THE NAVY

At Newport, Rhode Island, I met my first ocean. I liked her! It was wonderful just to look out over the harbor at the chorus line of sleek, majestic naval ships. Now I was a real sailor man.

As an officer candidate based on my business administration education, I had expected to be assigned to the Supply Corps. But the books I was given to study were on gunnery, engineering, and seamanship. I thought something was wrong until the personnel officer informed me that my eyes were too good to place me in the Supply Corps. Therefore, I met the criteria to be an officer of the line.

When he's on duty, an officer of the line stands on the ship's conning tower and is in charge. Under the captain's authority, he is responsible for the ship. The supply officer is restricted to working in an office with the accounting records and the ship's supplies — it is somewhat boring.

Thus, I started my work as an apprentice officer candidate. Marching back from class, I'd come to my barracks to find my books all over the deck. I thought that maybe the chief petty officer wanted me to arrange them better: the tallest ones on the left (port), the shortest on the right (starboard). I did that, but the next day, my books were all over the deck again. Finally, I asked the chief what I was doing wrong. I was trying to be the shipshape and tidy good sailor. It was the dictionary he didn't like. It was a civilian book. Banish it. And banished it was!

Officer Candidate School was tough. For 120 days we were

exposed to the same academic curriculum as at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. For the first time in my adult life, I encountered things that were really hard for me to understand: the steam cycle in the engine room, for example; servos and synchros on aiming weapons. I really studied. In the middle of the night, I went to my "office," otherwise known as the potty, to continue my studies. (It's the best place because nobody interrupts you.) It was a difficult four months, but I did make it.

Not everyone did. One fellow student was engaged to marry soon after graduating and becoming an ensign. He was the son and grandson of famous Navy officers, but he was flunking out of OCS. On a weekend pass, he went to Boston, took a hotel room, and jumped out the window.

It was winter and cold. The bitter northeastern winds blew right through us as we marched. I was an officer in my battalion. My responsibility was social chairman, and we did have some fun, going to Providence and Newport on our liberty.

Finally, graduation came, and we received our orders. The OCS. sailors were generally well educated. Many had master's degrees, and they received good assignments, like communications officer in Naples, Italy; a round-the-world tour on the cruiser *Helena*; naval intelligence duty in Washington; Rhine River patrol. Those were the assignments I wanted. I was excited thinking about them. I was singing from *The Student Prince.*

I was the last person in my squadron to get his orders. I opened them up and read, "Ensign Gerald B. Cramer (that should have been ensign-to-be, as I wasn't quite an ensign yet) you are hereby scheduled to report to the LST 611 located somewhere in Korean waters."

Korea! There was a war going on! After getting my assignment, I did some research. I found a book titled *Jane's Ships*, a classic that includes all the ships in all the navies in the world. It described an LST as "a brave ship." The Navy had so far lost two ships in the Korean War, and both were LSTs. The 611 was the sole surviving LST in Korea.

The LST had been a secret weapon in World War II that in many cases was towed across the Pacific to the Japanese battlefront. The 1945 John Wayne movie *They Were Expendable* was about LSTs.

They weren't glamorous. They weren't even named like other ships were. They had just a number. They WERE expendable.

I had no idea what LST even stood for. In the naval base library I found the answer: Landing Ship Tank. It is amphibious, flat-bottomed, cumbersome, about the size of a football field. Small landing crafts, or L.C.I.s, were carried on each side, and these carried the marines who waded from the water to the beach from the dropped bow. It wasn't a typical ship. With its flat bottom, it was designed to go aground, whereas if a destroyer or cruiser went aground, its captain would be court-martialed. The LST wasn't a sophisticated ship and didn't have much electronics. It had some 40-millimeter guns but, all in all, it wasn't very imposing. In truth, it was a big clumsy container that floated on and off a beach.

LST officers needed to know about tides and currents because they had to pick the exact time almost to the minute when to bring their ship full of tanks and troops ashore. The tide had to be high, the current right; good navigation skills were required. Before landing, the ship dropped a rear anchor 200 to 300 feet off the stern. When the tide went out, the LST resembled a beached whale; the water might cover only the stern propellers. There it sat on the beach, helpless and vulnerable, with bow doors open, and with its cargo of tanks, trucks, or troops dislodged.

An LST cannot just remove itself from a beach in a minute. It must be programmed using tide tables produced by the United States Coast and Geodetic Society. The sea has to be flowing in. The ship becomes somewhat buoyant, and the engines are started. You move in reverse, stern first; you pull yourself off the beach, using the anchor cable you had dropped before. Then, the LST is a regular ship again, no longer the beached whale. It's not a simple exercise. If the proper time is missed, the ship remains stuck on the beach until the next full tide. As officer of the deck and eventually executive officer, I would be responsible for this maneuver.

I was flabbergasted. I was going to be in a real war at only twenty-two years old! I wondered why I had volunteered so eagerly. (Years later, I understood how people felt about the Vietnam War and the ones in Iraq. Being about to go into a war zone is traumatic.)

The first person I shared my concerns with was fellow sailor

Rodney White, a very special friend. I felt comfortable expressing my concerns, possibly dying, with him, not with others. After men reach a certain age, they find it hard to show most other men their fears; they can reveal these only to a few close friends. I talked with Rod a lot about this.

