Practice Makes Perfect

Finding Ralph, Part 1
Finding Ralph, Part 1

Free Fire Zone

Members, as a way to ensure the longevity of our great Chapter 20, I recommend that ALL lifetime members make an annual donation of $20 (equivalent to 1 year membership).

Approximately 270 members are a lifetime member, as am I. If all of our lifetime members make the same commitment, the Chapter would generate $5,400.00 extra in needed funds. Brothers and Sisters, let’s not have our chapter, that we have spent many years building it up to what it is today, die off simply because of money.

Lucien (Lou) Waters
United States Navy
1964-1967
Served in Vietnam

In conjunction with James Hendrix, Jr
United States Air Force
1992-1996
Served in Support of Desert Storm
I can remember writing an article years ago about the event that I wish everyone a Safe, Peaceful and Prosperous New Year!

Nothing has been reported from the DPMO and JPAC this month about our missing from the Vietnam War. That does not mean they are not hard at work searching, recovering and identifying our missing service men and women. The total year-to-date number of missing Americans listed by the Joint Prisoners of War/Missing in Action Accounting and the Defense Prisoner of War Missing Personnel Office are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Number of Missing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World War I</td>
<td>3,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II</td>
<td>73,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>97,978</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cold War</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1,678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Wars</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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...and the room was packed with visitors and veterans. This event gets to be a bigger production each year where Chapter 205, along with the Veterans Group of Moore and I went to the Auburn Correctional Facility to make it happen. Job well done guys!

Macedonio and the other vets who worked so hard to plan and supervise the Parade, the ceremony, the Cemetery Service, the Chamber/D Mess Hall was attended by 52 members and the Deputy of Programs were in attendance, as well as those listed as POW/MIA. Sister Roz, the facility Catholic chaplain, took part and those in attendance were able to enjoy pizza and wings afterwards. The Chapter also received permission to provide the general population with a showing of the HBO movie “The Pacific” on Veterans Day. We’d like to thank Attica’s Facility Superintendent Mark Bradt for his approval and support of the Veterans Day activities there, as well as Carl Macedonio and the other vets who worked so hard to make it happen. Job well done guys!

Chapter 489 News - According to Carl Macedonio, Chapter 489 Vice President, the Veterans Day Observance held at the Attica Correctional Facility Chapel/D Mess Hall was attended by 52 members and associate members. There was an opening prayer, Pledge of Allegiance and remembrance for all those who have died for our country, as well as those listed as POW/MIA. Sister Roz, the facility Catholic chaplain, took part and those in attendance were able to enjoy pizza and wings afterwards. The Chapter also received permission to provide the general population with a showing of the HBO movie “The Pacific” on Veterans Day. We’d like to thank Attica’s Facility Superintendent Mark Bradt for his approval and support of the Veterans Day activities there, as well as Carl Macedonio and the other vets who worked so hard to make it happen. Job well done guys!

Chapter 205 News - On December 2nd, Ken Moore and I went to the Auburn Correctional Facility where Chapter 205, along with the Veterans Group of Auburn, had their 24th Annual Christmas Give-Away. This event gets to be a bigger production each year and the room was packed with visitors and veterans. I can remember writing an article years ago about the 3rd Annual Give Away and it is just great to see the way the vets there have continued that proud tradition. Facility Superintendent H.D.Graham, who is a veteran, and the Deputy of Programs were in attendance, as well as members of the Crochet Squad and members of #205. Over 800 hats, scarves, baby sets, lap blankets, chemo caps and even three teddy bears had been completed and distributed to various agencies from Auburn. That’s right – 800! Financial donations were also made by the vets to several local community agencies from money they had raised at the prison. Ken and I were given two huge bags for School 33 and School 9 here in Rochester, which were dropped off the following Tuesday. The quality of these items is simply first rate and the camaraderie present at Auburn on that day was such a pleasure to be a part of. We thank Chapter 205, the Veterans Group of Auburn and Dennis Conway for all the hard work they put into this most worthy cause, and for increasing production year in and year out. Most of all I want to thank the guys from the Crochet Squad for their diligence and consistency and for standing tall at Auburn.

