year of 1975 began. When you leave the base to go on liberty there, you enter Olongapo City, which is a virtual Disney World of bars, discos, drug dealers and prostitutes. Records say we were there until 7 January, so that means we were there for 2-3 weeks of liberty and some repairs. While our ship was in Subic Bay, I got to spend one whole day in the bay as boat crew. Our ship went out to sea, but they left us for some reason (I think it was because our captain had to be ashore, and we were to pick him up in the evening.) All I know is, we got to swim and just cruise around all day, as if we were the owners of a big luxury boat on vacation.

The ship left the Philippines for Kenya, East Africa on 7 January. Before leaving port, our supply officer and staff loaded over 100 cases of Olympia beer and locked them up in a storage compartment whose entry hatch was located in a berthing compartment where some of the crew slept. Word of this spread rapidly, and some of us were quite interested to know who was going to get that beer! Our ship sailed for days in heavy ship traffic through the Straits of Malacca (one of the busiest maritime transit points in the whole world) and into the Indian Ocean. We were at sea for 53 uninterrupted days, which eventually seemed like eternity to us. I saw even best friends get in fistfights before that time ended, just because of the stress and boredom of living on a small steel ship in such close proximity for so long.

Our guided missile destroyer, the USS Benjamin Stoddert, along with the nuclear cruiser USS Long Beach and various other vessels, was part of the first nuclear aircraft carrier USS Enterprise’s battle group. We were cruising through the Indian Ocean region to show the flag and counter a growing Soviet presence. Occasionally during the cruise, we did see Soviet vessels not that far distant from us. The Enterprise was carrying F-14 Tomcat fighters for the first time on this cruise, and they, along with various other aircraft, engaged in practically constant flight operations over India, Pakistan, and other nations of the region. One thing that surprised me was that during this whole time, the Indian Ocean was almost always extremely calm with virtually no waves at all. It seemed as calm as the Central Florida lakes I’d so often fished on back home.

As the battle group proceeded west, we crossed the equator on 15 January and I and hundreds of my fellow crewmen were initiated as “shellbacks” (sailors who’ve crossed the equator), in a day-long, very arduous and ridiculous “ceremony” in which we were beaten with sections of fire hose, sprayed with salt water, and subjected to all sorts of other humiliations. This has been a Navy tradition for generations, going back, I believe to the 18th century. Those who went through it were given simple certificates. I later decoupaged mine and it hangs on a wall in my home.

When we got to Kenya, a cruise ship (I believe it was the Queen Mary II), preceded us into the harbor and delayed our entry. The scenery on the coast was everything I’d imagined Africa to be. While in Mombasa, we were allowed to go ashore when off duty for only a few days, the records say from 5-9 November 1975. Then our short break was over, and we were back at sea once again. In Mombasa, I only went to bars rather than seeing the natural sights. I even missed a special day-long excursion offered to our crew of a beautiful wildlife park, from which, I was told, Mt. Kilimanjaro could be seen, along with the typical African big-game animals. To my deep regret in hindsight, I had no interest in such things at that time. Instead, I found that marijuana was abundant and cheap in Mombasa, so I purchased half a paper grocery bag full for a ridiculously low price. With the help of some friends, I was able to smuggle it aboard the ship in life jackets on the ship’s boat.

Soon after we put out to sea from Mombasa, word came that there had been some sort of natural disaster on the island of Madagascar. As a result, our whole carrier group was ordered to steam there to provide aid. We set off at flank speed, but the nuclear carrier and the nuclear cruiser USS Long Beach quickly left us behind and got to the island days long before the rest of the ships. As a result, they provided whatever aid was needed and we were ordered to turn back before we ever got there.

As we were returning to the Philippines, several of us conceived of the idea of breaking into the storeroom where we knew that beer was and getting some of it. We’d found out the reason it had been brought on the cruise. It was thought we would have some ship to ship softball games in Mombasa and the beer would be brought out then. When these games never came about, the beer was left untouched, a completely unacceptable outcome to our way of thinking! So in the middle of one 12am – 4am watch, several of us picked apart the hinges of the storeroom hatch and were able drop down into the room and pass several cases of beer up to friends above, who quickly transported them to the captain’s “gig,” the navy term for his personal transport. We all climbed up the davits and got onboard the boat and inside its enclosed cabin, then popped open some of the warm beer, and began guzzling it as fast as we could. However, we’d only drunk maybe one beer each when a loud and gruff voice called to us from below the boat.

It was the ship’s master-at-arms, telling us he knew who we were and what we were doing. We were to file out and bring everything with us. We all did so, fearing the worst. But when we’d assembled on the deck below, the master-at-arms was merciful. He scolded us, told us we *could* receive a severe punishment, but because we’d been at sea a long time, he was going to let us off the hook and pretend it had never happened. We breathed a sigh of relief, surrendered all the beer, and went to our quarters.

The ship put in at Singapore on our way back to the Philippines, for more R & R. Before allowing us to go ashore, our captain gave us a severe warning of the dangers of breaking the law in Singapore. There was no agreement with the government there to turn sailors who committed offenses back over to American authorities.