I was fortunate to have a comrade in arms in Rod. We had met at Syracuse and were reacquainted at Wharton. He was bright. After Syracuse, he went to Yale Law School, but he didn't like law and after a year transferred to Wharton, thinking he would like business. I ran into him again at Newport on the "grinder," where we marched and had our inspections. I told him I was worried about going to Korea — he, on the other hand, was going to Hawaii on a wonderful ship — and I queried him about thoughts whether I should quit OCS and go to Bainbridge, Maryland, where I would become an ordinary sailor. There would have been nothing wrong with doing that either. It would have meant just two years in the Navy instead of three and with less risk of actually going to war.

Rod and I talked all this over, and after a couple of sleepless nights, I decided I wouldn't quit. I wrote to the LST captain, Lt. Elmer Atchison, telling him that I was looking forward to being on his ship and to the challenge of active duty in Korea. (My fingers were crossed.) I really laid it on thick. I began to believe it myself.

In about three weeks, he wrote back, telling me that the 611 was no longer in Korea. It was in Hawaii and was expected to be there awhile. He went on to advise me to bring my tennis racquet, golf clubs, and swimsuit.

Why had I wasted so much time and energy worrying? Now, I was really looking forward to the experience!

Hawaii is one of the most photogenic places anywhere. The skies are always blue, the clouds are whiter than anywhere else, and the palm trees sway like hula dancers. It's a wonderful environment.

There were seven officers and 100 sailors on the 611. Captain "Atch," as he was known, became my father figure. He was an old mustang (someone who had worked up through the ranks), which was unusual in the Navy. He had been a submariner in World War II and was a legitimate hero. He had tattoos all over his body. (Tattoos are chic now, but back then they meant that a sailor was drunk a lot.)

The 611's mission was supplying provisions to naval stations among the Hawaiian Islands and as far away as Midway Island – a small, sand-duned speck in the middle of nowhere. It was a seven-day trip to Midway and, because of favorable winds and currents, five days back. Then we had two weeks in port. It was very pleasant.

I discovered that my ship had been recognized for bravery in World War II. One of its unique assignments came after that war when it took all the "comfort women," girls the Japanese military had on the front lines to "comfort" them, back to their native lands, mostly Korea and China. I learned that the Japanese officers got the pretty ones and were allowed three chits a week versus the enlisted men who got what was left and only one chit a week.

When I joined the ship, the captain asked me about my educational experience. I told him I'd been an accounting major in college and then a finance major in graduate school. I suggested I could help out in the supply area. He told me that what he needed was an engineering officer responsible for damage control, someone to be in charge if there was a fire or if the ship went aground and sprung a leak. I thought back to the courses in OCS that I had struggled with in the john. What did I learn from those courses that would help a damage-control officer?

I would soon find out. On the second day of my new assignment, I heard the signal for fire.

The ship's gong system identified whether the fire was fore or aft and how deep below decks. I listened carefully. I identified that the fire was in the forward part of the ship in the fourth deck. The ship's electricity was turned off, and as I ran to where I thought was the fire, I grabbed a battle lantern, congratulating myself on that smart move. I turned on my light and rushed down to the fire, ready to help. When I got to the scene, nobody was there except me. So I climbed back up the main deck, where I saw hoses working in the middle of the ship. With battle lantern still in hand, I went back down to where the fire actually was. There the petty officer in charge of damage control saluted me and said, "Ensign Cramer, I report to you that the fire is extinguished and all is secure." Better late than never!

From being damage-control officer, which is a junior engineering post, I became the chief engineering officer. Now I knew very

little about engineering — to this day, changing a light bulb is a thought process for me — but I nevertheless became the engineering officer about three months after I boarded the ship.

I went to the first-class engineering petty officer. He was probably in his mid-thirties to my twenty-three. I told him that he was in charge of the engineering spaces and that I would do anything I could to help him. I offered to get any piece of equipment, any supplies, anything that was difficult to get. He had the authority and I would totally back him. If nothing else, I knew what I knew not. He was responsible for engineering and I was responsible for supplying his needs.

We had a symbiotic relationship. I was able to get him wonderful equipment and stay out of his hair. I knew not to be a little red-assed ensign telling him what to do when he had fifteen years' experience. It was a great relationship, and we had a first-class engineering space. The ship hummed like a Bentley.

I think one important leadership quality is getting the best out of people. Work with people, empower people, use the "martini" approach to leadership (four parts compliments and one part criticism). The Chinese philosopher Lao Tse wrote, "A leader is best when you know not that he exists." Work with them, not against them. Try this; you'll be surprised with the results

I was promoted to executive officer, the head of all operations on the ship. The executive officer is like a C.E.O. at a company. The captain is more of a chairman. The captain is responsible for the ship over all. The executive officer runs the ship. I was the No. 2 officer. We had seven officers, all young except the captain.

I had some memorable experiences in the Navy. One was with our ship's cook, a fifteen-year veteran named Sleepy Holloway. Because the ship didn't have a formal supply department, Sleepy was my man. He and another sailor were in charge of everything to do with feeding the crew. But Sleepy, who was a great cook and a great person, could hardly read and could never get promoted because he couldn't pass the necessary exams.