Chapter 190 News - A sincere Thank You goes out to Atmore, Alabama veterans at Chapter 190 for the Veterans Day card they sent me signed by all the members there. Officer Arnold Boben has become the new Chapter liaison and we wish him well in his new job. We also want to recognize the Holman Veterans Group for helping to reduce the recidivism rate of men who are active with Chapter 190 and we hope that more vets from the general population there can get involved.

Chapter 745 - From the great state of Washington, we heard from Harvey Talbert, Chapter President. He was able to use information we sent him on the early history of VVA at their recent Veterans Appreciation Day held at the correctional facility there. According to Harvey, the program went off with only a few minor glitches and it consisted of a color guard presentation, music, guest speakers and awards being given out. Congrats on your memorable day 745!

In closing, my budget like so many others in the chapter took a hit and I am also dealing with the reality that several of the incarcerated chapters are under suspension. However, when you go in the prisons and see what these guys are doing, it is hard to deny them whatever support we can lend them. So despite their status, I feel they have earned and deserve our support regardless. And knowing Chapter 20 as I do, I believe you support them, too. Thank you!
finding RALPH
by Vito Scarpetta

Mike, Vito, Danny and Tonie at the 2011 USS MAURY Reunion in Norfolk, VA.
It was the last week of March. Too cold to go out for a walk and I've nothing to do today so I decided to finally sit down at my desk, turn on the PC and write about what has been banging around my head for the past month or so. I thought it would be easy, but I've been sitting here for 20, 30 minutes staring at a blank white screen, wondering how to put to words thoughts that keep filling my head. Thoughts about getting old, getting farther and farther from my time in the Navy, when I was much younger than I am today. Thoughts that never came to mind when I was younger. Why would they, I was young! For some reason I keep thinking about my days in the Navy. Now that I’m retired, I have too much time on my hands and not much to do to keep me busy, I guess.

I've been retired for two years now, but I've been volunteering for a year and a half at the VA Medical Center in Canandaigua, giving back for the care that they give me. I enjoy working with the staff there and help as much as I can. We have a great working relationship, but it would be better if I was paid. Well, maybe not, I do get satisfaction knowing that I choose to work as a volunteer. I think coming to the VA Medical Center started me on this nostalgic track. All the government facilities that I’ve been to have the same smell. I don’t know what it is and can’t describe it, but it just draws me back to my time in the Navy. Anyway, for the days that I am not volunteering I work around the house trying to keep busy and avoid the inevitable part time job that most people my age sign up for.

As I said earlier I’ve been thinking about my days in the Navy and my shipmates. What are they doing now? Where do they live? Are they still alive? How do I contact them? It’s been over 43 years, where do I start? The internet! You can get anything on the internet, Of course the idea didn’t come that fast to me. I had to painfully get to that the hard way.

I started that morning by going through the stack of letters that go back to my Navy days when my wife and I wrote to each other practically every day, well really my wife did, I wrote every other day or maybe every other other day, well maybe it was once a week. Anyway, I still have all two hundred and eighty-seven letters and every once in a while I take them up from the basement and read through them. Like I said today was one of those days, but today I not only brought up the letters I brought up the whole plastic bin, and in it there are also pictures. Pictures of a younger me, of a beautiful girl that became my wife, and them guys. Them being my old Navy buddies and pictures that I had taken when I was overseas. I just sat there flipping through the pictures and my mind dove into each one and floated in the memories. I had to stop because I’ve done this before and lost a lot of hours just sitting and looking at pictures. Trying to squeeze back in time and feel young again. By reading some letters and looking at the pictures I had a head full of ideas and things I wanted to do, but for some reason I kept coming back to my old shipmates. I didn’t know where to start. I had my 1968 cruise book from the Maury. I had my shipmates’ pictures, but all I had was their names, no addresses or even what part of the country they lived in. And of course my memory wasn’t worth a darn at this time in my life so I couldn’t remember where they all lived, just a few. I could start by contacting some of the guys I hung out with while on board ship. I knew where they lived back in 1967-68, maybe they were still living in their home towns. I kept thinking, what were they doing today? I wanted to know how they made it through the years. Was it just me or were they thinking the same things? What the hell happened to Vito? It must just be me, or else someone would have contacted me by now. Yeah, but why did it take so long for me to start looking?