We were told the penalty for drug possession (any kind of illegal substance) was a certain number of strokes with what was called a “rotan.” We had no idea what that meant at the time, and we just snickered about it. It wasn’t till years later that I heard news about this brutal form of punishment, also known as “caning,” and found out how serious it was. You might remember the story that was all over the news some years back of a young American who had keyed somebody’s car in Singapore and was sentenced to be beaten with this type of cane. It turns out it was such a huge deal that the parents of the young man begged the court for mercy, and the news media really emphasized the barbarity of this form of punishment. It turns out this “rotan” or cane is some sort of bamboo rod, and the beating is carried out by a martial-arts master. Apparently the punishment can be so severe that it sometimes takes weeks or months to recover from it!

In our ignorance and stupidity, we had no fear of this at all, not realizing how drastic and practically medieval a form of torture/punishment it is. Ignoring the risk, we both purchased drugs and even smuggled a small quantity of opium tar onto the ship. We were never caught, thank God. All my free time was spent in the bars of Singapore, but one night, a friend and I purchased some marijuana from an Indian guy who was a Hare Krishna devotee (he had posters and such on his walls). We smoked in his place and he told us about “Lord” Krishna, then we returned to the ship on a rickshaw. Our rickshaw driver was very proud of the fact that his rickshaw had a boom box in the back. He asked if we’d like to hear music on our ride, intending, no doubt, to charge more for the entertainment. When we agreed, he enthusiastically got off his bicycle at the front of the rig, to go back behind us and turn on the music. Unfortunately, my companion and myself, being Caucasian, were much larger and heavier than his usual fares, so when he got off up front, the rickshaw lifted up into the air and dumped us unceremoniously onto the pavement! The coolie was embarrassed, and so were we, but we did end up getting a good laugh out of it.

Our ship returned to the Philippines on 28 February, and according to an online record of the cruise, we were there for a bit more than 4 weeks of liberty and repairs. I had various Filipina “girlfriends” while in Subic Bay. I spent my off time (and some on-duty time) smoking pot, drinking a lot, and once I even received a “package from home” which contained a batch of brownies with mescaline sprinkled in the icing. I was responsible for getting an entire duty section high on a hallucinogenic drug that night! I was proud of that at the time, but as I think of what I did now, I realize how very stupid and dangerous it was to put an entire Navy duty section out of commission in that way. What if there had been some kind of emergency?!

Sometime later, my hippy background caused me to become very disillusioned with the Navy and to believe what we were doing was morally wrong somehow. Such thinking led me to decide I was going to “jump ship” one afternoon in broad daylight, literally jumping the few feet from the deck of our ship to the pier and running away. My department petty officer heard what I was planning and tried to talk me out of it, but I wouldn’t listen, and I jumped. I had a Filipina girlfriend who was from some rural part of the Philippines, and my hope was to run away with her and live what I imagined would be an idyllic life, living in a hut in the tropical jungle, working the rice patties with her father’s water buffalo and paddling an outrigger canoe over the crystal-clear tropical sea. Of course, I had no visa for the country, couldn’t speak Tagalog, knew nothing of the culture or the dangers or risks; in short, had no realistic idea of what I was doing! But such are the foolish notions of 20-year-olds!

As I ran from the ship, I expected military police to come for me before I got off the base, but they didn’t. I made it out and went to this girlfriend’s house, where I stayed for only a night or two, I’m not sure. But in one of those nights, there came a loud pounding on the door, and it was the MPs! They’d come to arrest me. I found out later the girl had turned me in for a $20 reward, enough to pay her rent for a month! I came out with blue jeans on and no shirt or shoes. I was treated rather roughly, pushed against a wall and handcuffed for the first time in my life, then thrown into a panel truck, taken to the station, and locked in a cell. Several hours later, a petty officer from my ship came to get me and take me back to the ship. I don’t remember what punishment I was given for this, but it didn’t cause me to get a dishonorable discharge. Once again, the grace and mercy of God!

We left the Philippines and sailed for Vung Tau, Vietnam on 5 April, where we joined up with an Amphibious Ready Group with which we worked for about two weeks. On the day of our arrival, as we were steaming slowly into the Mekong Delta region, we noticed the water was brown from the enormous river, even though we were still at sea. Another sailor and I were ordered to fuel the ship’s motor whaleboat. We lugged the diesel fuel in five-gallon “jerry cans” from somewhere below, up several decks and outside to where the whaleboat was stored in its davits. As we were bringing these five-gallon cans out on deck, my companion, a farm boy named Hochhalter, looked over the side and in shock reported we were slowly passing a floating dead body! We sent word to the bridge, and the officer of the deck turned our ship around.

As an engineman, I was part of the boat crew lowered over the side to investigate this body we had seen. With our helmets and lifejackets on, we motored over to where the body was floating on very calm, flat waters. As we got within about 10 feet of the body, there was a terrible stench. We had been told if the body was American, to recover it, but to be careful of booby traps, since the VC had been known to booby-trap bodies to maim those recovering them. But there was no sign of any such trickery. The man was floating face-down and was obviously in a military uniform. He also had very blond hair, which moved about as he bobbed up and down. That let us know right away he was Caucasian and thus, probably an American.