I got discouraged with his flunking these exams, so I asked him to come see me in my cabin. I took the exam with him by my side. Some questions were a bit tough. How do you make bread? But we

passed and he was promoted. He was so proud of having a couple more stripes on his sleeve.

There was also Jonesey. I'm pretty sure he had lied about his age when he joined the Navy. One of those freckle-faced skinny kids, he looked to be about twelve. His IQ was about equal to his age. We had gunnery practice, and one reason I'm hard of hearing today is because back then it was macho to go near the guns without earphones or even cotton in your ears. A plane would fly by with a long line dragging a sleeve about 200 feet behind. We were to aim the guns at the sleeve and try to shoot it full of holes. Not Jonesey. He aimed his gun at the plane. The gunnery officer, Frank Shoptaugh (Shoppy), was in charge of the exercise, and fortunately, especially for the pilot of the plane, he stopped him.

Then there was "Poppa" Aquire, a deck hand from Guam. He was probably about sixty and had been in the Navy since he was about eighteen. The arm of his jersey was hatch-marked. Every four years he got a hatch mark for how many years he'd been in the Navy. By the time I met him, his whole shirtsleeve was filled. When the ship arrived in Guam, it seemed like the whole population of the island came to greet us.

It was great to have guys like that around. It was a male society, a true bonding comradeship at its best. We were a team, and I was one of the leaders of the team. I was treated with tremendous respect as their executive officer. I even served as captain for a month. Everybody worked together. We had a mission. We had to manage the ship to its destination, keep its engineering in order, keep it moving, keep it clean, and keep the guns in working order. After all, we were a man of war. We weren't a great man of war or a pretty one, no sleek cruiser or agile destroyer, but we were ready to fight any enemy at any time.

Before the sailors went on shore leave, I lectured them, reminding them that they needed to know that many of the women they would meet probably had infectious diseases. I urged them to be careful even with the condoms we handed out. They'd nod understanding the good sense of my sermon, and they still would come back, drunk and disorderly, boasting of their sexual escapades. "Doc," our pharmacist mate, was kept very busy.

Because I was also the supply officer, Sleepy Holloway brought

me all the mail relating to food. I was notified that the Wisconsin cheese lobby was offering American ships at sea an opportunity to buy cheddar cheese for a penny a pound. Yes, a penny a pound. Remember, I was big on low unit costs.

I told Sleepy that this was a great deal and that we should order some Wisconsin cheddar. Three months later, we were back in port and we saw a couple of big trucks unload rings and rings of cheese. The entire dock was filled.

Sleepy (not being keen in math) had ordered a hundred times more than he should have. We put as much as we could in the hold. I was trading cheese with other Navy ships for movies, for supplies, or for anything I could think of. On the 611, we had cheese soufflé for lunch, cheese omelets for breakfast, cheese sandwiches for night watches.

Later, we received orders to leave Hawaii and go directly to Sasebo, Japan. I thought it would be educational for our sailors to try an indigenous Japanese meal. At Sasebo, I became friends with the Japanese laundryman and he gave me the recipe for sukiyaki, which the Japanese pronounce "ski-yaki," the U silent. Sleepy, under my direction, prepared the meal, and when the sailors came for dinner, I gave them chopsticks instead of silverware. They were flabbergasted with the strange utensils, trying to pound the sticks into the food or use them as shovels.

I invited my new Japanese friend to eat with us in the officers' quarters, and I asked him what he thought of the *skiyaki*. He responded politely, "Your *sUkiyaki* very good." I said, "No, the Japanese don't pronounce the U. It's called *skiyaki*." He said, again very politely, "*Skiyaki* we eat; you serve *sukiyaki*." Sleepy was clearly not an accomplished Japanese chef.

Japanese women were spectacular. For most of us Navy men, including the officers, this was the first time we'd seen such personifications of femininity, geisha-style, coy and coquette, not like the daruma girls. Daruma was the name for "easy women," who like the Japanese's toy daruma doll came right back up after you pushed them down. They were "pushovers."

Frequently, a sailor would fall in love with a Japanese girl and want to abandon ship and stay with her. Poor Jonesey was one of them. We had to send some of our more muscular crew members ashore to

find the sailors, including Jonesey, to bring them back. I can visualize them carrying Jonesey above their heads, he kicking and shaking, screaming and crying.

There are always a few in a crowd who are picked on. Jonesey was No. 1. Once I found him as the center of a commotion. He was at the side of the ship yelling, threatening to kill himself. He had "had it," he said, and was going to jump over the side. I told our pharmacist mate, Doc, a veteran, totally shaved-headed, tattooed sea dog, "We have to do something about this." I was the officer in charge at the time, and he was the enlisted man in charge. He said, "Mr. Cramer, let me handle this." He turned to Jonesey and said, "Jonesey, jump over the side right now, now jump!" Jonesey replied, "Right now? I don't wanna; you can't make me."

The 611 was an informal ship. Unlike a destroyer's crew, we didn't always follow the book. Unfortunately, the sailors didn't have the same pride as those on destroyers or cruisers. It was more like in the movie *Mr. Roberts.* It sure wasn't the gung-ho rigid Navy life. We wore only khaki shorts, flip-flops and a cap, we were bare-chested most of the time. We'd be more formal when we went ashore.

