

# Fair winds and following seas: A sailor remembered on Veterans Day

“Sea-going unit, sea-going unit, land base.”

That’s how my dad described his duty request when he first enlisted in the Navy in the 1950s. “And what did they (Navy) do?” he would remember with slight angst in his voice. “They shipped me to Bainbridge 50 miles up the road from my parents.”

He was looking for adventure.

John William Parks, known as “Bill” to many, was raised in Brooklyn Park, and graduated from Calvert Hall College High School, then located in Baltimore where the Catholic Center now stands.

United States Naval Training Center-Bainbridge was a training school perched high on a bluff overlooking Port Deposit along the Susquehanna River in Cecil County. Remnants of the closed facility can be seen peeking over the treetops if you look left as you cross the I-95 bridge from Harford County to Cecil County.

After Dad’s passing, I came across his USNTC-Bainbridge yearbook, “The Compass.” I looked for images of Bill participating in drills or exercises. The only apparent photo was his Company 82 portrait. He was a smiling 20-year-old dressed in his white enlisted uniform. The world was at his footlocker.

It was a time when expressing faith publicly was a significant part of our national pride. Faith and the military still have a long-standing tradition. Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faiths were prominently recognized in the “religion” section of the journal. While a compass gives mariners direction, God is the compass for the faithful. Both are necessary instruments.

My father’s personal photo album had deteriorated over time, though the black and white photos of his Navy life were in perfect order. He spoke often about how he watched his ship rise and fall with the water levels in the locks of the Panama Canal as his ship traveled through Central America.

I saw Bill sitting at his desk completing paperwork in accordance with ship duties. Next, he was sitting on the ship's bow wearing a battle helmet while operating a bulky two-way radio. It's one of the few photos I've seen of him as a single young man. On the back he wrote, "End of maneuvers, June 11, 1954." He was 24, the same age as my son.

The young sailor was part of the commissioning crew of (Landing Ship Tank) LST-1158, a flat-bottom vessel that could land on a beachhead, spreading its bow wide like house shutters so tanks, soldiers and supplies could be offloaded. There's a good chance you have seen one in a war movie or actual film footage.

As part of the commissioning crew, Bill joined a unique fraternity of sailors in one of the Navy's unofficial traditions: Plank Owner. Certificates that are works of art containing humorous seafarer language are presented to original crews entitling them to a piece of deck once their ship is officially decommissioned and sent for deconstruction.

Bill never had the option of receiving an actual plank. However, Plank Owner certificates gave bragging rights to any sailor who possessed such a distinction. It was a great source of pride for Bill. Dad's certificate is prominently displayed in my home.

My father described cruises between his base in San Diego and Pearl Harbor. Pacific storms would thrash LST-1158 about, as if it were a child's bathtub toy. When anchored off Hawaii, he described almost as if it were a romance novel, the volcanic lava glowing against a star-filled sky.

One story he seemed proud to share was the time he challenged an inexperienced officer's orders that could have injured his shipmates. He was never one for mincing words, especially if he was right. Till his dying day, Bill didn't have kind words to say about the officer. Somehow the stubborn Irishman avoided the brig.

Bill and his three brothers served honorably during the Korean and Vietnam War eras. As a parent of my own young adult children, I can't imagine what my grandparents must have felt at the prospect of losing one or more of their children to military conflict. Fortunately, Dad and his brothers avoided direct military action.

In a separate incident onboard ship, he severely damaged his left knee that may have helped him avoid seeing action in Korea. He always said he wanted to continue his Navy career, but it wasn't meant to be. The injury stayed with him for his remaining years.

Decades had passed when Bill traveled back in time during an iMax movie, which flew over the Pacific Fleet moored at San Diego Harbor. For him, it was as if it were yesterday. It was clear just how important those few years were to him. Bill's Navy adventures were firmly docked in his memory.

According to some online research, the name USNS Tioga County was added to the LST-1158 designation after Bill left the service. LST-1158 ended service on Dec. 23, 1970. She then operated as a non-commissioned cargo ship with a civilian crew until the early 1970s. Following reserve fleet status, her final demise came, amazingly, in August 2005, when she towed for demolition.

Especially during the month of November, please take the time to offer a simple thank you to a veteran for their service. If you see someone wearing a cap denoting their military branch, tell them you like their hat.

Our soldiers, sailors and their families have, and will continue to sacrifice for our nation's ideals. They do so willingly without fanfare or recognition.

As for Bill, he dropped anchor in Heaven in May of 2011 after some 80 years. His military headstone reflects his Navy pride with the inscription, "Plank Owner - LST-1158."

I'm sure he's still telling that same story, "Sea-going unit, sea-going unit, land base."