One of our crew used a boat hook, a long pole with a hook on the end, to grab his clothing and flip the man’s rigid body over. It was rather difficult for him to achieve this, but he eventually succeeded. As the body flipped, we could all see there was no longer a face. Where the face had been, there was only a dark open crater, the rest obviously having been eaten away by sea creatures, and perhaps having been blasted open by some sort of catastrophe. The jaw was still attached and flopping around loosely. We could see the man’s dog tags hanging around his neck and a wallet in the front thigh pocket. One of our crew grabbed the dog tag chain and broke it, saving the tags. Another used a knife to cut open the front pocket so I could retrieve the wallet. When I opened it, I found his ID cards and there were photos of what were probably the man’s wife and kids.

His uniform indicated he was a US Airforce sergeant, and a round patch said C-5A Galaxy. By online search, I recently found out that the man was staff sergeant Donald Dionne, USAF, and I learned other details I never knew at the time. It turns out that Dionne was indeed a crew member on a C-5A Galaxy, the largest troop carrier plane the US has. He was part of an airlift of orphans from Vietnam as the South fell to the communists. Shortly after the plane took off, some sort of hydraulics failure on the aircraft caused a hatch to blow open in flight. As a result, he was sucked out of the aircraft and presumably died on impact with the waters far below. The incident occurred on 4 April, 1975, and made the news. Of course, none of us knew all of this at the time. This information can be accessed at <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/last-ship-from-vietnam-interview-with-cmdr-jonathan-malay-usn-ret/> (accessed 1/1/2020)

We had brought a body bag, so several of us had to reach over the side and grip his body to pull him aboard. I grabbed a leg and saw his combat boots still laced up. We pulled him aboard with difficulty and put his stiffened body into the bag, then zipped it around him, having to push his head down several times to get it to stay inside. When we returned to the ship, we were hoisted up in the davits, then lowered his body over the side to other crewmen waiting below. They then carried it to one of the ship’s refrigerated storage areas.

As I was returning to my quarters, I passed our captain, Commander Peter Hekman, in the passageway. He told me he realized that this task of recovering a dead body was a difficult one for me and all of us, but of course, it had to be done, and was important for his family’s sake. I thanked him for his words of appreciation, said yes sir, and went back to my regular duties.

We steamed up and down the coast of South Vietnam for some time. I didn’t know what we were doing at the time, but my online search informed me our primary mission was to “cover” the Military Sealift Command’s operations, assisting in the evacuation of Vietnamese citizens. These evacuations were carried out by helicopters as well as ships or boats.

A little detail I found interesting was that, as we cruised around this area, there were times when we could see literally hundreds of coiled sea snakes floating on the surface of the waters. We were told they are highly venomous.

Another interesting and scary thing that happened during this time is that we were told the NVA had taken over a base where US F-4 fighter bombers had been stored, so we were to be on alert in the case that one of our *own* planes might come to attack us. Fortunately, that threat never materialized. This was the only period during which I ever received combat pay. I remember we could mail letters without a stamp for about a month. So technically, I served during the Vietnam war, though it supposedly ended “officially” in 1973, and my service was quite minimal and hardly dangerous.

During our weeks with the amphibious group, we chanced to be operating near an amphibious carrier, often called a “jeep carrier.” If my memory serves me, this was the USS Okinawa, LPH-3. The ship was off our port side, and there were various other amphibious ships around. I happened to be on deck one afternoon when there were lots of helicopters buzzing around, both US and Vietnamese. These were all involved in evacuations in the final days of the war. One of the latter radioed the Blue Ridge requesting permission to land. It was carrying South Vietnamese army personnel. For some reason, the carrier waved them off, saying permission to land was denied. However, these desperate people ignored those orders and simply came in and put their Huey down on the deck of the ship! All onboard got off the helo as quickly as they could, for they were escaping for their lives. But just as quickly, members of the ship’s flight deck crew hurried to push the helicopter over the side of the ship and into the water! It hit the brown water with a big splash, then sank out of sight in a matter of seconds. I was amazed and remember wishing they’d have been able to give *me* that helicopter so I could sell it to somebody! It turns out this kind of thing happened several times that day, and images of these incidents became sort of an iconic picture of the desperation of those times.

As we continued to maneuver outside the Mekong Delta with other US ships, orders came for us to escort a US landing ship (of the type I myself would serve on a few years later) on a mission to supposedly rescue hundreds of Vietnamese civilians fleeing the advancing forces of the communists. However, when we arrived at the pickup point on shore (we were told later), it turned out that rather than civilians, the people awaiting rescue were South Vietnamese army units. It was against US policy to rescue such units. As a result, the landing ship backed off and turned around, and so did we. Apparently, there was a great deal of chaos, and ships had to start and stop operations of this sort many times before it was all over.