I don’t know if it’s just me, but I keep thinking back to when I was younger, way before the new aches and pains started popping up. For some reason I keep thinking about when I was in the Navy back in 1967, back at the Naval boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois, back on board the USS Maury and the friends I made. Back when my life was a lot simpler and less complicated. Back when the sun was hotter and it was okay to get a tan. When I was younger I couldn’t wait to leave the

This short story is dedicated to four guys that met at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, Illinois boot camp and sailed together on the USS Maury, AGS 16. We had the same idea back in 1967.....Join the Navy and see the world. Some of the events and conversations were made up to replace the memory loss of the author. There’s something to be said about the privilege of growing old.
I could still smell the diesel fuel and salt water from the docks at Pearl, feel warm breezes and hear the sound of chipping paint as the crew prepared to get under way on yet another cruise. For me, however, it was my first cruise. I could see my shipmates in their work clothing, dungarees and blue denim shirts, their white sailor hats sitting back on their heads, a cigarette hanging from their mouths as they carry stores of food supplies on their shoulders, through the hatchway bound for the store rooms. Others crossing the boarding ramp in their whites coming and going on liberty trying to squeak out another day as a make-believe civilian. A flood of memories fill my mind and brings me to a stop. Even now as I sit at my desk and stare at my iMac I am spellbound, not seeing the page in front of me or anything, just staring into the past. The feeling is so damn strong and magnetic, pulling me back in time. I read once that certain smells are associated with events in your past life and just the faintest whiff will bring you back. It's true. I am nowhere near salt water or diesel fuel, so it must be the musky smells from the pictures I brought up from the basement in a plastic container. Three years of memories in one album and several envelopes full of pictures, not to mention all the letters I sent to my wife and letters she sent to me that we've kept. We haven't read them out loud together in a while. We used to. It seemed like fun, reading mushy love stuff that two teenagers wrote to each other. Words of undying and faithful love. I can feel a smile breaking as I look down at the plastic container, so many memories in those envelopes. So many wishes and dreams and hopes. I reached down and picked up an envelope. I slowly opened the envelope and pulled out a letter, careful not to rip it as I unfolded the aged paper. There was the faintest hint of perfume still clingning to the letter. I can't even remember the name of the perfume, but the smell, it brought back sweet memories. I read the first few lines that I wrote to my wife who was my girl at the time. I was in the Philippines when I wrote it, a scary and exciting place for any young man wanting an adventure. I remembered a pier in Subic Bay, it was July of nineteen sixty-eight, the USS Maury tied up to the dock, sailors walking up and down the plank to get on board the ship or go out on liberty. I could smell the wooden pier baking in the hot sun. Dead fish and diesel fuel rainbows floating on the water. I can feel the sun on my back as I watched the medics in their quarter-ton ambulance take Ralph away from the ship. What happened to Ralph? Where is he? What happened to him after he was taken away? Is he still alive? Many unanswered questions were left on that pier in Subic Bay as I watched Ralph airlifted from our ship to somewhere for treatment. Ralph and I never discussed what made him so sick that he had to be medivac’d off the ship. It took 43 years for me to find out that Ralph had encephalitis. I can feel myself slipping back in time as I thought about it. I think it was sometime early in my senior year of high school, maybe the fall of nineteen sixty-four, when I first read James Michener's Hawaii. I read each word slowly and although I wasn't really interested in knowing how a rock was formed, I loved the book just the same. I wanted to become a Hawaiian, live the life, surf the waves, eat the roasted pig and dip my fingers
into the purple poi, and dance the hula with those beautiful Hawaiian women. I was just in love with everything Polynesian and all it took was 937 pages of an incredible book. I was also in love with anything else but New York City. I had had enough of the city and wanted to see the world, but how could a kid from the Jefferson Projects in Harlem scrape up enough money to go to Hawaii? I didn’t know how, but I knew that someday I would see Hawaii. Even though it was as far away from New York as the moon, it was going to happen, I was determined to find a way. One night as I was finishing up the book, I thought about joining the Navy, but I was still a senior in high school and my parents were determined that I should go to college. My parents talked me out of signing up right after I graduated, but I wasn’t ready to go to college so I took a job instead. I respected their wishes for two years and in June nineteen sixty-seven I took a military leave of absence from my job and joined the Navy. I thought that I could just ask to be sent to Hawaii as a reward for joining up. Yeah, right. I soon found out that it didn’t work that way, but by that time it was too late I was already signed up and on board a train to Chicago and the Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