The ship was segregated by rank. The officers socialized only with the officers. But even the petty officers, who were also enlisted, would socialize only among themselves. If I had been on a big ship, I wouldn't socialize with the commanders or the lieutenant commanders. They stayed within one rank of what they were, up or down. That's the military.

Rod White came back into my life about this time. His ship was working out of Hawaii, and several of us shared an apartment on Royal Hawaiian Drive at Waikiki Beach. It was a good group: Rod, Herb Hoffman, and Paul Dietche. We constantly played tennis.

I had first met Dietche at a tennis tournament. He was quiet and gangly, and I thought he'd be an easy opponent. Instead, he blew me away; I won one game. We became buddies. One day in Honolulu we were fooling around, joking as we walked down a street, and there he saw a tin can. He started kicking it with great skill. I asked how he learned to control the can with such finesse, and he muttered, "All-American soccer, Yale." There is a modest man. To this day, he's one

of my good friends. He came to both of my weddings. I got him involved in Wall Street, where he became an analyst and a very successful money manager.

It was in the Navy that I really entered the isle of man — male comradeship. It was different from high school and college; in neither of them do I remember being particularly a man's man.

Of course, I also met some ladies. I remember one from the University of Hawaii, "Miss Pineapple." After reading about her in the local newspapers, I got on the phone and called her up cold. It was simple. I told her I was Ensign Gerry Cramer and that I'd heard a lot about her and would like to meet her. It was a bold move. She accepted my overture. She was beautiful, wonderful, and we had a nice, wholesome relationship. Unfortunately, she transferred to a college on the mainland. Had she stayed, I think we would have got to a more serious level.

Another time, my ship returned to Hawaii and the docking procedures were to attach the telephone, fuel, and water lines to the ship. Just as the phone was activated, it rang. As the officer of the deck, I picked it up. A woman on the other end asked if I was Ensign Adams. I said "I was." (What did I have to lose?) She responded, "Oh, I had such a good time with you last night at the Monkey Bar. I'd like to see you again." I said, "I'd like to see you again, too." She asked if I had a friend for her girlfriend. I told her I'd bring Rod White.

So Rod and I went to the Monkey Bar, not knowing what to look for. We walked into a dark room and eventually found our dates, two pretty Samoans. Their deep, tanned skin made a good contrast for our white uniforms. It was quite an evening. The next morning, Rod and I were on our way back to our ships happily singing and that's when he discovered his date had stolen his wallet. We stopped singing.

When we put on the Navy officer whites and walked into the Royal Hawaiian Hotel or the Moana Hotel on Waikiki, we were magnets. The women gravitated to us. First of all, it's a very attractive uniform. Second, we were fighting men. Power attracts, and we had women up the kazoo.

The Matson Lines, a steamship line out of Honolulu, brought co-eds from the University of California to spend their summers in Hawaii or for a two-week vacation. I recall one situation where a girl

was ready to go back home and her Navy officer friend came to see her off, so did her Hawaiian beach bum. He arrived in his lava-lava with leis around his neck, and his competittion came in Navy whites. Seeing his rival, the beach bum got mad and started to punch the officer; the girl got in the middle to try to hold him back. She ended up being slugged accidentally by her beach bum. She was down for the count.

I was never overly promiscuous in the Navy. I'm not saying I was celibate, but I was still gradually getting over the mindset of idolizing the "good girl" and using the "bad girl" for sex. It was still hard for me to put the two together. I was very polite and slow to become sexually intimate. I'd wait until the fifth date for that type of involvement.

There were some great women in Hawaii. For a while, I dated an admiral's daughter, who would do everything but have intercourse. Her father was in charge of Ford Island, the Naval Air Station, a major command post. When my ship entered the harbor, we'd pass Ford Island and all stand at attention and salute him, and he would wave at me. After all, I was dating his daughter. He was transferred to Japan, and she had to go with him. She used to write me wonderful love letters. One day I wrote her a "Dear John" letter telling her not to waste herself on me because I wasn't ready for marriage. I told her she was a wonderful lady, and I got back the response, "Dear Son of a Bitch." She married a month later.

My ship was assigned to a six-month tour of duty in Japan and Korea. In Sasebo there was a club called the Matsu Lodge. It was originally a Japanese officers' club and then became an American naval officers' club. Not only the single men but also married couples went there to have dinner and dance. Beautiful Japanese were dance hostesses. When you'd buy them a drink, they converse with you — junior geishas amusing their guests.

On New Year's Eve 1953, I was at the Matsu Lodge by myself and lonely. A beautiful woman walked slowly into the room. She was gorgeous. Japanese were short back then — most were five foot one or two — but this woman was probably five foot seven. Majestic. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Finally, I asked one of the other girls whom I knew as a friend to tell that beautiful woman that I'd like to meet her. Her name was Fujisan, like Japan's magical mountain. She was willing to meet me, and that was the beginning of my *Madame*

Butterfly romance. We dated. She loved to go to the American movies. I treated her like a real girlfriend. I'd take her out to the officers' club. She was so very special.

Then my ship received orders to leave port within twenty-four hours. We had a major mission. The Nationalist Chinese, were on Taiwan, and their two little islands off the China coast, Quemoy and Matsu, were being shelled by the communists from the mainland. The American naval fleet was being sent as a show of force, and the LST 611 was to be part of the flotilla.