According to online records, sometime after this, on 3 May, we were ordered to sail west into the Gulf of Thailand, toward Cambodia. We’d received word that a South Vietnamese navy vessel was in trouble in that area. We arrived at the craft’s location, and ended up rescuing 19 people from it, including a woman and 4 children. I remember that later, while on watch one night as I was walking through the ship, I saw flip-flops carefully arranged outside one of the officer’s compartments. (The Vietnamese remove their footwear at the door of their dwellings.) So I saw the father’s pair, then the smaller mother’s pair, and then four little pairs of the children’s flip-flops, all side-by-side on the deck. This must have been one of the officers of the gunboat and his family, who for that reason, were allowed to stay inside the ship in better quarters.

Later that same day, we received a call from a Korean fishing vessel which had picked up 158 Vietnamese refugees. (I learned that the vessel was Korean later by reading about it online.) We drew close to the vessel which was dead in the water at the time and wallowing with the swells. I was off duty and could watch as we approached. Vietnamese people were all over the decks of the vessel and the waters were littered with possessions they had been throwing overboard to lighten their craft. We drew near, and our crew helped them to transfer directly onto our deck from theirs. Our captain told us we were not to allow them belowdecks, so the deck hands had to rig up shelters for them all over the after part of our ship. They did this by creating a network of ropes or cables stretched from the 5-inch gun mount and other deck equipment, then fastened to the ship’s railings. Metal buckets were brought up for them to use as latrines. I believe our cooks were charged with making them food and bringing it up to them.

We were told to avoid contact with them, but that was practically impossible on such a small ship. I remember getting a roll of South Vietnamese money from one in exchange for cigarettes or some such thing. His money no longer had any value other than as a souvenir of a fallen country. I learned online that our captain took a real risk in helping these people, because he was ordered to do no more than give them provisions and leave them to make do the best they could, but he disregarded his orders when he saw their craft couldn’t remain afloat much longer. His concern saved many lives. I also learned online that my captain retired years later as a 3-star admiral. He was certainly good to me and I’m sure he was a fine officer.

We eventually set out for the Philippines to take these refugees to safety, and we offloaded them to an island in Subic Bay where they were to live while being processed. As we set out, we were accompanied by a myriad of fleeing South Vietnamese boats and ships of every sort imaginable, many of which were in terrible running order. The boats were spread out all over the surface of the sea, many of them belching smoke and barely able to run. This was their desperate, last-ditch effort to flee the oncoming invading forces of the communist North, and I got to witness it. So it was that the USS Benjamin Stoddert, DDG-22, thus officially became “the last US warship to leave Vietnam.”

We remained in the Philippines for two weeks, and either on the way there or sometime afterwards, I was busted (in a surprise search) for possession of a marijuana pipe and possibly some marijuana too (I can’t remember for sure.) As a result, I was sent to Captain’s Mast, the Navy’s form of non-judicial punishment. I was given 45 days extra duty, 45 days restriction to the ship, a $450 fine, and I was reduced from E-3 to E-1 again. This was a very unpleasant time for me, as I wasn’t allowed to go ashore for all that time.

Immediately after Captain’s Mast, the captain sent word for me to come to his personal quarters. I was worried about that, for sure! But when I got there, he said he’d looked at my records, and my scores at the A school put me in the top 98% of the Navy, according to him. He asked why I was wasting my time and talent smoking pot? What did I need? Thinking that I must be a mechanical type, he offered to get me manuals about the ship’s boats or whatever else I might want, in order to learn more and become a better sailor. I thanked him and was rather awed. Of course, I wasn’t really a mechanic, so I wasn’t interested in manuals or anything of that sort. When I returned to my quarters, my druggie companions pooh-poohed everything he’d said anyway, and told me to ignore it; it was just manipulation! Sadly, I listened to them and let their bad influence affect my thinking.

Years later, I realized that I *should’ve* asked to be sent to dive school, but unfortunately, that thought never occurred to me at the time. I also learned that my mother had corresponded with my captain, who had told her he was a Christian man and would pray for her son.

Shortly thereafter, we sailed to Hong Kong for some R & R. While there, I was assigned as boat crew for the captain’s “gig.” One day our captain ordered us to take him across Hong Kong harbor for some event or other. The waters of the harbor were quite choppy that day, so the boat really took a beating from the waves on the way. We made it over to the captain’s destination and dropped him off, but that rough ride caused a serious problem. It caused our water-muffled exhaust system to come apart where two sections of it were joined together with a rubber joint and hose clamps. The exhaust line takes the engine’s exhaust and mixes it with a fine mist of sea water as it exits the boat, muting the engine noise somewhat and making the exhaust cooler. But because it was long and made several turns within the confines of the engine compartment, it couldn’t be made of one piece. Having to connect several different sections in such a way was a definite weakness in the design.

When we returned to the ship, a huge barge was tied up along the side, blocking our access to the boat’s davits. I think it might have been a fuel barge. As we drew close, the officer of the deck shouted to us that the barge would be there for a few hours, so we should just go to the nearest pier and tie up. We could wait there until our way was clear to be brought back onboard. We agreed to do this, but before we left, I shouted back to the officer of the deck about our exhaust pipe problem. At the time however, it seemed a minor thing and no cause for concern. The officer acknowledged my report, but from his perspective it was just a minor detail. Even though I was an engineman and a member of the boat’s crew, I didn’t foresee the trouble this problem could cause, so we went happily on our way over to the pier.

