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Korean War

I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and raised in a Christian home. The war in Korea broke out while I was in high school, and many people were being drafted. My father, an ex-Marine, said, “Son, you don’t want to be in the Marines, and you don’t want to be in the Army. They sleep in the mud and the dirt. You want to be in the Navy.” So I set my sights for the Navy. After taking several tests and going through a program, I became an NROTC regular. Every summer during my college years, I went on a cruise as a midshipman and then received a commission as an ensign upon graduation.

My first duty station was in Boston, Massachusetts, aboard the USS Northhampton. The ship was still being built and was in dry dock. My roommate onboard had just graduated from Harvard, so he knew his way around Boston and knew a lot of people. We had a fantastic time going to the Hasty Pudding Club on the Harvard campus, going to the Harvard/Yale football games, learning to ice skate, and attending plays in New York on weekends when there was nothing else to do. Each Sunday, a chaplain conducted services on the fantail of the ship for everyone. I went to church in Boston one Sunday, where there were only five or six people 90 to 100 years old, the preacher and me. It wasn’t anything like going to church in the Bible belt.

My situation was very different from that of the soldiers in the trenches during the Korean Conflict and quite unlike the lives of some of my classmates who were stationed on ships off the coast of Korea. I was in air-conditioned comfort on a 722-foot long ship with the latest technology, including modern electronics and missile capabilities. When I first boarded the ship, I was a division officer supervising about 53 people who handled the air conditioning and other equipment. I had a private stateroom and enjoyed excellent meals.

Our ship finally went to sea, and we sailed to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, via Havana, where a revolution was in process. Ours was the first ship to pull into Havana while Batista was in power. I saw the machine guns and barbed wire surrounding the capital grounds there. In Guantanamo, we swam, rented sailboats, visited the officers’ club and had a lot of fun.

About six weeks later, we departed for Northern Europe, crossed the Arctic Circle, went to Oslo, Norway and saw the beautiful fjords. In Bergen, we went to the top of a mountain and had a wonderful time. I also visited Reykjavik, Iceland; London; Paris; and Bremerhaven, Germany.

Later we served as flagship in the Mediterranean with an admiral onboard. By that time, I was assigned to engineering. Our homeport was in Villafrance (between Nice and Monte Carlo), where we would go to sea for one week and then stay in port for a week. During our weeks in port, we traveled throughout the area. I spent one Christmas in Rome and was blessed by the Pope. He came to a window of the Vatican and waved a handkerchief at all the people waiting to be blessed in Vatican Square. Onboard ship we could visit the library or watch the movies shown on the fantail every night. In port, automobiles were available to drive us to various public transportation points.

I was stationed in the Mediterranean for 18 months. We were armed and could handle any problem. Our weeklong trips included exercises such as going to general quarters — manning our battle stations, and refueling at sea. Sometimes Russian submarines in the area would shadow our ship. Of course, our electronic gear could detect them. Primarily we were a task fleet command ship.

The ship bore 14 stars at one time, which indicated the total number of stars worn on the shoulders of the admirals onboard. Edward R. Murrow once came aboard to do a show. Actually, we were more into public relations than anything else. Whenever we entered a port, the American Ambassador would bring people onboard to tour the ship, and we would attend parties on the shore. For the single men, dates were arranged with the local girls brought in by the ambassador. In Barcelona, Spain, I once was sitting at a table in an old castle with admirals and Spanish dignitaries. A person stood behind each chair to serve everyone. My date was the daughter of Admiral Bobodilla, who served under the Spanish dictator Franco. After dinner, we drove to a bullfight in his flagged car. As our car whizzed by, people jumped out of the way.

Though my military experience was fantastic, I wanted to leave the Navy for several reasons. One, I got seasick; and two, I was afraid of becoming an alcoholic. But I did manage to keep my Christian values. While sitting on the fantail during church services each Sunday and listening to the chaplain's sermon, I would look out and see the vast waves. It made me realize that God created everything and was in control.

After spending three years on active duty, I was assigned to a destroyer for a communications exercise. I had served in communications during the second half of my career on the USS Northhampton, decoding messages and distributing them. Being seasick on a destroyer was not a lot of fun., I resigned my regular commission after two years and accepted a reserve commission. I am now retired from the Navy as a Commander.

My time in the service enabled me to visit so many places, like North Africa, Algiers, Algeria; Gibraltar; Barcelona, Seville and Malaga in Spain; Cannes, Nice, Monte Carlo; Athens, Greece. We also sailed up and down the coast of the United States and throughout the Caribbean. When I look back and think of the people who haven't had these experiences, I think they've missed part of life. Also I believe people who have traveled extensively have a deeper sense of patriotism. I fly the American flag at my home every day. The Fourth of July services at Green Acres Baptist Church with all the people and the flags deeply move me. Probably nine out of ten people who served in the military recall specific events during their service as some of the most important events in their lives.

What one learns at home carries one through the faraway places. Sometimes people come back the same. Sometimes they come back better. Sometimes they don't come back at all. But for me, it was a real experience. When I listen to Korean War veterans recount their memories of being out in the cold, wading through the mud, getting shot or being imprisoned, I tell them that I don't belong in their group. I served in a country club atmosphere during that war.

After I graduated from high school, I thought I was awfully smart. But in the Navy, I saw problems that I never dreamed people had. It was a different world. If a sailor is away at sea a good deal, his family can start having a lot of problems very quickly. I was glad I was single during my time in the service.