



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

BILLY WORRELL

Blue Water Sailor

There were “Brown Water Sailors” and “Blue Water Sailors.” My ship patrolled off the coast of North Vietnam out in the blue water of the Tonkin Gulf, as opposed to the muddy water of the Mekong River. Since North Vietnam had no Navy, we never felt threatened. For decades after the end of that war, we Blue Water Sailors were told by the VA (US Department of Veterans Affairs) that if we didn’t touch terra firma in Vietnam, we could not have been affected by Agent Orange. Like the wind stops blowing at the coastline. For some guys who were stationed in Thailand, Agent Orange was running off the planes they were servicing and they too were told by the VA, since they were never in Vietnam, Agent Orange could not be a factor in their illnesses either. After 33 years, some Blue Water Sailors now qualify for benefits for conditions caused by Agent Orange, including things like deformities passed on to children of veterans.

When I graduated from high school in 1967, every male over 18 was required by federal law to register for the draft. If drafted, they went into the Army or Marine Corps and the vast majority went to Vietnam. Maybe they survived and came home, maybe they didn’t. I utilized a draft deferment option by going to college. Then, in 1969 Uncle Sam cancelled all college deferments. When we got our draft notices, my best friend said, “We’re not going to Vietnam. My dad was in the Navy. We’re enlisting.” Once again I evaded the draft by enlisting in the Navy in 1969. We were offered a 180 day delay program. I took advantage of the entire 180 days and reported to Great Lakes, Illinois in August of 1970.

I asked the Navy recruiter if they had computer operator jobs in the Navy because I was starting to get into programming in college. He said they did. I did not know that you never know what kind of job you are going to get once you are in the service, no matter what the recruiter tells you. While in boot camp, after I found out there were no computer operator job offerings, I opted to become a nuclear power technician. The nuclear guys were very well trained. In the nuclear program, you had to attend two years of education, then four years of service. Before you could attend nuclear training you had to acquire a regular Navy job rating. I went to Machinist Mate A-School in Great Lakes, Illinois. While attending that school and getting a taste of Navy life I decided not to do the extra two years.

When it came time to pick a home port, I knew that West Coast sailors were constantly going to Vietnam. One of my two selections, which I got, was Newport, Rhode Island. I was first stationed on the USS Joseph K. Taussig, DE-1030, a destroyer escort. By Navy standards she was a very old ship. We went on a Mediterranean/North Atlantic extended deployment. Thirty days of that cruise, while chasing Russian submarines above the Arctic Circle, she broke a hole in the hull. Envision the seas in the movie, “The Perfect Storm” for 30 days and nights. During this deployment I flew home from Edinburg, Scotland to get married. A week later I flew back to London, England and took a train to the British Naval Base in Rosyth, Scotland to find my ship. My ship was scheduled to be on liberty that whole week in Scotland. If some event had occurred somewhere else that my ship redirected to, I would have been AWOL when I



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returned. When we returned to the Newport US Naval Base, DE-1030 was decommissioned. I was then transferred to the USS Dewey, DLG-14, a guided missile frigate. While part of her ship's company, I found out you could sail from New England to the South Pacific. We got a new captain, who cared about advancement, and he raised his hand to volunteer for Vietnam service.

My hazing on my first ship (DE-1030) consisted of the petty officer 1st class (the guy in charge, an MM1) in charge of the engine room sending me to get a pail of JP5 – jet fuel. He was on Cloud Nine because he only had a few weeks left to retire. I was the new guy so I finally found JP5 and filled the pail and brought it back to the engine room. Envision walking around with a pail of gasoline. He said to me, "Put it down." So I did. He was smoking a cigarette at the time, which I did not think was such a good idea. He then threw the lit cigarette into the jet fuel, expecting me to freak out. I did not even flinch. He asked me why I did not react to what he had just done. I told him, "I figured, you've been in the Navy for 20 years, and if it didn't bother you, it's not gonna bother me." As it turns out, the flash point of jet fuel is at a much higher temperature than a cigarette.

I went home for the weekend and came back looking for that guy and found out he was dead. We made electricity on the ship from steam that was 880 volts. Since that guy had been on Cloud Nine and not paying attention, he was doing some work and closed the circuit and literally fried himself. That opened my eyes, and I came to respect the electricity we were generating.

The destroyer escort was propelled by 600 pounds of steam pressure that was 350 degrees. The guided missile frigate was propelled by 1,200 pounds of superheated steam that was 950 degrees. Since I have always been very detail-oriented, they often called on me to service the main valves in that engine room. I turned 21 in boot camp; I was young, but 21-year-olds were not considered young in the military in 1970.

When we were up in the Tonkin Gulf, sometimes we were with a carrier, which is surrounded by destroyer class ships. There were ships all around her to take a torpedo if it came to that. We had torpedoes on board, but we never fired them or the missiles while we were there. North Vietnam had no submarines, nor any ocean-going ships. None of their planes were crazy enough to confront our missiles. Other times we were by ourselves monitoring all of the planes in flight from our carrier. The carriers' radar watched planes taking off and landing. Our ship had a radar span of about 500 miles. We not only had a clean view of our planes, but we could see the enemy planes in flight too and therefore keep our guys informed of threats to them. Often our ship informed a jet of danger heading their way before it was visible on their plane's radar, giving them time to react, and they would fly by on the way back to the carrier to say thanks.