I say happily, because for me, being sent to the pier was great. Since I was restricted to the ship, I couldn’t go ashore in Hong Kong or drink. This would be my chance! There was a restaurant right by the pier, and we’d likely be tied up there for hours, so now I could finally get myself intoxicated. We motored slowly the few hundred yards over, secured our boat to the pier, and then all four of us went inside the restaurant. Having transported our ship’s captain, we were all dressed in our dress-white summer uniforms. We each ordered beers, and while the other three crew members went to the bathroom, I found a table and happily started guzzling my beer.

I’d hardly taken more than a few sips however, when a military policeman came in, looked at me, saw my Navy uniform, then asked if it was my boat that was tied up to the pier. When I answered in the affirmative, he proceeded to tell me that I’d better get out to the boat right away, because it seemed to be sinking! I thought he was surely pulling my leg but headed out to take a look, “just in case.” As soon as I got outside, I saw to my horror that he was right, the boat was already filled with water to the point the choppy harbor waves were washing over the gunwales! Ignoring the fact that my uniform was sparkling white and there was black oil floating up from our boat’s bilges, I leapt onboard into water up beyond my knees, grabbed a bucket or something, and started bailing water out as fast as I could. It only took a minute or two however, for me to see I was getting nowhere; the boat continued going down. All I could do was give up bailing and make sure we had enough lines securing the boat to the pier so that at least, it wouldn’t sink all the way to the bottom.

Meanwhile, I could hear an alarm going off on our ship out in the harbor, and soon, the ship’s other boat came in bringing a repair crew to help us. They tied up to the pier and leaped into action, firing up a gasoline-powered P-250 pump, and inserting its suction hose into the oily water swirling around inside our boat. But though the pump was working well, blasting a torrent of water out of its outlet hose into the harbor, the boat was still going down. It suddenly dawned on me that the exhaust pipe that passed from the engine compartment out to the water, was now a five-inch opening into the sea, allowing water to pour in as fast as it could be pumped out. Once I understood what the problem was, I grabbed a conical wooden plug, laid down in the filthy waters in my dress uniform, and shoved that plug into the end of the exhaust pipe. Once that was done, the water could be pumped out, the boat was raised and towed to the ship, then hoisted up in the davits.

The captain’s gig certainly wouldn’t be able to pick up our captain that day, and in fact, was out of commission until we could pull its engine and replace it with a new one. But amazingly, I wasn’t punished, for the simple reason that I *had* told the officer of the deck about the exhaust problem, though I certainly *hadn’t* made it plain that this would make the boat sink! (That had never occurred to him or to me.) I was very relieved that no punishment came my way as a result of this incident, though, as boat engineer, I was obviously to blame. In hindsight, I can see that I was often granted grace instead of the negative consequences my actions deserved.

We eventually returned to the Philippines briefly, then put to sea on 9 May for the return trip to our home port of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. I remember that we sailed through the thousands of little Philippines islands literally for days. Then we stopped at Guam, where I think we refueled. From there, we steamed to Midway Island and some of us were allowed to go ashore but go no further than the immediate vicinity of the pier. We quickly discovered the base had machines that dispensed beer instead of soda. It didn’t take us long to find every beer machine in the area and empty them completely.

Another thing I remember about Midway Island was the “gooney birds,” aka albatrosses. They had been flying around our ship for at least a day as we were approaching the island (and also accompanied us on our way out), and they were everywhere we walked there on the base. They fly very gracefully, but have earned the name “goony” because they always crash land very clumsily. We found we could walk right up to them, but it wasn’t a good idea. When I tried it, one really whacked me on the hand with his big and very hard bill!

We finally arrived off Pearl Harbor in the early morning hours, days later, on 21 May. I was on deck just after dawn, and I remember how beautiful it was seeing Diamond Head, the distinctive volcanic mountain which is the trademark of Honolulu. I ended up living in beautiful Hawaii for nine months. For the first part of that time, the ship was in and out of harbor frequently, conducting various drills and training exercises. We bombarded an island not far from Maui for three days straight with our five-inch guns and saw literally thousands of dolphins all over the surface of the sea.

Then the Benjamin Stoddert was placed in dry-dock on 1 Oct. and spent several months there in routine refurbishment. We lived in barracks during that time. In Hawaii, I bought a ’65 Mustang convertible (white), and a 750 Yamaha motorcycle, and enjoyed body-surfing and traveling around the island. However, in spite of all there was to do there and the beauty of the place, my use of drugs, marijuana, and alcohol only got worse and became known to many on the ship. As a result, and due to some very remarkable circumstances, I ended up being eventually sent to US Navy Drug Rehabilitation. This required that I first spend some time in Tripler Army Hospital, there in Honolulu. But then I was flown halfway around the world to a Navy base near Jacksonville, Florida. While going through the three-month program, I became a Christian, which enabled me to truly give up the use of all illegal drugs. The direction of my life, including my Navy life, changed drastically.

When my time in rehab came to an end, I was called to appear before a review board of high-ranking officers whose task it was to determine whether or not I was fit to continue in the service. I was able to tell them how my life had been changed, which seemed to impact them significantly. It was decided that I could return to the fleet instead of being discharged, so I was sent first to the base in Orlando, Florida, where I was assigned various work detail duties to fill the time until other orders could be processed for me.