We all met in boot camp, Great Lakes Naval Training Center outside of Chicago. I had just arrived from a long train ride from New York City, Chicago was just another big city, but it was a new city to me. The buildings weren’t as tall and they weren’t densely packed like in New York, but it still generated a feeling of adventure. Even the air smelled different. I was excited and couldn’t wait to see what was next. The bus ride to the Naval Center seemed to go on forever as the Chicago skyline behind us grew smaller and eventually disappeared. I watched a lot of WWII movies and knew that boot camp would be something I would have to get used to. I would have to learn to deal with guys older, younger and my age, and also guys from many diverse back grounds. I was 19 and figured it would be a piece of cake. Besides, I thought, I’m from New York, I can handle anything. It turned out to be a little tougher than I thought. That included being away from home.

The bus finally passed through the gates of Great Lakes and dropped us off at the “Welcome Center” so we could begin our Navy life. Here we got our heads shaved and found out just how many needles we could endure, received our new wardrobe and a navy blue canvas seabag to carry it in. We were then told to form a double line and we marched to our barracks. After a half hour march that felt like an eternity, we finally made it to our barracks. I was tired and limping and just wanted to sit down and rest, but that was out of the question. We needed to learn how to do more with less complaining and whining, so after dumping our seabags on our racks we were led out to the parade ground and marched around the grounds several times. As it turns out, we did this so that our chief would have time to get his act together before meeting us. It was our first experience with “hurry up and wait” and wouldn’t be the last. My shins were killing me and I was limping as we piled back up the steps and onto our racks only to be yelled at by the drill Sargent, James Coleman, (I thought I joined the Navy, not the Marines!) dressed in his whites with khaki spats laced up to his shins.

“We do not lie on our beds until it’s time for taps! Now get the hell off of those racks and get your gear into your lockers.”

James was the same drill Sargent that hustled around the grounds. I thought he was a jerk and was convinced of it when I found out that he was from New York, but like everything else, just give it some time get to know the person and eventually you’ll either like ‘em or hate ‘em. As it turns out, he was a good guy, just doing his job and helping us cope with our new Navy life. Back then I just wanted to lie down and have a smoke. Not going to happen. We found out that there was a time for that when the Navy wanted it to happen and not a minute sooner. We had to wait for the “smoking lamp to be lit” before we could light up.
The barracks were fairly new and somewhat sterile. The walls were painted light gray and the floors gray linoleum tiles. Our steel gray bunks were double deckers with thin blue and white striped mattresses, like those you see in prison movies. The double decker bunks filled the sleeping area. Off to one side of the room was large bathroom, or as we were told later, "the head." The room was painted light gray and had several rows of toilets and urinals and a large open shower stall with ten shower heads hanging from the tiled wall.

As it turned out our barrack was equally divided into two groups, guys from the NYC area (including New Jersey) and the southern states, Alabama, Mississippi and even some guys from Louisiana. Since New York was my home town and I already knew people from New Jersey, I decided to find out if the guys from the South were really that much different from us. Just how different were they from the northern guys? Was it just their accent, dress, style or food? What was the difference? It was their attitude and all the above yet they were no different from us northern guys, just different experiences growing up. They were a little afraid of the unknown and just as excited as I was to get out of their small towns and see the world.

Ralph was comical to watch as he tried to fit in and march with the company on our daily parade ground marches. He was just too tall and lanky to march in line with the rest of us.

