



Thomas H. Owens
 FT3, U.S.S. Missouri BB63, U.S. Navy
 Korean Conflict
 1951-1954

While I was attending the University of Texas, I joined the reserves along with several of my buddies to earn some extra money. Of the 22 who enlisted at the same time, only two were called to active duty almost two years later in 1951. I was one of them. At the time, I thought it was the worst thing in the world because as a Navy recruit, I probably would be sent to fight in Korea. But it turned out to be a blessing, after all. I learned so many things, and the trials I experienced showed me where I was in my spiritual life also.

The Navy sent me through boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center that winter, and it was very cold. Many times, we had to march up and down the parade grounds in snow up to our knees. The purpose was to prepare the grounds for our graduation ceremony in front of the big shots. So we marched all night long sometimes just to keep the snow down. Of course, I was ready to go home after boot camp. But we couldn't get out of the railroad station because the switches had frozen. They were using blowtorches to heat them so the train could leave the station, and we could go home for the holidays.

After the holidays, I received my orders to report to the USS Missouri in Norfolk, Virginia. When I boarded the ship, she had just been pulled from the mud where she had been stuck. For the next six months, the sailors from the other ships referred to us as the "Stuck in the Mud Reserve".

The USS Missouri made many cruises and was used mostly to train midshipmen for ship duty. In April 1952, we shipped out to Cuba where we shot at some big white rocks on an island. We also went to the base at Guantanamo for rest and recuperation. I rode the train to Guantanamo

City, and that was pretty exciting. The tracks ran straight up and down and around, so we had to hang on to the seats to keep from falling out.

Then we returned to Norfolk for some special training. Because of my math courses at the University of Texas, I was trained to be a spotter for a battleship. A spotter goes ashore with the Marines or frogmen and radios information back to the ship about where to fire the shells if they're not hitting a target the first time or where the shells need to go next. He has to have to have an idea of the parallax or trajectory of the shells so the guns can fire more accurately. While training in Danneck, Virginia, I didn't realize how dangerous the job would be.

They taught me how to get out of a submarine underwater, how to swim and how to survive in the ocean by floating with only my shirt to hold me up. They showed me how to crawl while people were shooting at me. I also had to learn the ship's routine while receiving spotter reports so I would know what to expect and would understand both sides of a situation. Airplanes would be able to protect us at times on the shore, but sometimes they could not if the area happened to be covered with anti-aircraft guns. I wasn't sure how long I would be able to survive. But when I watched the frogmen go through their exercises, I thanked God that I didn't have to go through that strenuous program.

For Armed Forces Day, we sailed to New York City. Everyone welcomed us tremendously, and it was a joyous time. Visitors came aboard the ship to explore it and see where MacArthur had signed the peace treaty. While we were on liberty there, my buddy Skip and I went to his house in White Plains, New York. We found dates and had a big time just seeing things, celebrating his birthday, and going up to Connecticut.

Born and raised in Austin, Texas, I never had traveled much before I went into the Navy. So going overseas was really an experience for me. When we sailed to Haiti, it turned out to be one of the poorest countries I've ever seen. The people sold their hand-chiseled mahogany goods on the streets. I still have a pair of donkey head bookends I bought there. With open sewers, the stench in Haiti was unbelievable. It was so hot the summer we were there that we slept on mattresses drug to the top of the deck in spite of the stench. I felt like I had a big black streak of filth coming off my body. Of course, we were given vaccinations, but we still couldn't drink the water. It was putrid.

Before we arrived, they had hung a chicken thief in the square at Port au Prince. Then they hung him off the end of the pier to warn us to stay out of trouble while we were on shore. That got our attention. I stood shore patrol a lot, just like I did in other ports. That way, I earned more time with my family when we got back to the States. Many men did that.

We took another midshipmen training cruise to Bergen, Norway, and saw the Fjords. They were cliffs that rose almost straight up and were unbelievably beautiful set in the crystal, dark blue water. The midshipmen had to take the cruise to learn how to be a Navy man, but we mainly just put up with them. Of course, we ate a little bit better when they were onboard because they always had better food. The exception was one Thanksgiving when we had to eat turkeys that had been deep in the hold of the ship so long that they had turned dark blue. When we got to go ashore in

England on our way back, I ate fish 'n chips every time I had a chance. They were so good and as popular there are hamburgers are here.