My ship usually sailed independently, a lone wolf, but now we were part of a fleet. It was both exciting and frightening. We were always on full alert. (In the service, you were either bored to death or scared to death.) One time, a Nationalist Chinese plane flew over, and because we were so used to being informal, we weren't flying the American flag on our masthead. We quickly realized that this plane might think our LST was communist Chinese. As the Nationalist Chinese plane circled us, we hoisted up the mast the largest American flag we had so we wouldn't be mistaken as an enemy. The plane tilted its wings in recognition that we were a friend and flew away.

We were on patrol for about three weeks, and I received a medal for this exercise. Then things cooled off, and my ship returned to Sasebo.

I went back to the Matsu Lodge to see Fujisan. I asked one of the hostesses where she was. The hostess replied, "Fujisan thought you left for good. Very sad for a while, but now she is living with a commander." I asked my go-between to tell Fujisan that I was back and that I wanted to see her. Fujisan agreed to meet me the next day.

Visualize a beautiful Japanese moss-covered garden, a misty rain falling on glistening cobblestones. I waited for Fujisan in front of a torii gate to a small hotel where our rendezvous was scheduled. Then in came my beautiful woman, her face moist from the mist and her eyes like starlight. We had a most romantic reunion. At dinner in the hotel, I told her that my ship was going to have a dinner party there for the officers and that the hotel had given me a free room, one with a big mosaic-tiled ofuro (Japanese hot tub).

I was telling Fujisan all this in English in front of the Japanese manager of the hotel. Her eyes narrowed; she scowled at me, anger in

her facial expression. "What was wrong?" I asked nervously. She spoke to the manager in Japanese, agitated, then removed her signet ring and gave it to him, saying, "This is for the room — I pay, not free." Confused, I awkwardly handed him yen to pay for the room.

We went to our room, where she immediately had second thoughts, turned around, and ran from the room. In her eyes, I had made her lose face. I had treated her as if she were a daruma girl. Sadly, I prepared a hot bath, undressed, and put on a kimono trying to understand what I had done wrong. I heard a knock at the door. I opened it. It was Fujisan. She had come back. We had a poignant evening together, but she would never ever see me again.

The 611 served a major purpose in the Korean War. Before I came on aboard, it participated in a major military operation, the landings at Inchon. At that time, the North Koreans and the Chinese were galloping south and controlled South Korea almost completely. Then, the American commander in chief, General Douglas MacArthur executed a brilliant strategic strike by passing north of the enemy lines. A flotilla led by LSTs went to Inchon, a major port southwest of Seoul, surprising the enemy and cutting it off from the rear. LSTs, including my ship, brought in the marines and their supplies and formed a beachhead in the enemy's rear. Two of the three LSTs in the operation were sunk, the 611 survived.

"LST" doesn't have a ring like "destroyer," "cruiser," or "carrier." When we went ashore, we were embarrassed to say what ship we were from. Here were sailors saying they were on the cruiser *Helena* or some other famous warship, and we had to say that we were on an LST, the LST 611. It wasn't good for the ego; the handicap provoked many fistfights. It diminished the pride we had for our ship, which we did love, though not as much when we went ashore.

One day I was discussing this problem with a naval officer at Pearl Harbor. He was the chief publicist, and I asked if there was a way we could get the LSTs a name like the other ships. Battleships are named after states, aircraft carriers after famous people, cruisers after major cities. LSTs didn't have names. It was like the ship was a bastard.

The publicist and I drafted an argument to the Bureau of Naval

Personnel in Washington, spelling out the lack of respect the LSTs had received, even though they were fighting ships like any other ship in the Navy.

We got a positive answer: Henceforth, et al, (all in Navy jargon), LSTs will have names. They will be named after counties.

Wow. That was important. Since I was one of the catalysts for the momentous change, I thought my ship should be named after a well-known county, maybe Westchester. But what name did it get? *Crook County*. Not *Cook County*, which contains Chicago, but Crook County. I looked in an atlas and found that there were two of them: Crook County, Oregon, and Crook County, Wyoming.

It didn't sound respectable to say, "I'm on the *Crook County*" — were we a pirate ship? — but we accepted it. At least we now had a name.

I wrote a letter to the county commission of Crook County, Wyoming, and said, "Dear Sir, I'm very pleased that my ship is named after Crook County, Wyoming, and I want to say that we will wear your flag with pride. We'd like very much to keep you abreast of what we're doing, and we'd like your citizens to contact us." We got cookies, bolognas, correspondence from schoolchildren. My sailors felt important. I am most proud of this accomplishment.

A Honolulu newspaper even printed an article about the USS *Crook County* 611, its history of how it had taken the comfort women back to their homelands, the lone LST survivor in the Battle of Inchon, an eleven year-old lady warrior still proudly steaming ahead.

We had a recommissioning ceremony in Pearl Harbor — any excuse for a party. I contacted the recent Miss Hawaii entry in the Miss America pageant, and I asked if she would preside at the recommissioning. We also invited bureaucrats from the territory of Hawaii (it wasn't a state then) and major personages from the Navy. Miss Hawaii swung a bottle of champagne, whacking the prow of the LST 611. The bottle didn't break. She was too weak from dieting, so I helped her. And that's how the LST 611 became the USS *Crook County*.