I eventually received new orders and was sent to join the crew of USS Francis Marion, LPA-249, a so-called “attack transport,” sometime in the Fall of ’76. It was actually a refitted freighter that carried large “mike boats,” landing craft for carrying Marines in amphibious assaults. The ship was in dry-dock in Baltimore, Maryland, so I ended up having two periods in dry-dock in a four-year enlistment, one in Hawaii and one in Baltimore, which is not something most would experience or want to experience! When the ship was finally seaworthy, we went out for a couple of weeks to test everything out and provide training for the crew. At some point we also sailed to Newport, Rhode Island in the middle of winter to pick up the ship’s compliment of “mike boats.” As an engineman, I served as boat crew on one of those boats and remember how freezing it was as we rode them out to where the Francis Marion was moored and big cranes loaded them aboard, one-by-one. Our ship then returned to its regular port in Norfolk, Virginia.

My time on the Francis Marion was short. If I remember correctly, we only went to sea for a very few brief excursions, then were sent to the Caribbean Sea for a month or so. But when we returned to Norfolk, I was allowed to go on leave, so I drove back to my home in Orlando, Florida to be with my parents and other family members. One day while on leave, I was riding a horse my parents allowed to be boarded on their property for its owner. As I galloped up a dirt road, the horse spotted a car coming about ¼ mile away and suddenly bolted under some trees, knocking me off on a low-hanging branch. I flipped through the air and landed on my head. There was a flash of shock and pain, and I thought I’d broken my neck. My father, who’d been working in a nearby field, saw what had happened and came to my aid. With a neighbor’s help, he loaded me onto his pickup truck and took me to the Navy hospital in Orlando. Fortunately, my neck wasn’t injured; I just had an AC separation in my right shoulder. I went through a surgery for it and had to rehabilitate there for some 3 months. As a result, my time on the Francis Marion came to an unexpected end and I received orders to report to a different ship, my third in a four-year enlistment.

I was now assigned to the USS Newport, LST-1179, also home-ported in Little Creek Virginia, near Norfolk. After some time aboard, during which we made various trips to sea for varying lengths of time, we were sent to the Caribbean again for the month of June, 1977. I think we were originally to go to Guantanamo, Cuba, but an onboard fire caused that part of the trip to be canceled. We did go to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, and then to Vieques Island, where our Marine complement went ashore for three weeks of exercises while we remained anchored offshore. I remember that some of the crew had brought fishing equipment, and they fished every day during those weeks. I believe one of our radiomen had brought his own portable stove, on which he ended up frying some of the fish and eating them onboard. Later, we proceeded to St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands, which was amazingly beautiful, before returning to Little Creek.

While in St. Croix, I remember a few things of note. First, they sold marijuana there, and I ended up falling to that temptation, though I was now a Christian and knew better. I bought a bag and smoked it alone, not wanting anyone else in the crew to know, because I had told all of them of my Christian experience. One night I came back aboard quite high, intending to avoid being seen by anyone and just go to my bunk, draw the curtain, and go to sleep. However, when I got below in my compartment, some other crew members were there, and two of them got into an argument. Suddenly, they rose to fight one another in that close space. But one of them pulled out a big Buck knife, opening the blade with a very pronounced click. The other, seeing this threat, immediately grabbed a 3-foot chain from a nearby hatch cover and wrapped it around his right hand, swinging the rest as a weapon. This was a very serious and frightening moment, which could’ve had very serious consequences for one or both of these young men. I was high, but I was still a Christian, and I didn’t want to see them do this. Without a moment’s thought or hesitation, I stepped in between them, extending my arms toward both, and just said, “No guys, don’t do this!” I’m sure that deep down, neither really wanted to, but to save face, they may have felt they had no choice. Fortunately, what I did gave them the chance to back off without looking like cowards. Others also intervened at that point.

Some might think that a very brave or very foolish move on my part, and looking back, I realize it truly was! Things could’ve gone very wrong for me, and either one of them or both could have hurt me instead of the original opponent! Fortunately, they didn’t do that, and the incident came to an end. I wasn’t being brave, because I wasn’t even afraid. Of course, I was under the influence of pot. Some of the other guys standing there began talking about what had almost happened, and they said they were glad I’d done what I had. But then, as they looked at me, it was obvious I was high! One of them snickered and said, “Hoyt, look at you! You’re high, aren’t you?!” I realized I’d been exposed, so I just quickly turned around and went to my bunk. I knew I hadn’t heard the end of this episode though.

For the next several days, I continued to smoke pot at night and stay away from the rest of the crew when I did. But God really worked on my conscience, and I felt very guilty. Finally, I made the choice I needed to make. I decided to give up the marijuana again as I knew God would want me to. But I chose to do so in a strange way. Rather than simply throwing it away, I decided to give it to the men I knew who smoked it, and to admit my failure. I knew where they tended to hide and smoke when the ship was at sea, so I got my bag of pot and headed there one afternoon. I opened the hatch and walked in, and sure enough, there was a group of men who were obviously there to smoke pot. They looked at me with a grin and asked what I was doing there? Did I want a joint? I answered no, I thought I’d give them some pot instead! They were shocked but took the bag from me with a smirk. I turned on my heel and walked out.

