

Roberts Ramblings  
By RF "Stan" Stancik

## **Memoir Chapter: A Life in Mines and the Navy**

I was raised a Yankee in New Jersey, the son of a world that felt both ordinary and wide open. After high school, I spent two years at Mount St. Mary's College in Maryland, but I wasn't cut out for the classroom. I felt restless, like my life hadn't quite begun yet. So on August 15, 1956, I signed my enlistment papers and stepped into the U.S. Navy.

Early on, I was reminded that timing matters. During one inspection, an officer challenged me for not wearing a Korean Service ribbon. I told him to check my record—the Korean War period had ended the month before I enlisted. That small exchange would be one of the first times I stood my ground in uniform, but it wouldn't be the last.

### **Westward to Hawaii**

Boot Camp at Bainbridge, Maryland, broke old habits and made room for new ones. Afterward, I was sent to Yorktown for Mineman A school. When billet choices came around, Hawaii called to me, and I didn't hesitate.

NAS Barbers Point was my first real Navy home. I made Third Class there, though my time would be short—just a year later I was transferred to NAD West Loch, about six miles away. Barbers Point was downsizing, and only a small crew stayed behind to prepare mines for an LST heading to Bikini Atoll for an atomic test. Two of my A school classmates, Phil Dechene and Tom Hoffman, were on that operation.

West Loch became my world for the next three years. Most of my days were spent in component testing with MNC Malinowski leading the shop and MNI Sikorski and Nicklin beside me. I tested everything from K mechanisms and M5 dip needles to A5 acoustics, magnetic devices, depth charge pistols, and the guts of rocket-assisted depth charges. Once, I even had the chance to build a MK 6 drill mine—one of those small things a young sailor remembers with pride.

By the time I made Second Class, my collateral duties extended beyond mines—I became a duty driver and even a lifeguard. Trips to Honolulu to exchange movie reels turned into brief escapes from routine. At HASP, I'd grab a coffee and usually find YN3 Betty Spann, whom I'd met pulling Shore Patrol. We shared a few conversations over those cups. When I left Hawaii in 1960, I carried with me not just memories, but my old Territory of Hawaii driver license certificate—proof of a time before statehood.

### **Into the Nuclear Era**

From Charleston's B school I moved on to Key West for C school—nuclear training. Then came a year in Keflavik, Iceland, working on MK 90 and M101 nuclear weapons, getting them ready for possible deployment.

My next stop was the USS *Gilmore* (AS-16). Though it had a mine shop, I ended up in the electric torpedo shop, tending the battery locker for the MK 37 torpedo. After six months, I received orders to NAS Sigonella in Sicily. Lt. Janke met me on arrival and told me not to unpack—I'd be going TAD to Malta. That was where I met MNI Harry Bright. He created the SIG Rock Club, where every member carried a particular stone. If you were caught without it, you bought a round. It was harmless mischief, but the kind sailors remember.

Back in Sigonella, we assembled and cared for MK 36 and MK 25 mines, sometimes keeping them in Bravo condition—ready within an hour for the P2V Neptunes. I even flew a few observer missions. Meanwhile, MK 10 mines were found leaking exudate and discontinued.

Security inspections could be amusing. Our gate was always open, which raised eyebrows until LT Janke introduced Julie—our 90-pound mixed-breed watchdog. She loved sailors but had a problem with certain maintenance workers. Once she snapped a 30-foot rope to go after an Italian worker. No one questioned our security again.

## **War and Beyond**

From Sigonella I went to NAD Yorktown's QA Department. Then one morning MN2 Frank "Juice" Steedley and I heard a yeoman mention that volunteers for Vietnam would be requested. We both said, "Sign us up." Orders came immediately—and when I left, it took four soldiers to replace me.

Upon arrival in Saigon, Frank and I were assigned to manage Navy billets—four hotels each out of the sixty-three the Navy operated in Saigon and Cholon. The city still held echoes of peace then; we could visit the zoo and sit in the park on weekends. I remember Cardinal Spellman's visit, the *Hello, Dolly!* troupe with Mary Marten, and General Westmoreland snapping a salute her way. I even attended a Vietnamese military reception where I got to see an Air Force general and President Ngo Dinh Diem.

## **Across the Atlantic Again**

After Vietnam, I returned to MOMAG 0321. At Yorktown, OINC Lieutenant Ed Oyer, assured me I wouldn't deploy again as a war veteran. One month later, he said he didn't have enough people—I was going to Mildenhall, England.

Assignments changed quickly. Soon I found myself under LT Toby Horn, with MNI Stancik and MU2 Ron Wilkens, heading to CINCLANT in London and then north to Glen Douglas, Scotland near Helensburgh. There we observed the offloading of MK 52 mines and equipment. We inventoried them at Arrochar, then prepared half for transfer to RAF Machrihanish. The Naval Station there had long been inactive; when we arrived, we were the only U.S. personnel.

Civilians helped us install batteries and pressure detectors, and the Air Force sent a C-130 to bring in the mines.

Eventually, LT Stryker's team from Mildenhall joined us, and after a full tour, we returned to Charleston.

### **Chief, Senior Chief, and the Years of Travel**

In 1966, now a Chief, I joined an inspection team with Bo Bellamy. We traveled to Machrihanish, Keflavík, Andøya, Sigonella, and Souda Bay. Back home, I was made Senior Chief and later returned to Machrihanish as OINC. That was where I met Irene MacDougall. We wrote letters for nearly a year before I returned in December 1969 to marry her.

Instructor training in Norfolk came next, followed by a tour teaching A school and B school students about the MK 52, M55, MK 56, and MK 57 mines. Then MOMAG Charleston sent me to Machrihanish once again—this time with my family.

I was promoted to Warrant Officer and sent to Guam, where the mine division became MOMA Unit 8 under LT John Hughes. I served as Mine Assembly Officer and later as XO. Guam was overwhelmed with Vietnam refugees, and each command provided guards for the tent city. Our manpower was stretched thin, and we fell behind in training. During a Mine Readiness Inspection, a component test went wrong—an explosive fitting detonated inside a chamber. No one was hurt, but the failure cost me my job. LT Hughes relieved me, and I was assigned to NAS Guam awaiting orders. I spent that time writing new instructions and a "Lessons Learned" report, especially after a typhoon hit the island.

Eventually, I returned to Charleston once more, with deployments to Souda Bay in between. I served as division officer for Mine Assembly, Training, QA, and Safety.

In December 1979, after more than two decades in mines, torpedoes, nuclear weapons, and nearly every climate from Keflavík to Guam, I retired from the United States Navy.