I recently Googled USS *Crook County* LST-611 and here is what I found.

The LST-611 was an ungainly, flat-bottomed breed of

ship known as "Landing Ship Tank," designed to transport tanks, men, and equipment directly onto the beaches of war zones in Europe and the Pacific during World War II. Because the LSTs were designed to "skid" right up onto the beaches to unload their cargo, they were not expected to survive their initial landings and were not assigned names. This particular LST belied their expectations during a varied life plying the Pacific waters — Philippine landings during World War II, Korean landings during the Korean War, milk runs throughout the Pacific Trust Territories before and after the Korean War, and a top secret mission to collect samples during the H-bomb testing at Bikini Atoll — earning three battle stars during World War II and two battle stars during the Korean War.

The LST-611 was built at the "Prairie Shipyard" of the Chicago Bridge & Iron Company in Seneca, Illinois, and launched on April 28, 1944. She was then sailed down the Illinois River to the Mississippi River, then on to New Orleans, Louisiana, where she was commissioned on May 15, 1944 and turned over to her Navy crew, commanded by Lt. Roy E. Burton. Following a shakedown cruise in the Gulf of Mexico, she sailed through the Panama Canal to San Diego, then on to her homeport of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Too late for the landings at Saipan, she was in time to join the convoy headed for the Leyte Gulf in the Philippines — she landed troops and equipment at Leyte, then Mindoro Island. When she returned for another landing at Leyte she was bombed and holed in the main engine room, killing four crewmembers. Refloated and pushed to one side of the harbor, she was stripped of equipment and supplies until finally her captain made a personal plea to Admiral Nimitz and she was towed back to Pearl Harbor, then on to San Pedro, California for repairs.

While she was undergoing repairs, the war in Japan ended. She was returned to Pearl Harbor as part of Material Salvage Unit #1, transporting Seabees to various Pacific

locations for salvage operations. Upon completion of the salvage mission, she was detailed as a cargo ship, sailing throughout the Pacific Trust Territories, carrying copra (dried coconut meat), coconuts, chickens, ducks, cows, pigs, dried fish, and wandering islanders. She earned the nickname "Copra Queen" as she visited remote and exotic locations in the Marshall Islands, the Marianas and the Carolines, Kwajalein, Noumea, Samoa, and more . . .

When North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, the LST-611 was the only American LST in Yokosuka, Japan, and was pressed into service training novice LST commanders in ship handling and beaching. She landed troops on the beaches of Pusan, Pohang-Dong, and Inchon, as well as making ammunition runs between Japan and Korea.

After her service in Korea she returned to service on the "Copra Run." Crewmembers commented on this service in a letter to the *Our Navy* publication: "There are few vessels . . . who have had the privilege of hauling bug-infested copra, coconuts, dried and frozen fish, live sea turtles, dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, cows, pigs, goats, Pacific Islanders, and even Marines and Seabees. Very few vessels have had the opportunity, year in and year out, to operate in the sweltering tropical Mid-Pacific heat surrounded by carnivorous flies in the daytime and bloodsucking mosquitoes at night. Endless islands, all appearing the same, unmarked harbors, blinding coral, tropical thunderstorms, periodic typhoons, nonexistent liberty, and formaldehyde-laden beer (when available) mark the daily routine that is broken only by a few days of liberty and recreation at that famous Mid-Pacific paradise called Guam . . ."

Finally recognized for their usefulness and longevity, the LSTs were assigned names in 1955. Back in Pearl Harbor on July 30, 1955, the LST-611 was christened the USS *Crook County*. The official reason for the choice of the name Crook County is unknown, but crewmembers speculated that "these two particular counties were known for two things: rugged and durable people and rugged and tough

terrain. This LST was a rugged, durable, and tough ship, so the name seemed appropriate."

Her work over, she was finally removed from service in 1956 and mothballed — in 1959 she sailed one final time to a location off the California coast, where she was torpedoed and sunk.

We often went on liberty in Midway. We were kind of heroes of that isle because we were bringing the locals their provisions, like Scotch and cigarettes, and we were also fresh faces to locals who had island fever. Midway was also known for its many Laysan albatrosses, which sailors for decades have called gooney birds. They are clumsy on land but soar gracefully once in the air. Years later, I created a little nursery rhyme for my children, "Poor Little Gooney Bird, sits in its nest all day — when can I fly away and play?"

Randy, my predecessor as executive officer, and I went to the Midway officers' club to drink and relax. We were talking with one of the local officers and his wife. After a while, this officer asked to speak to me in private. He had a bizarre request. He said, "My wife and I have been married for ten years, and we've been trying unsuccessfully to have a child. I think she's fertile; I'm not. She kind of likes you, Gerry. Would you mind having sexual intercourse with my wife so we can possibly have a baby, so we can raise a child?"

Now this was in the early 1950s, long before in vitro fertilization, and the only way for procreation was old-fashioned sex. So what did I do? Well, first of all, remember that I'm a hick; I was having trouble understanding sexuality with women to begin with. I thought to myself, "Wow, I can't do anything like this. This is too weird for me." And, besides, she wasn't very good looking. So I replied, "I'm sorry," and then I said, "But I got somebody who might take you up on that — the guy with me." Randy was so randy that he could do it with anybody.