Later that night, I was on watch in the engine room alone in a little sound-proof compartment. Suddenly, the sound-proof door swung open, and one of the men who’d been in that room smoking came in to talk to me. “Did you bring that pot to us in order to reach me for God somehow?” “No,” I admitted, “I just knew it was wrong for me, and thought you guys could take it off my hands.” He seemed to be quite impressed or impacted by what I’d done, that I admitted I’d smoked pot, that I’d sinned in my own estimation, but that I’d repented of it and made the decision to quit again. I don’t know that what I did was right. I probably should’ve just thrown the stuff out. But I do think the way I handled that episode might have been used by God to reach that young man, my shipmate. Anyway, I kept away from the pot for the rest of my time in the Navy, except for one other episode later, when I fell into it again briefly. It had been my way of life for about 5 ½ years, and old habits don’t die easily.

Be that as it may, the ship returned from the Caribbean to Little Creek. For the next several months, we followed a rather sporadic schedule of going out to sea and returning to port for differing but mostly brief lengths of time.

On one such excursion (in February of ’78), I was serving 12-hour watches, in which I and another sailor took turns being on duty for 12 hours at a time, then being off for an equal period. Because of this schedule, we were somewhat separate from the rest of the crew and had little interaction with any of them. The rest of the people in my division weren’t aware of what the two of us were doing, or when. On one of my off-duty periods, I was asleep in my bunk during the day, with my curtain drawn. But I was awakened by a loud bang and then our engines went offline (we were powered by 6 huge locomotive-sized diesel engines.) When the engines go offline, all the normal noises of a powered ship at sea; the noise of the main engines, all the ventilators blowing, and all the other various motors and systems that normally function, are suddenly silenced. All of a sudden, you can hear sounds you never ordinarily hear, like the sound of waves slapping against the hull.

I awoke to this strange silence and the sound of the waves. I could also hear men shouting and running on the steel decks above my compartment. Then I heard a sound like an outboard motor. It was all very unusual, and I pondered what the meaning of these strange and unfamiliar sounds could be, especially that sound of an outboard motor. We had no outboard motors on the ship! Suddenly I realized what it had to be – it was the sound of one of our portable, emergency P-250 pumps, the same kind used to pump the water out of our captain’s gig in Hong Kong. Hmmm, I thought. That’s strange; I wonder why they’re running one of those pumps? We only use them in emergencies…

Since I was now fully awake and hadn’t showered after my watch, I thought I’d take a shower, so I got out of my bunk in my underwear, opened my locker, and got my towel and bathroom kit. I put on flip-flops and headed to the head (Navy terminology for the bathroom/shower room.) As I was heading up the stairs out of my compartment, I almost bashed my head into the heavy hatch that had been secured over the opening. This was only closed during general quarters or battle stations. I thought, what in the world is happening? Why is this hatch shut? Are we at general quarters, and I wasn’t told?! (All crew members, without exception, must report to their battle station when that status is ordered, no matter what watch they may be serving.)

Right at that moment, the ship began to list, to lean toward one side. All of a sudden, all of this incoming information clicked in my mind, and I realized something was very seriously wrong! Our ship was obviously taking on water to list in such a way and for pumps to be running and hatches to be secured. It seemed I wouldn’t be taking a shower after all!

I got dressed and found out very quickly that we *were* at battle stations, but no one had awakened me, so I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. If our ship had sunk, no one would ever have told me, and the first I’d have known of it would’ve been when the icy waters surged over me in the darkness as the ship sank somewhere in the Atlantic off North Carolina! It turned out that a routine flooding of the ship’s ballast tanks had turned into a major disaster because some crew members, in performing maintenance on major valves that connected those tanks, had failed to tell others the valves were no longer working, while at the same time, others had left a 24” inspection plate into the tanks open. As a result, when the tanks in the after portion of the ship filled, the water then ran forward and blasted into the hull of the ship through this opening that had not been secured. Sailors who discovered this tried desperately to seal up the opening, even attempting to cram a mattress into it, but the cold ocean water blasted in with far too much force for them to be able to accomplish their goal. As a result, the Newport took on 24 feet of sea water in her main engine room (completely immersing the main engines there) and was really in danger of sinking.

Had it not been for an ocean-going salvage tug, another Navy ship, that happened to be sailing in the vicinity, our ship might have gone down. But that tug was able to get to us on time, come alongside, and hoist a massive diesel-powered pump as big as our main engines onto our decks. Even this powerful pump was just barely able to hold its own against the incoming waters and keep us from sinking deeper until we were able to return to port in Little Creek. Once there, divers were able to go into the water and seal up the 24” opening and we could then pump out all the water and restore the ship. But before that could all happen, we as the crew had to be at general quarters for, I believe, about 24 hours straight. I remember that the cooks made us sandwiches or something and brought them around to feed us as we stayed at our stations. This was really quite an experience for all of us. I sure was glad I wasn’t responsible for the fiasco this time!