Our next midshipmen cruise was to Guantanamo Bay, where we shot at the big rocks again. In late 1952, we returned to Norfolk and loaded up for our trip to Korea. We cruised through the Panama Canal on our way to Hawaii. When we reached Hawaii, it was almost like Heaven with the wonderful smells of the beautiful flowers and the pretty water. My buddy and I had a good time. The Navy and Armed Forces had taken over a place called the Pink Hotel during World War II to serve as officers' quarters. It was absolutely beautiful and very expensive, so we didn't stay there. We just looked at it. Our training at Pearl Harbor included shooting our 5 and 16-inch guns at sleds pulled behind the destroyers.

By late October 1952, we had arrived at Yokohama, Japan. The country looked like it was 20 years behind in its development compared it to the United States. Again there were a lot of open sewers, and we had to watch where we stepped. The sidewalks were big squares of concrete over a sewer. Falling in one was a real experience. Thank God I never did, but some of the other boys did.

We docked next to the other Missouri ship, and the Admiral of the Fleet transferred his people to our ship. Fleet Admiral "Jocko" Clark came onboard and outlined the strikes we were to make on the east side of Korea.

When the actual firing began, I don't know how many shells we shot. It seemed like more than 200,000, but it probably was more like 2,000. Nearly every time we shot those big 16-inch guns, we thought, *There went a Cadillac!* Each shell plus the powder it required cost about that much money. After each battle, we would go to Sassabo, Japan, to load more shells and have a little R&R. Then we'd return to Korea and shoot some more.

I was assigned to Fire Control, where we mainly pointed guns, spotted targets, and reported the range and trajectory for the targets to various people. Sometimes we actually pulled the trigger from a remote location, like a gun directory on top of the ship. There were four directories for 10-five inch batteries on the ship — one on each side and one up front and in the back. Most of the time, the gun directories were directing the 5-inch guns. There also were 25-inch guns on both sides of the ship with five turrets holding two guns each on either side of the larger guns. When we went into "automatic" (shooting at airplanes), we could only set the fuses at 5 or 10 or 15 seconds. They would go off right before they hit the target and scatter all over it, bringing the airplane down.

Sometimes we just practiced by shooting at drones — remote control planes. Then we would try to retrieve them in a net but we missed a lot. Most of the time, we were shooting at a target towed behind an airplane. Since the planes were very slow compared to jets, that really was not an accurate exercise for shooting at real targets that might be shooting at us.

One time we went into Wonsan Harbor, which was shaped like a cul-de-sac. I kept noticing bicycles going down to a particularly dark area with brush piled on top of it. The area kept getting darker and darker like trees do when they are cut down. At the time, we were being fired on by

105-millimeter guns. When I told my lieutenant about the brush, he said, “Well why don’t you take the gun director up there on the starboard side. When we pull in there, just walk those star shells (phosphorus) up the side of that mountain and see what’s happening to that pile of brush you keep looking at.”

We had to get inside the harbor as far as possible and we almost were dragging bottom. That was dangerous because of the mines all over the harbor. When I started walking those phosphorus star shells, they looked like a whole block of fire going up the side of the mountain toward that brush pile. Suddenly, the enemy opened up with every gun they had in that mountain. We couldn’t even see the water beside the ship because of all the smoke, fire and shrapnel coming toward us. They had set fuses to explode and send shrapnel all over the ship in an attempt to kill everybody they could. I don’t know why they didn’t have shells that would have penetrated the ship.

I was sitting on the top deck with nothing but a piece of canvas over my head. Seacrist, a colored man, was there next to me. When those shells went off — “WHACK!” — they got our attention real quick. It was madness. I never saw anything like it. The water was solid foam. Then I looked two decks below and saw Seacrist opening up the dogs on the door to get out of there. He looked up at me, and I asked, “What are you doin’ down there?”

“I’m gettin’ outta here!” he yelled. He was so scared that his eyes were as big as saucers.

The funniest part about the whole thing was when Captain Edsel, excited and thinking he was talking only to Admiral Clark, pushed down the PA system microphone and asked, “Admiral, should we return fire with the 16-inch guns?” In considerably stronger language, the Admiral replied something like, “Heck No! Turn this blankety-blank thing around and get the **Heck** outta’ here!” That conversation was broadcast throughout the whole ship, and we all roared with laughter.

The captain ordered full flank speed, meaning turn the motor on, turn the props and go as hard as you can go. As we turned around, the ship was bouncing up and down because it was digging into the ground. The water was so shallow that mud the size of a two-car garage was being thrown out the back of the ship every time the prop went down. It was a scary experience but funny, too.