I first met Mike the next day at boot camp. From the sound of his accent I knew that he was from New York, but didn’t know if it was a Brooklyn or Bronx accent. Mike was from the Throgs Neck area in the Bronx, I wasn’t too familiar with the area, but would be in the future. The Bronx was the natural migration route for families leaving Harlem. We decided to watch our backs since we were both from New York. It was a good thing we did. Mike wasn’t the most dedicated sailor in the group and often caused us to have extra duties or no smoke breaks because he forgot to fix his bunk correctly or didn’t have his clothes stacked properly. Some of the guys decided that Mike needed a lesson to get his act together so they decided to give him a blanket party. If you’re not familiar with the term it’s a night raid on an individual. The group would wait for lights out, the victim to fall asleep, then surround the poor guy’s bunk and pull his blanket up over his head hold it down and start hitting him for several minutes or until the person was able to escape. Anyway, Mike was scheduled for a blanket party one night and since we had each other’s backs, I let him know about it. Mike was up when the group came by and after convincing them that he would fly straight, they let him go.

I met Ralph the day after the aborted blanket party and thought he was a curious kind of guy. Tall, skinny, walked kind of loopy. He sounded like a hippie with a southern drawl, if that makes any sense. I found out that he was from Foley, Alabama, down around the gulf shore, not too far from Mobile. Ralph thought he was a wise guy. He was working alongside of me on kitchen duty and asked.

“Where the hell you get that weird way of talking, boy?”

I didn’t know if he was just pulling my chain or wanted to start a fight. I didn’t think fighting would be the way to go on the second day at boot camp so I decided to give it back to him and see where it went. “Where do you think asshole? I’m from New York,” I replied.

He looked down at me and smiled and said. “Just checking boy, you’re OK. Calm down man.”

“Hey, drop the boy shit, my name is Vito,” I said and from that day on we became friends.

Ralph was comical to watch as he tried to fit in and march with the company on our daily parade ground marches. He was just too tall and lanky to march in line with the rest of us. Even Tiny Carmen, from New Jersey, as big as he was, marched well. The Navy was determined to make us conform to their rules. Marching, training classes and psychological and mental pressures were doing the trick for most of us. I say most of us because Ralph was still pissed about losing all of his long hair on the first day at camp.

Danny had the pleasure of being in line after Ralph and watched as he told the barber to take a little off the top. Danny watched as the barber nodded, took the shaver and buzzed from the back of Ralph’s head up to the top leaving a valley of white scalp where his hair once was. Danny said that the look on Ralph’s face was priceless. He thought Ralph was going to cry as he watched his hair fall down the front of his head and onto his lap. Danny said he laughed so hard he thought he was going to piss
he smiled as he walked back. Damn, I thought, I hope I stopped halfway back and began reading his orders. Mike walked up to Mr. Sokolowski and got his orders. Mike squeezed the life out of you. All that muscle was from wrestling and it showed why he was once All State champion wrestler in Alabama. Danny was a good guy to have on your side.

The months flew by with classes in seamanship, drills, duties and a couple of Liberty Calls to Chicago and Milwaukee. Mike managed to fly straight and didn’t get any more late night blanket parties. We were heading into the stretch. Soon we would graduate, parade around the grounds, and get an award for the best company parade. After all the bitching and griping we finally made it to the end of our training. On the final day, all the companies were gathered in the gym facing the grandstand and the Battalion Commander, Captain Sullivan.

Captain Sullivan gave his closing speech and then each company commander called the names of sailors in his company and presented them with their orders and next duty station or school. After several grueling months of boot camp it was finally over. We were down to the last few hours and would find out where our next duty station would be.

Mike and I were seated next to each other. Danny, Ralph and a few other guys were across the floor in the gym. I was nervous, didn’t know what to expect and kept prying that I would be stationed on a ship whose home port was on the West Coast – anyplace but the East Coast. And then our company commander, Chief Sokolowski began reading off the names of the guys, alphabetically. Danny was called before any of us. He marched up and took his orders from the commander. Danny became one of the guys that hung together and stuck together.

McKibbon was next and the skinny kid got up and walked up to the commander and took his orders. Now Ralph knew what Danny had gotten and as he read his orders his face lit up and he walked a little faster back to his spot next to Danny. Ralph said something to Danny and showed Danny his orders. Danny jumped up and began hugging Ralph. They were horsing around for a few minutes as Chief Sokolowski continued calling names. I couldn’t imagine where those two were going, but it looked like they were happy. Danny had a shit eating grin on his face. I thought he was going to bust as he hopped around Ralph. The guys around them were laughing. Ralph was pushing Danny away, trying to gain some composure and coolness.