When the Newport was again all squared away and seaworthy, we were sent on a “Med Cruise” for six months, from February through August of ‘78. For this cruise, we took on some 360 Marines from Elizabeth City, NC, with their amphibious landing craft and a contingent of Sea Bees, the construction unit of the USN. We crossed the Atlantic and came into port in Rota, Spain for a few days.

From there we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and proceeded to a deserted place on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, where we did what the Newport was designed for. We used a floating pontoon bridge that had been chained to the sides of the ship to bridge the gap from the beach to our ship. Then our Marine contingent, with their tanks, trucks, artillery pieces, and amphibious vehicles, were able to drive out from the hollow interior of our ship and onto the shore. They spent some days or weeks in exercises in the desert of that country. We were told that some scenes from Star Wars were supposedly filmed in that same area.

Later, we took those Marines back aboard, along with the bridge sections, and sailed to Florence, Italy, where we enjoyed some days of liberty. We also spent time in Naples, from which some of us took a train to Rome for a tour. Being a Christian now, I spent my off-duty hours in far more positive ways than I had in my earlier years, sight-seeing, eating out in restaurants, and going to Christian ministry centers whenever possible.

Later, the ship was sent to the coast of Greece, then to Crete, where we participated in various exercises with NATO ships. We also got to spend time in both Mallorca and Menorca, the Balearic Islands, which were absolutely idyllic and beautiful. My time in the service ran out in July of ’78, just about the time we got back to Naples. I had to “check out” from the ship, getting my paperwork signed off by everyone from the XO on down. Then I was flown to Rota, where I spent a day or two, then on to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for out-processing. I spent some 7 or 8 days just reporting in every day, doing some sweeping or other chores for an hour or so, and then having the rest of my time off to tour the city. I was glad to get out, but at the same time, glad to have spent the four years seeing the world and experiencing military life.

I was prompted to write this memoir of my Navy time by my daughter Allison, a major in the US Army. She interviewed me as part of her required leadership training as a new major. Recollecting my experiences caused me to want to think more clearly about them and do some research to make sure of my accuracy regarding the dates when these things occurred. I tend to not remember *when* things happened or in what order, while clearly remembering details of *what* happened.

I ended up learning a lot of details I hadn’t known at the time, like what was going on in the bigger picture of our ship’s activities in Vietnam, for example, or how our captain risked his career by saving the Vietnamese refugees, or why it was necessary to go to the Indian ocean, or how close we came to being the ship chosen for the Mayaguez incident in May of ’75. (If you don’t know about this incident, you should look it up in Wikipedia at least. Many died in the episode, but their sacrifice is hardly remembered.)

I discovered in my research that the Benjamin Stoddert ended up sinking in the Pacific Ocean while being towed to a scrap yard in 2001, and the whole episode almost cost the lives of the crew towing her. I was able to download a short story about it written by the tugboat captain. I also hadn’t known some of the history of the Francis Marion or the Newport. Both made the news at different times, the Newport for that flooding incident while I was aboard, and the Francis Marion for being involved in a collision shortly after I left. I was also somewhat amused to learn the Newport, after being decommissioned from the US Navy, was sold to the Mexican Navy, and later brought aid to Louisiana after hurricane Katrina. (Amused, because I speak Spanish, have traveled a lot in Mexico, have a Mexican son-in-law and half-Mexican grandsons; you get the picture :-)

In retrospect, I wish I had been a more mature individual when I joined the Navy. Many people thank me for my service to our country, but I don’t feel I deserve such thanks. To be honest, I only enlisted because an ex-girlfriend challenged me to, and because I wanted to see the world and follow in my father’s and my older brother’s footsteps. I wish my motives had truly been more patriotic. I actually jumped ship in the Philippines, because I believed a lot of foolish “hippy” philosophy which caused me to look at the military in a bad light.

My other greatest regret is that I allowed my recruiter to get me to sign up for engineman school. Mechanics is not really my forte. I can do it if told what to do, and I got great grades in A school, because I’m good at theory and schoolwork. But I found out later in life that I could’ve gone to the language school in Monterrey California and become a Russian linguist. (I had taken Russian in high school.) Or I could’ve pursued what I really joined for and become a salvage diver. That was what I had in mind when I signed up, but I was such a drug user, wasting my time and frittering away my gifts, that by the time I’d been in a year, I was already getting into trouble, and had lost all motivation for the diving school. To be honest, until years later, I never even remembered that it had been my original goal.

I suspect that had I gone to diving school and succeeded as a diver, I might have truly enjoyed my military career and stayed in for 20 years. I think I would’ve had a better life had I done that. But alas, it was not to be!

The best thing that came out of my Navy years was that the trouble I got into caused me to be sent to drug rehab, and while there, I ended up having an experience with God and His Son Jesus, which changed the direction of my life forever. It’s interesting that this occurred about halfway through my four years, and the difference between how I lived those first two years and how things were for me in the second two is very drastic indeed. Anyone who knew me would describe the difference as being as great as going from night to day.

If going in the wrong direction in the Navy was what got me to that final goal, then it was worth it. Too bad I couldn’t see the light without going through all the wrong and foolish choices along the way!