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Second Class Petty Officer, U.S. Navy
Vietnam War
1960-1964

In October 1960, I joined the U.S. Navy while still in high school in Dallas. They put me on a train to San Diego, and I arrived at boot camp on my 18th birthday. I became an Electronics Technician, Aviation Electronics Technician. After ten weeks in San Diego, I spent about eight months at an air base in Milton, Florida, near Pensacola. Next I went to Memphis, Tennessee, for another eight or nine months of training at an electronics school to become an aviation electronics technician.

Except for one eight-month cruise in the Pacific on the USS Ranger aircraft carrier in 1962 and 1963, the rest of my time was spent in San Diego. My squadron had four AWAC planes — aircraft with a large radar dome on top, not fighters or bombers — on the ship, and I worked as a radar technician. When we were flying in patterns around the aircraft carrier, we could see hundreds of miles out with our radar equipment. So we operated the Early Warning Radar System.

Aircraft carrier operations were fascinating. I'll never forget the first time I went up on the flight deck during an operation. It was nighttime and pitch black because no white light was allowed anywhere on the deck. We had to put on red glasses and wear them for a little while before going to the flight deck so our eyes would dilate and we could see pretty well. It's pretty scary the first time. Back then we still had propeller planes onboard as well as a lot of jets. Those jets and props were turning up all around me, and vehicles were zipping around all over the place. If a person didn't watch what they were doing, they could get hurt. It was really interesting to watch the planes being catapulted off the flight decks and then being caught by the landing cables upon their return. I maintained the electronics equipment on the flight deck and hanger decks.

More than 4,000 people were onboard our aircraft carrier, and they faced many dangers. Probably four or five sailors were accidentally killed over that eight-month period. One sailor walked into a prop on the flight deck, and another was blown overboard behind a jet one night. The flight deck was about 90 feet above the water and it was dark, so they never found him. When they're preparing to launch planes, they turn the ship into the wind and increase their

speed fairly substantially to get that extra air lift. By the time an aircraft carrier can slow down and turn around to search for someone in that dark ocean, it's not very easy. On another occasion, a boiler exploded and killed one or two people in the boiler room.

The Vietnam War began shortly before I got out of the Navy. In the spring of 1964, President Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam. If it wasn't clear that we were involved in a war with Vietnam before that, it certainly was then. I vividly remember that was a very significant event for the country and for me personally. The Navy was extending the length of people's enlistments, and I worried that I might not be able to get discharged. But I wasn't affected. Other than day-to-day military operations, sailors weren't exposed to too much danger during that war. Of course, the Navy pilots flying off aircraft carriers certainly were engaged in combat, as were the men on Navy boats maneuvering up rivers in Vietnam.

In September 1964, I left the Navy after four years service and enrolled at North Texas State University in Denton that same month. I drew a monthly GI Bill benefit check for the next four years. That was a big help. In 1966, I got married and switched colleges. I earned a bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

I suppose there were two benefits to my Navy service. First, I would hope that I served my country. Second, a very big personal benefit was that I grew up. Though I actually dropped out of high school at 17 to join the Navy, I was a very mature person and knew exactly what I wanted to do by the time I came out. I really had some goals and did very well in college after that. There's no doubt in my mind that I would have tried to go to college if I had finished high school rather than joining the service. But my grades weren't terrific in high school, so I might have had problems getting accepted. There's also no doubt in my mind that I would have squandered the first few years. I was just a typical 17-year-old kid without a whole lot of meaningful vision and goals. I lacked the maturity that the Navy taught me.

I had passed the G.E.D. exam in the service. At that time, state universities in Texas had to accept anyone for one semester on probation if he or she had a G.E.D. and was at least 21 years old. At North Texas State University, I managed to come off probation after the first semester. Eventually I earned a PhD. in mathematics. I'm probably one of the few people with a PhD who never finished high school.

Probably just about anybody would say that you make close friends while in the service, extremely close. In fact, with very few exceptions, for the rest of my life I never made friends as close as two of my Navy friends. When you're living 24 hours a day with people, and you're away from home, you become pretty close and develop some strong friendships. I still remember a lot of their names, though we haven't stayed in touch. Most servicemen also usually remember everybody's home state, too. If I picture someone's face in my mind but can't recall their name anymore, I know where they were from.

After I earned my bachelor's degree in Louisiana, I did two semesters of graduate work there. Then my wife and I went to Vienna, Austria, for a year so I could study there. Then we came back to the States, and I earned a master's degree at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. In 1972, I received my PhD from TCU. At that point, we moved to Germany and lived there for about nine years while I worked for various places. Mostly, I worked for the German government in a computer center as a technical person developing software and consulting. I also taught at the university for a while in their civil engineering department. During our last three years in Germany, I worked for the Burroughs Corporation.

We enjoyed the German culture, but I got very homesick the last year or two that we were there. Frankly, though I'm glad we did it, I don't ever want to leave Texas again. In 1981, we

moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where I worked for Structural Dynamics Research Corporation, a mechanical engineering company, until the end of 1989. Then we finally made it back to Texas.

I decided that I wanted to get into a university as a professor, and the University Of Texas at Tyler had an open position at the time. Originally I was from East Texas, and my wife was from Dallas, so it was a good location. I did get the teaching position in the computer science department but only stayed about three semesters. In 1991, I went into business for myself by establishing a software consulting company. I still have that business today.

When I joined the Navy, I was a Christian. Everywhere I went, whether it was on the base or on a ship, there were church services we could attend. I've had it all good in life and have no complaints, so I think God's been with my family and me. My wife and I started coming to Green Acres Baptist Church four or five years ago.