The officer hesitated. He went to talk to his wife and came back to say that she would agree. He spoke to Randy in private and proposed the deal, and Randy, of course, accepted.

We usually spent three or four days in Midway, five or six days en route to Pearl Harbor, a week or so in Hawaii, and then back to

Midway. The next month, the local officer, his wife, and Randy went to the officer's home for dinner. The husband then left and came to the officers' club and had a nightcap with me. A couple of hours later, Randy joined us, and he and I returned to our ship.

A happy ending. The woman became pregnant and had a much-wanted child. The husband was so appreciative that he crafted a leather wallet with a big R on it for Randy.

I began to understand the meaning of love. This officer from Midway opened my eyes: his wife's maternal needs, his unselfish act of allowing her to have sexual intercourse with someone else to realize their wish for a child. That's the ultimate love story.

I had great respect for the crew of my ship, particularly the enlisted men. The officers were all young, except for our captain, mostly around twenty-two or twenty-three years old, and like me were former civilians awash at sea. The enlisted men were ten to twenty years older. Most were World War II veterans or had joined the Navy even before that war, during the Depression, when there were so few job opportunities that the military was the only resort. (In many ways we're seeing something like this now in our volunteer military. Many of the people joining are members of minorities who are looking to the military as their only opportunity.)

During my Navy career, I saw that these enlisted men were people who loved their jobs, loved their ship, loved their colleagues. It was a unique experience for me. I knew that if they had the opportunity to go to college, who knows what they could have become. Many certainly had the intelligence and the drive to succeed.

Although a half century has passed, I remember these enlisted men's names as if it were yesterday. Sleepy Holloway and Jonesey, who provided comic relief. Lester in the engine room and Miller in damage control. Those two engineers ran their departments with sincerity and determination; they weren't chiefs; they were senior petty officers, second-class or first-class petty officers. They worked their way up the ranks. To be promoted to chief was very unusual. You had to be special, as was Elmer Atchison, and he was very special.

Chiefs and master sergeants run the military. Chiefs run ships and master sergeants run the Army. But these first-class and second-

class petty officers were the kind of men I would like to see working for me in the business world. They had the attributes I respect — passion, a work ethic — and I learned from them.

After the Navy, as my business life progressed, I didn't pay much attention to the people above me, my bosses, for want of a better word. I always paid attention to my job, which was my responsibility, creating a product, finding clients, or being a good professional. I paid much more attention to my underlings, younger people whom I could maybe help — my future Sleepy Holloways and in return receive this loyalty and contribution to our mission.

I've thought about this many times. Too many people are brownnosers, sycophants. They spend more time being obsequious to people senior to them or richer than them — people that they try to exploit with their charm. I did not pay much attention to people like that when I was in the Navy, because I wanted to make sure my ship of a hundred men sailed safely and smoothly. And I didn't care about the admiral sitting in some plush office in Pearl Harbor.

Our band of brothers — six officers on my LST — and the captain left a strong impression on me. Lt. Phil Fass loved show music, so we used to listen to show tunes, *Porgy and Bess* and *Oklahoma.* I still love Broadway show tunes because of this. We used to play bridge and have two chess games going on simultaneously. We had a serious purpose, running a ship, but we also had ample time for introspection and to gain insights into each other's personalities.

I recently reconnected with Frank Shoptaugh "Shoppy" after more than fifty years. Shoppy succeeded me as executive officer on the *Crook County.* He was a good buddy as well as a good officer. In his memoirs, he wrote about an interesting incident that I will quote:

> I had been aboard the *Crook County* for about two months, and we were doing our Midway Island milk-run thing. My friend, and fellow officer, Gerry Cramer, being a connoisseur of wine, spirits, and booze of any kind, would always bring some goodies back to Pearl Harbor that he had purchased from the Midway Island "ships store," because it was cheaper there, and because it always impressed the ladies of the island. On this trip, he had purchased a magnum of

some fancy brand of sparkling burgundy wine. Very red. In every officer's stateroom, there is a safe that is welded to the bulkhead (wall) above a desk, that is used to store classified documents, such as code books and confidential correspondence, etc. A very serious safe, for very serious and very secretive things. This is where Gerry stored his sparkling burgundy wine. About 0200 in the morning, I was awakened by nudges to my arm, and Gerry saying: "Get up, get up, I've got an emergency!" *Oh my God, we're going down* — I jumped out of my bunk and grabbed my life vest, but Gerry said "No, not that kind, it's in my stateroom." My stateroom was on the starboard side of the ship and his was on the port side so we went racing to the port side in our skivvies. Fortunately, no one was about at this hour of the morning to observe this ridiculous mad dash, and we ducked into his stateroom and he closed the curtain, which screened out unwanted eyes. There was red everywhere. The motion of the ship had caused the cork on the bottle of burgundy to pop and the red wine had soaked the classified publications in Gerry's safe, as well as the .45 caliber pistol that each officer is issued, and normally remains stored in the safe, forever. I could immediately see the need for mop-up operations, and both Gerry and I began sopping up the red stuff off of the publications with his dirty clothes, and laying out sheets of paper to dry, that were probably that day's top secret code series. Not surprisingly, everything dried out kind of red. We got the immediate crisis under control, and sat back to assess the situation. The .45 caliber pistol might get a little rusty, but nobody was in morbid danger. The classified publications would survive, but would have a little rouge tint to them, hardly noticeable in the faint light of our dingy staterooms. So we had done a great job of "damage control," my shipmate and I. And guess what. There was about two-thirds of a magnum of the bloody red stuff left in the bottle. At this time, both Gerry and I were the most junior officers on the ship, and we were not used to making "command"-type decisions. After