Luckily, no one was injured that day. A while later, it was a different story. One day I was scheduled to go ashore in Korea as a spotter with some Marines. Before we could go, the helicopter pilot had to take a Marine captain, lieutenant and ensign to our planned destination to scout out a daytime hiding place where they could get spotters back to the ship. A mountain stood between us and the ammunition dump that was our target. Our planes couldn’t get to it because of the anti-aircraft guns.

With black all over my face while I was waiting for the helicopter to come back, I asked one of the Marines, “Well, what am I gonna’ take to protect myself while I’m over there?” I was going with a complement of about 90 Marines armed with machine guns, hand grenades, bazookas, and everything else you could imagine for protection. When they handed me a 45, I said, “That don’t

seem right. You have bayonets, sabers, knives, pistols and machine guns. And all you give me is a 45 pistol! That doesn't make sense to me."

He said, "They git us, you ain't got a chance anyway!"

But we never left. The helicopter on the scouting mission was shot down, and all the men aboard were killed. It was a suicide mission, but I guess the good Lord was taking care of us. As it turned out, we would have all been killed if we had tried to go ashore. The helicopter was about 500 yards off shore when it went down. They tried to retrieve the bodies but only found the ensign, who they had to drag back to the ship on a rope underneath the helicopter. That was a tragic time.

When we landed at Sassabo for the last time after we had served all our missions in Korea, we got a new captain. In that particular harbor, we had to make a real sharp turn as we pulled in to get through the submarine nets without hitting the mines. Russian submarines followed us everywhere we went in Korea. They knew every step we took. I think they were Russian submarines because they would send dive bombers to make dive bomb passes at our ship every night and never drop a bomb. They just kept us up all night with general quarters. We had to stay and lock our guns to go off in five seconds, but we never shot at them. I could see the submarine's periscope sticking up and could watch them follow us. Meanwhile, we just went on about our business.

In Sassabo that day, the Captain's friend Buddy, a chief boson's mate, fell off the ship when Captain Edsel made that sharp turn. Buddy and the captain had been friends and fished together all the time. Thinking his fishing buddy would be sucked beneath the ship by the huge propellers and drown, Captain Edsel had a heart attack and died right there on the bridge. That was real sad. But Buddy came back up was all right. The captain had stopped the ship quickly enough that the propellers didn't hit him or pull him under.

Captain Brody took over then and we went back to Hawaii. My buddy, Bill Nichols, and I rented a convertible and drove all over the big Island. Next we docked at Long Beach, California, and I hitchhiked on an Army plane that was to be mothballed in Waco, Texas. It was a B-25, a little dive-bomber type twin-engine plane, and I sat up in the nose. Most of the radios and all of the radar equipment had been taken out for use in other planes. When we took off, we went up through a pass just east of Los Angeles and hit a sandstorm. Without radar, we couldn't fly back through the pass. So we had to fly at an elevation on only about 150 to 200 feet and follow the Southern Pacific Railroad, all the way to El Paso. Since I was about 10 feet in front of the cockpit, I could see better than the pilot or co-pilot. I kept telling them where the railroad track was, and they watched out for radio towers. When we came to a mountain, I had to tell them, "Pull up! Pull up!" Many times, we would pull up just in time to trim a few treetops. When we landed in El Paso, the tires went flat because the plane was so heavy. It was loaded with sand in all the little cracks and crannies. I don't know how we ever flew with that much weight, but we did.

I caught a train out of El Paso and arrived in Austin a couple of days later. While I was home, I met my wife on a blind date. After five dates and before I had to go back to Norfolk, she asked me, "Would you Marry me?"

“I don’t know you that well,” I said. “I’ll be honest with you. I’d like to know you better before we make any kind of decision like that.”

She said, “Well, I’ve made up my mind in 5 days.”

I’ll always wonder why I didn’t go ahead and say yes at that point, but something in the back of my mind said, *You’d better make sure you marry a lady who believes in the Lord and wants to raise your children as the Lord would want you to.* So I said, “No. Right now, I can’t make that decision.”

When I went back to the task force, we set off to pick up midshipmen at Annapolis. On the way there, we had to plow through a bunch of mud banks in Chesapeake Bay. At full flank speed, hitting those mud banks was like hitting a stone wall. We’d barely make it through one and then have to pick up speed to hit the next one. If we had gotten stuck in the mud again, it would have been a disaster. But we finally made it.