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While being deployed in the Western Pacific Ocean (WES/PAC) in the evenings and at night, we would be out on the fantail to relax outside. We never really felt threatened because of the armament we had onboard. I never saw a statistic, so I don't know if any blue water ships ever got attacked. I doubt they ever were. When we got time to stand down we went on liberty to the US Naval Base in Subic Bay, Philippines and from there a short drive to Clark Air Force Base, Philippines. Other ports of call on this 1972 WES/PAC cruise were: Bahrain (in Persian Gulf), Recife, Brazil, Bandar 'Abbas, Iran (in Persian Gulf), Mombasa, Kenya, Olongapo City, Philippines, Manila, Philippines, Singapore, Port of Spain, Trinidad, Mayport US Naval Station, Florida, Charleston US Naval Station, South Carolina

Ports of call on the 1971 & 1973 Mediterranean/North Atlantic cruises were: Antwerp, Belgium, Portsmouth, England, Plymouth, England, Falmouth, England, London, England, (by train), Golf Juan, France, Keil, Germany (via Keil Canal), Hamburg, Germany (by train), Athens, Greece, Elefsis, Greece, Naples, Italy, Rome & Vatican City, Italy (by bus), Arendal, Norway, Bergen, Norway, Kristiansand, Norway, Kristiansund, Norway, Lisbon, Portugal, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Roosevelt Roads, US Naval Station, Puerto Rico, Edinburgh, Scotland, Greenock, Scotland, Rosyth, British Naval Station, Scotland, Barcelona, Spain, Valencia, Spain, Rota, US Naval Station, Spain.

My closest friend in the fleet and I were both on the Joseph K. Taussig and both ended up on the Dewey. We went on liberty together all the time. He lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota and we have stayed in touch.

A few years before I was transferred to the USS Dewey, one of the boilers on it blew up and the Navy pumped a lot of money into repairing it. As a result she was always going somewhere because they wanted to get their money's worth out of her. Soon after we got back from Vietnam, we went to the Mediterranean/North Atlantic on extended deployment for six months. When we got back to Newport, we found out it was closing. I had six months of naval service left, so I left my wife and young son again for my new home port of Charleston, South Carolina.

While stationed in Charleston, South Carolina, I asked for an early discharge to start college again as soon as I got out. In 1974 there was still lynching going on in the deep south. Typically, an enlisted man never sees the Captain. But my Captain had me come up to see him in the ward room. He was from Little Rock, Arkansas when all the civil rights stuff went on there. He said to me, "I'll give your wife my personal home phone number." I said, "What good is your phone number if I'm hanging from a tree?"

Well, I ended up in Charleston, and I had a good time there. Nothing race-related happened to me down there. I bought a heavyweight Honda motorcycle, and me and the boys covered a lot of highway and visited a lot of back-country bars.



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I was married and had a son who was six months old when I left for Vietnam. If I hadn't gotten married, I might have stayed in the Navy forever. A full commander liked me and we'd talk on the fantail after dark. He offered me a prep school for two years before going to a university to become a commissioned officer. I thanked him and turned him down and got out in 1974.

I spent three out of four Christmases out to sea. My wife wrote me a letter every day, and she made cassette tapes. She took loads of photographs of my son all the time. My daughter, who was four years younger, used to complain about all the pictures we have of her older brother. I always wore two watches—one with the local time and one with New York time, to remind me of home.

I've always been focused. When I got out, I went right back to college—a community college, Orange County Community College in Middletown, New York. That's where I'd been before the war. There was a program in New York State at the time called Operation Bootstrap, where if you were doing something to better yourself, you could get unemployment for two years. I also had the GI bill. My unemployment person said I didn't ever have to go into the unemployment office; I just had to call once a month to check in. Then he called and said, "I've just gotten a call from IBM, looking for computer operators. Why don't you go talk to this guy to get experience at interviewing?"

All through the interview I was just sitting there. In the military, you don't talk unless someone asks you a direct question. He asked me a few questions, and I gave short answers. When it was all over, the personnel manager called me up and said, "Billy, that manager wanted to hire you, but you wouldn't talk to him. Here's what you're going to do next time." He scripted for me in detail what I should do and say.

The manager from IBM called back two weeks later since he had another opening. That time I barely let him talk. He hired me that day. I ended up working full-time as a computer operator at night on second shift and went to school half-time during day. The kids in school knew I was a veteran, but I wasn't around people with all the negative stuff about Vietnam.

In the Navy, you couldn't just go home at the end of the day. When I was working for IBM, I worked until the job was done. Even if I was there until 2, 3, 4 in the morning, I was working until the job was done. I learned that in the Navy. When I was at PECO in Philadelphia as a Project Manager, I had people in several states working for me. If there was some system down and some guy fixing a problem needed someone else's help right now, you had to get it done. I developed a work ethic. The Navy changed me, not Vietnam.