Finally, the commander called my name and I walked up and received my orders. I was almost afraid to look down as I walked back, but the anticipation and excitement of the day was too much for me to wait and so I looked down and read, “USS Maury, AGS 16, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.” I couldn’t believe it. Hawaii! Hawaii! God Damn Hawaii! After all those days and nights reading Mitchner’s Hawaii, page after page after page, loving every word that described the rocks and plants and palm trees and people and surf and all, I was going to Hawaii!

I felt like I was frozen to the floor. I couldn’t take another step and then Mike called out to me. “What ya get?” and the freeze was broken. I looked up at Mike and called out. “The Maury, I got the Maury, I’m going to Hawaii with you!”

“WHAT? Yeah? Son of a bitch! Great! Come on let’s compare our orders,” Mike said as I ran back to my spot on the gym floor.

We compared our orders and found that we both had the same orders, reporting time - October, where?
- Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and our designated duties - Deck force? “What the hell is Deck force?” I asked.

“Sweeping, chipping, painting, all the grunt stuff,” Mike said.

“Shit, I don’t care. It’s in Hawaii,” I said.

Well, several weeks later I did care once I found out what the Deck force really was. The lowly seaman. No particular specialty to work at, nothing of great importance, just the clean-up men on board ship. The guys that chipped the old gray paint off the bulkheads and painted it a new gray. The guys that hung on swings over the side of the ship and again, chipped the paint off and painted it new. The Deck force made sure that the decks were swept and swabbed and the brasswork shined. We were the janitors! Sweeping, cleaning and other grunt work just wasn’t what I wanted to do for the next four years, but what really clinched it was the sleeping quarters. The Deck force quarters were
We were the complete opposites, Ralph a little over six feet, thin as a rail, talked with a southern drawl, wore his hair a little too long in the front for military standards, probably a throwback to his earlier days as a protesting hippie in rural Robertsdale, Alabama. Me, not quite 5’7” from the streets of Harlem, NY talked faster than Ralph could hear, Ralph was always saying, “Huh, what’d you say?” and right wing - like I said, two opposites. Ralph tried to play it tough, but he wasn’t. He was like the rest of us; a little leery of what Navy life would bring. Who would be our allies and our enemies? Trying to find some strength in friendships, and we did.

Ralph had a knack for playing pool. He could make that cue ball dance around the green felt hitting the soft sides and slamming into whatever ball he aimed at. He called the shots and always made them. He tried to teach me, but that was a waste of time. I was lucky if I bagged a couple of shots that I’d called. But Ralph was so precise and always took his time eying the ball to the pocket he was aiming for. He’d chalk up the cue stick, lean his thin body over the table and position himself until he was comfortable, then call the shot. Then, right before he took his shot, his long straight hair would flop down around his eye and he’d brush it back in one smooth motion, eye the ball again, settle himself and shoot. Smack! There would be a sharp crack as the cue ball hit his targeted ball and disappeared in the pocket he called as the cue ball bounced against the rim and back to Ralph.

You know, that’s all I can remember about Ralph, or maybe I just forgot. Tall, skinny, played pool, talked with an Alabama drawl. That’s not much. I don’t even know if he had any brothers or sisters, or if his Mom and Dad were married or divorced. One would think we would know more about each other, but then again it was only a year. Jeez, just a year. From boot camp to Pearl, to Guam, to Subic Bay and Manila, to Viet Nam, Bangkok, Hong Kong, then back to Subic Bay. All that in one year. Join the Navy, see the world, make good friends. What more can you ask for at nineteen?

In July, the ship pulled into Subic Bay, Philippines after several months off the coast of Viet Nam for supplies and refueling and it all ended. All those times we went on liberty together in Honolulu, Guam, Manila, Hong Kong, Bangkok, the nights we just went to the Enlisted Men’s Club instead of going out with no money in our pockets. All of that ended. Our slush fund (loan sharking) to make money (five dollars for seven dollars back) from our shipmates’ drinking or gambling habits. Ended. All of that in just six or seven months. Over and out. Ralph was gone. Taken off the ship and medivac’d somewhere back in the States. I received a letter from Ralph in October of 1968 after we pulled back into Pearl, but can’t remember what I did with it. I wrote to his Mom several times and she replied, but we sort of lost contact and, for the life of me I can’t find her letters or Ralph’s.

