

My not so glorious Navy service

Bob Gilhooly sonar tech 64-67



I grew up in a suburb of Baltimore. In the spring of 1962 I drove to the US Naval Reserve station at Fort McHenry in Baltimore and joined the US Naval Reserve. My older brother was a career Naval officer so I wanted to be part of the Navy. The Naval Reserve occupied one of the old buildings at Fort McHenry in the shadow of the Star Spangled Banner.

It wasn't just to be drills in this building though. This reserve center had a ship, the USS Darby DE218, a WWII destroyer escort. The drills in those days were once a month

Friday evening, Saturday and Sunday. We would cast off lines Friday evening and cruise the Chesapeake for the weekend and occasionally out into the Atlantic. The two weeks active duty in 63 was a cruise to the Caribbean and stops in San Juan and the US Virgin Islands.

Onboard the Darby is where I learned how to be a sailor. I was quickly introduced to a chipping hammer and two kinds of paint, red lead and haze grey. Line handling was another learned skill. The mooring lines were from WWII. Since hemp was hard to come by (most came from the Philippines) the mooring lines were woven with hemp and steel. The steel on the outside frayed over time and it could cut your hands to shreds.

Under way there were watches to stand. I started as a sound powered phone talker on the bridge or bridge lookout. The captain thought I did a good job so he moved me to the helm. I never did get very good at this, I kept us going in the right direction but it looked like a snake was chasing us if you looked at the wake.

For weapons training I learned how to load a hedgehog battery and how to load 5 inch projectiles. One of the positions in the 5 inch was to handle the hot shell casings when they were ejected from the breach and drop them in a scuttle at the rear of the mount. Those shells came out hot and fast and I was not looking forward to being assigned to that station. My GQ station fortunately ended up the forward 5 inch ammo handling room under the mount. I would put the requested round into a lift which would adjust the warhead timing up to the time the shell was loaded.

I had experience with electronics so I asked to be moved to the radar gang. They moved me to that gang and I learned how to operate the radar which was rather primitive. I didn't get enough time on this to get where you would want me on the radar in reduced visibility. The radar scope was in CIC which was about as big as the bathroom in your house, maybe smaller if you have a big house. My GQ station was now behind the Plexiglas plotting board because I could write backwards. You had to write backwards so the officer on the other side could read it.

In those days it was required for reservists to do two years active duty. Why the military gave this up is beyond me. I was told I could go to sonar school if I extended my active tour one year. I readily agreed and in January 64 I boarded a plane on a snow covered runway and headed for Key West. The A School was 31 weeks long with extensive electronics training and then sonar gear maintenance and operation. The personnel man looked at my records on checking in and said you play a musical instrument do you want to join the volunteer band, it will exempt you from watches. In 64 Key West Naval Station had beach watches because Cubans were coming ashore in anything that would float and the Navy had to intercept them and help them till the authorities arrived. I opted for the volunteer band which practiced after classes and performed for military and civilian events. The highlight was playing for President Truman on his visit to the Key West White House that summer.

I graduated first in my class and filled out the next duty station request believing that the Navy looked at it. I received orders that I was to stay in Key West and attend school for the newest sonar gear and then to report to Boston Naval Shipyard as part of the crew of the soon to be commissioned USS Belknap. I reported to BNS a week or two before the Belknap arrived from Bath Maine. With other crewmembers I was assigned various work on DDs going through the FRAM upgrade in BNS. The Belknap arrived in Boston and we reported aboard to get acquainted with our berthing and equipment spaces.

On November 7, 1964 the USS Belknap DLG-26 was commissioned in the ship yard. I thought great here we go out to sea and adventure. Wrong, we moved to the other end of the shipyard and into dry dock, as there was much to be done before we would see the deep blue sea. The sonar transducer was not installed and I had to go down into the dry dock and up into the sonar dome to observe the installation of the transducer. With the work complete it was time to float DLG-26. There was some concern of the watertight integrity of the sonar dome as it was open and the welded closed. Another sonarman and I climbed down into the dome from an access in our transmitter room. We were to check for leaks as the dry dock was flooded. The sonar officer actually climbed down when the flooding started and told us to get the hell out if there were any leaks and not do any finger in the dike moves. It went off without a hitch.

We had several new weapons systems on board so we spent much of 65 at various ranges in Florida and the Bahamas and Puerto Rico testing the systems with manufacturing reps. on board. Before heading out we had to load ammunition in Yorktown. Those of us doing the loading went ashore to a classroom and were instructed in the proper way to handle the ammunition. It is the only class I attended in the Navy where no-one fell asleep. While in the Bahamas we dropped the anchor and missed the reef which resulted in breaking the anchor winch and stopping the anchor with red chain on deck. It took at least 24 hours to manually get the anchor back up. The Bahamas sounds inviting but the facility was on the large island of Andros and there was nothing on that big island except a small naval station.

We did our readiness training in Gitmo and well, everyone knows what Gitmo is like. I found it amusing that Belknap would be assigned on rotation to anchor out in the bay to provide gunfire support in case Castro had too much rum and decided to assault the base. We would have been able to fire on round at him and then spent time repairing the automatic controls on the 5 inch.

In 66 we had a NATO exercise in the North Atlantic and went above the Arctic Circle and were invited by Sweden to visit Stockholm which was fantastic. Later we did our first Med cruise. On this cruise in the winter we were called to assist in the search and rescue of a Greek ferry which had sunk. We fired up and put the engine order telegraph to Bendix and headed for the scene. We arrived at night and those not on watch were requested to go topside to look for survivors. We did not find survivors but we did find victims. I remember one victim was floating with two life preservers on. The hypothermia is what did them in. Daylight came and we continued to search for the day. That is where I realized what an extremely large area is visible from a ship and how hard it is to find objects in that large area. We found large truck trailers toward the end of the day I had not seen earlier.

After returning to Norfolk we did a short Caribbean trip and then it was into the shipyard to get ready to head for the Pacific. My time was up so I departed Belknap. I still had some reserve time to serve which I did in New York State. I had to do a two week active service in 67 and was assigned to a DD in Newport RI. When I reported aboard the ASW officer approached me and asked if I could fix his sonar gear which was not working properly. It was an older unit but the type we learned in A school. After a few days I had the bugs out and then tuned up the transmitters. After that they wanted a radar repeater fixed on the bridge. The officers were thrilled I spent the two weeks on their ship and I was happy to have something to do besides drinking coffee and telling sea stories. Thus ended my rather un-illustrious Navy service.