



John Waters
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Korean Conflict

I joined the Navy in September 1951 after graduating from high school. The Korean Conflict was underway, and I decided to do that rather than go to college. Boot camp in San Diego lasted for 11 weeks, and I learned to shoot an M1 rifle reasonably well. After a trip back to my hometown of Tyler, Texas, on a 30-day leave, I was assigned to the USS Philippine Sea (CVA-47).

The aircraft carrier, roughly three football fields long, was docked in San Diego. Once aboard, I was assigned to the deck area where we took care of the boats, barges and 40mm gun turrets. Before boarding, I noticed many Military Police around the ship. When I questioned a policeman, he said that no one should be observing their actions and they were asking everyone to stay away. An atomic bomb was being loaded on our carrier. I wasn't supposed to know that, but I observed it happening. Though we could have used it in Korea, we never did.

Having never been on a ship before, I wasn't sure what to expect. When we steamed away from San Diego, we headed for Hawaii. By Christmas Day, I was swimming on a Hawaiian beach. While in Hawaii, we often practiced firing our 40mm guns at a drone. The pilots practiced takeoffs, landing and dive-bombing targets.

Next we sailed for Yokuska, Japan. A week or two later, we were operating off the Korean Peninsula, striking against the North Koreans. For almost a year, we would operate in the area for a month or two, go back to Japan for a week, and then return to the peninsula to repeat the process.

The Koreans did not have a lot of air power. We could hear the gunshots and see the illumination of the gunfire on the coast. Primarily, we offered air support while cruisers and destroyers surrounded and protected our ship and another carrier. Except for a time or two, we were never directly threatened. On those occasions, the commanding officer would announce,

“We expect to stir up a hornet’s nest here, and we think they will retaliate.” But they never did. We did lose a number of planes that were shot down as they flew over Korea dropping napalm or bombs.

Everyone looked forward to mail call. At sea, of course, there were weeks at a time when we did not receive mail. At 18, I was just a kid who had never been away from home. My brother, a Marine, had been killed in World War II, and another brother served in the U.S. Air Force. So I knew what was involved and was somewhat frightened. But I was doing my duty and tried not to think about the danger too much. I don’t know how young people feel today about their country and what they have now. I always believed this is a great country and felt it was my duty to serve and protect it. Occasionally the other sailors and I would discuss the possibility of the enemy coming after us, but we felt fairly safe most of the time.

Like one of the Navy chiefs once remarked, “You can always serve your country. That is a duty you should do no matter what other people think or say. You can give four years of service. This country’s worth that.” I came to believe that my service did count.

I accepted the Lord at Hebron Baptist Church outside Tyler when I was in the fifth grade and was baptized in a lake off the old Kilgore highway. In the Navy, one of my duties was rather dangerous. To refuel our aircraft carrier, a boom 10 to 12 inches in diameter swung out from our ship to carry the fuel line and connect to the tanker delivering our fuel. I had to ride that boom, bouncing around out there in the ocean while tied to a lifeline. Thinking back, I may have been foolish to volunteer for that duty. But I thought I probably was more agile than the others in my group. I was thankful that the Lord allowed me to stay safe.

I made two trips to Korea during my time in the service. When I returned from my second tour of duty, I was anxious to get home and start on the rest of my life. Most of my friends back home went to college or to work after high school. Very few entered the military despite the draft. Though I was four years behind them, I wanted to go to college, and I subsequently earned a degree from the University of Texas. Upon graduation from the University, I married Betty Campbell in 1961. God blessed us with 3 daughters, their husbands, and six grandchildren. After completing my engineering degree, I went to work for NASA in 1962. I helped train the flight crews in the various mission simulators, participating in programs from Mercury through the shuttle days. I retired in 1998 and we returned to Tyler in 1999.

Looking back, I’m glad that I had my military experience. I believe, in those days, people were more patriotic and served their country more readily than in later years.