> thoughtful deliberation and much soul searching, we decided to drink the burgundy wine immediately, rather than risk having it further contaminate his stateroom. And so we did. And it was pretty damned good, even though it was French. And that's the kind of Navy I remember

One of our other officers, Gene Rossi, coincidentally graduated from Syracuse about the same time I did. We knew each other at school, but not well. Rossi was a certified intellectual and interested in philosophy, psychology, and classical literature. He became a philosophy teacher after he left the service.

In college, I'd had little time for quality reading; I read my textbooks and did my homework but not much more. But out at sea, we had more free time, and because of Gene, I found myself reading books like *War and Peace* and works by Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Dos Pasos, Fitzgerald, and other great authors. That's a habit I still have: I read only good books, biographies or social commentaries, not the current best-selling novels. I always want to learn. I prefer classical music, too; Sandy Eakin introduced me to good music and was the first to really stimulate my intellectual side. But it was Gene Rossi who helped me develop it.

We ate and read and played games in the wardroom, the officers' lounge. Each of us officers had his own small cabin. A room to myself — what a rare luxury! It was probably no bigger than a good-sized closet, but we had white-glove service by Filipino stewards with silverware and fine china for our meals. We were debonair twenty-two- and twenty-three-year-olds. The conversations at our meals were stimulating despite Navy regulations forbidding religion and politics. We discussed literature, history, and philosophy. I was becoming more socially aware in the Navy, though the process began in childhood with learning table manners. Mental and physical cleanliness is also a form of maturity; everything had to be shipshape.

I have a slogan I use frequently today. I tell people I'm an "anti-snob snob." So many people are snobbish. Snobbery and pseudosophistication are Gemini twins. I hate the people who go around with their noses in the air and think they have to have Fendi this or Mercedes-Benz that or have to go to the Hamptons because it's in. I want

to do the opposite. That's my form of snobbishness. I don't want to be like every other snob. So, I'm an anti-snob snob.

To sum up, the Navy was a very special experience. It was fun and I also learned a lot. It was a time in which I matured and gained some lifelong skills and good habits.The Navy was a focused period in my life. It lasted three years and four months. I was on one ship. I was captain for one month when our regular captain took a thirty-day leave.

We were scheduled to go into dry dock for a complete overhaul. Before going in, I had drawn up all the specifications and instructions for what we wanted done to the ship. The voluminous information was carefully typed by a yeoman, and the engineers carried it for me down the ship's ladder and into a small boat as I headed to review the ship's overhaul with the head of the shipyard.

After the review, I took the briefcase back to our ship. The seas were rough. As I climbed from the boat to the ship's ladder, there was slight disconnect between my boat and my ship, and I fell into the Sea of Japan. Boy, was it cold! One of my sailors quickly took off his shoes and dived in. I thought, "This guy's out to try to save my life." I saw him swimming frantically toward me, and when I was ready to lift my hand for him to grab, he swam right past me. It turned out that he was the yeoman who had done the typing and that he was determined that the briefcase get back to the ship before it became saturated with water. I was left to fend for myself. The briefcase had a higher rank.

When my Navy career ended, I was twenty-five. That stretch was 16 percent of my life, a meaningful chunk of time. At the end of my tour, when it was time to leave my ship for good, I packed my duffel bag and went ashore. I looked at my ship still attached to the dock, and I already felt nostalgic. In such parting situations we had a little ceremony — I don't know if it was universal in the Navy, but it was on my ship: The retiring officer would throw off the last line.

So the *Crook County* 611 was ready to go. The linesmen threw off all but one of the lines, which were then pulled aboard ship, leaving the last line holding the ship to a bollard on the dock. I lifted the line, looked at my ship, and threw the line into the sea. The sailors on the ship saluted me and pulled the line in. The umbilical cord was

severed. I watched the ship sail slowly, slowly off into the horizon never to be seen by me again.

In 1956, my last year in the Navy, the Bureau of Naval Personnel became very clever from a personnel perspective. They sent a letter stating that since I was an exemplary officer, would I consider staying in the service for another couple of years, two or three opportunities were available. One was to be port officer in Naples; another was to be public relations for the Rhine River Patrol, based in Heidelberg; and another was to be communications officer in Key West, Florida.

I'd never really traveled except on my LST. I had spent my entire Navy career on one ship wandering the Western Pacific. Irving Berlin wrote, "I joined the Navy to see the world and what did I see. I saw the sea." I'd never been to Europe, and I was really tempted to re-enlist for a few more years. It might be nice to have shore duty in Europe. I imagined myself singing German drinking songs. So I went down to the Bureau of Navy Personnel in Washington to hear the details of the offer. It sounded interesting.

But before I signed up for another two years, I wanted to see what job opportunities were out there in the civilian world. So I went to Wall Street. I was always interested in Wall Street.

A new chapter in my life was about to begin.