Now I’m just rambling and need to slow down. I am getting ahead of myself. Let’s go back to what started all of this thinking and mind time traveling.

We were all going to be stationed on our first ship together. What a hoot! Since I was no longer assigned to the Deck force, Mike and I sort of went our own way, but we remained good friends. We were always there for each other. Surprisingly, Ralph and I drifted together and Danny popped in and out when he wanted, but again like Mike, we remained good friends, always there for each other.

Why Ralph and I chose each other as friends I’ll never know. Ralph was very different than any of the other guys I hung out with in New York City. We were the complete opposites, Ralph a little over six feet, thin as a rail, talked with a southern drawl, wore his hair a little too long in the front for military standards, probably a throwback to his earlier days as a protesting hippie in rural Robertsdale, Alabama. Me, not quite 5’7” from the streets of Harlem, NY talked faster than Ralph could hear, Ralph was always saying, “Huh, what’d you say?” and right wing - like I said, two opposites. Ralph tried to play it tough, but he wasn’t. He was like the rest of us; a little leery of what Navy life would bring. Who would be our allies and our enemies? Trying to find some strength in friendships, and we did.

So are we!" Danny said.
"Must be one sorry son of a bitch of a boat for them to send all four of us on it," Ralph said.
"Don’t care, I’m going," I said and all four of us hugged.
"OK, OK. Break it up you sorry ass school girls," Coleman said as he passed us by. "I take it you four are reporting to the same ship? Feel sorry for them," he said.
"Yeah, bullshit!" Mike said.
"Yeah, I’m just breaking your balls. Good luck guys," Coleman said as he walked away.

We just stood there in disbelief, wondering how damn lucky we were to get a ship whose home port was Hawaii. I couldn’t wait to tell my girlfriend Geri, my Mom and Dad.....Hawaii.

We were all going to be stationed on our first ship together. What a hoot! Since I was no longer assigned to the Deck force, Mike and I sort of went our own way, but we remained good friends. We were always there for each other. Surprisingly, Ralph and I drifted together and Danny popped in and out when he wanted, but again like Mike, we remained good friends, always there for each other.

Why Ralph and I chose each other as friends I’ll never know. Ralph was very different than any of the other guys I hung out with in New York City. We were the complete opposites, Ralph a little over six feet, thin as a rail, talked with a southern drawl, wore his hair a little too long in the front for military standards, probably a throwback to his earlier days as a protesting hippie in rural Robertsdale, Alabama. Me, not quite 5’7” from the streets of Harlem, NY talked faster than Ralph could hear, Ralph was always saying, “Huh, what’d you say?” and right wing - like I said, two opposites. Ralph tried to play it tough, but he wasn’t. He was like the rest of us; a little leery of what Navy life would bring. Who would be our allies and our enemies? Trying to find some strength in friendships, and we did.

Ralph had a knack for playing pool. He could make that cue ball dance around the green felt hitting the soft sides and slamming into whatever ball he aimed at. He called the shots and always made them. He tried to teach me, but that was a waste of time. I was lucky if I bagged a couple of shots that I’d called. But Ralph was so precise and always took his time eying the ball to the pocket he was aiming for. He’d chalk up the cue stick, lean his thin body over the table and position himself until he was comfortable, then call the shot. Then, right before he took his shot, his long straight hair would flop down around his eye and he’d brush it back in one smooth motion, eye the ball again, settle himself and shoot. Smack! There would be a sharp crack as the cue ball hit his targeted ball and disappeared in the pocket he called as the cue ball bounced against the rim and back to Ralph.