The full complement of our ship was about 4,500 people. With a length of probably two or three football fields, she had 16-inch armor around the gun batteries area. Though the bow and stern were false, she could still float and fight if they had been blown completely away. When I walked through some of the decks, I could see how thick that armor was.

Our midshipmen cruise was to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, along with countless other ships (aircraft carriers, earth cruisers, etc.). We had to sail across the equator on our way there, so the pollywogs (sailors who had not crossed the equator before) had to be initiated. Sailors who had been through the initiation were called shellbacks. “Father Neptune” was in charge and told everybody what needed to be done. The pollywogs, including me, had to go through the “Judgment” and spend the day before the big event making up shillelaghs — pieces of canvas wrapped around rags and soaked in saltwater overnight. Each shillelagh had a handle on one end so it wouldn’t slip off a man’s hand when he hit someone. That afternoon, realizing we really were going to get it the next day, all the pollywogs ganged up on the men who would be wielding the shillelaghs. We doused them with fire hoses or threw them in the showers and turned on the water, uniforms and all. That was a lot of laughs.

When we reached the equator, they killed all the engines in all the ships, and we were just standing still in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Then the pollywogs had to walk between two lines of men as they whopped us with the shillelaghs. After that, we knew we’d been beaten with a shillelagh but we had a ball. I’ll guarantee you I was sore after all that.

In Rio I did shore patrol duty, but I gave some money to Lieutenant Boney so he could buy an engagement ring for my future wife. He went to a special diamond place and bought a beautiful engagement ring with a big blue diamond. From there we went to the Panama Canal and back to gunnery practice in Cuba.

While cruising, we transferred the Secretary of Defense Frank Nash from the USS Missouri to the Parker Destroyer. There was a rope hanging between the two ships, and he rode across in a slingshot type pulley tugged across with another rope. Unbeknownst to Nash, the Parker was on our starboard side. They made a port turn toward us and the rope went into the water, dunking the

Secretary of Defense. Of course, the captain got excited and told them to tighten up the rope real quick and pull him out. When they pulled it too tight, he shot up in the air like a rocket. Thank God, we didn't kill him, but he did have the experience of his life.

By that time, I realized that our ship was going to be put in mothballs. Not wanting to sit in dry dock while they were working on the ship, I signed up to get off to return to the University Of Texas. After the repairs were complete, the ship was to be transferred to Bremerton, Washington. That meant another trip through the Panama Canal, and I already had all the heat I wanted from prior trips. My buddy Bill Nichols got out, too. I bought a Chevrolet sedan in Texas that looked like a torpedo from the rear, and we drove back to Texas.

When I was leaving Korea to come back home, I sat down on a deck outside the ship and prayed. I thought, *If the Lord has put me through all these tests an' trials and I'm still alive, He must have something for me to do.* So I prayed, "If you'll allow me to get married, I will try to raise my kids to be Christian people and bring my family up as Christians in the best way I could." At that point, I renewed my commitment to the Lord. It was a turning point in my life.

On August 28, 1954, I married the girl I had met on that trip home. She had waited for me while I was overseas. Then she waited for another year after I came home because I didn't have enough money to buy shoes hardly when I left the Navy. We'll celebrate our 50th anniversary in 2004. I went back to college on the GI Bill and worked part-time jobs here and there. In the winter, I worked for the Post Office. Sometimes people would give me cookies or tea or something to keep me warm when I delivered their mail. It was the best time my life.

My wife is also a Christian. Her parents took her to Presbyterian Churches when she was very young, but she later went to a Baptist Church. She wanted her family to be raised the same way I wanted. Her parents had divorced, and she vowed that she would never have anything so hurtful happen again in her family. We have three sons and one daughter. Our daughter Holly was adopted after she was nine months old, and she now lives in Austin. Mitch, our oldest son, also lives in Austin. Our son, Greg, recently married and lives in Utah with his wife and stepson. He has two children from a previous marriage and one from his first wife's marriage (called Joe). Jeff, my youngest son, lives in Dallas and has one son.

We built our home on Highway 271, about 10 miles outside Tyler, in 1999. Our property is out in the country, and we have about 37 acres with trees. We just love it. One of the most blessed things that have happened to us was joining Green Acres Baptist Church. Our Sunday school class is like a little church within a church, and we love everybody in it. Dr. David just blesses us tremendously.