You know, that’s all I can remember about Ralph, or maybe I just forgot. Tall, skinny, played pool, talked with an Alabama drawl. That’s not much. I don’t even know if he had any brothers or sisters, or if his Mom and Dad were married or divorced. One would think we would know more about each other, but then again it was only a year. Jeez, just a year. From boot camp to Pearl, to Guam, to Subic Bay and Manila, to Viet Nam, Bangkok, Hong Kong, then back to Subic Bay. All that in one year. Join the Navy, see the world, make good friends. What more can you ask for at nineteen?

In July, the ship pulled into Subic Bay, Philippines after several months off the coast of Viet Nam for supplies and refueling and it all ended. All those times we went on liberty together in Honolulu, Guam, Manila, Hong Kong, Bangkok, the nights we just went to the Enlisted Men’s Club instead of going out with no money in our pockets. All of that ended. Our slush fund (loan sharking) to make money (five dollars for seven dollars back) from our shipmates’ drinking or gambling habits. Ended. All of that in just six or seven months. Over and out. Ralph was gone. Taken off the ship and medivac’d somewhere back in the States. I received a letter from Ralph in October of 1968 after we pulled back into Pearl, but can’t remember what I did with it. I wrote to his Mom several times and she replied, but we sort of lost contact and, for the life of me I can’t find her letters or Ralph’s.

Now I’m just rambling and need to slow down. I am getting ahead of myself. Let’s go back to what started all of this thinking and mind time traveling.

To be continued...
Are you a veteran looking for a way to assist your fellow veterans? Volunteer as a Peer Mentor in Monroe County Veterans Court.

Peer mentors are veterans who assist and support fellow veterans in the Criminal Justice System. Typical duties include appearing in court and maintaining contact with the veteran.

A Peer Mentor Provides:
- Emotional Support
- Insight necessary for the Veteran to successfully complete the Veterans Court
- Assistance to the Veteran in resolving their concerns about the court procedures
- Assistance to the Veteran in accessing and navigating the Veterans Affairs System

If you are interested, please contact Michael Volkmer, Court Coordinator of Veterans Court at (585) 428-4428.

Vietnam Veterans of America
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Women Veterans Program Manager

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Canandaigua, NY 14424
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SANGIN DISTRICT Afghanistan-Lance Cpl. Brian Castillolinarez, an M249 squad automatic weapon gunner, from Brooklyn, N.Y., provides security during a patrol here, Nov. 30. The Marines of Company A, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, take part in counterinsurgency operations in the Sangin District, limiting support for an insurgency with longstanding ties to local communities.

Cpl. James Clark, Marine Corps

Freedom Calls

Is someone you love serving in the military in Afghanistan, Iraq or Kuwait? You can now schedule a video conference with your soldier for FREE!

The Freedom Calls Center is located in the lower link level of the Bausch & Lomb Public Library Building and is available by appointment only. Call 428-8304 to find out how to schedule a call to your soldier today!

This service is provided courtesy of the Rochester Public Library, the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 20, the Freedom Calls Foundation and the County of Monroe.

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Ali Al Saleem Airbase
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The mission of My HealtheVet (MHV) is to improve health care for ALL veterans, independent of where they receive care, by providing health information and health assessments via the Internet. MHV is a web site designed for veterans and their families with the goal of optimizing veterans’ health care. It is for all veterans and offers additional services to those receiving care at VA medical centers.

MHV registrants will also be able to view appointments, co-pay balances and copies of key portions of their VA medical records online and much more as additional functionality is released. This is available to veterans, their families, veteran advocates and VA employees. Non-veterans are welcome to use many of the features, although they will not have access to all functions VA patients have.

You can access the website at www.myhealth.va.gov. You will need to register to use key features and will be assigned a User ID and Password for return visits. Please note that in order to access enhanced options of this website, you must complete an “In Person Authentication” (IPA) at your local VA facility. This step provides for confidentiality of your information and is required by The Privacy Act, Title 5 United States Code (U.S.C.) 552a, implemented by Title 38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) §575.1.584.

MHV provides access to:
• Online prescription refills with the VA
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MHV is a web site designed for veterans and their families with the goal of optimizing veterans’ health care.
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA, CHAPTER 20

Name: __________________________________________ Date of Birth: ____________________

Address: ________________________________ Sex: □ M □ F

City: ____________________________________ Home Phone: (_____) ____________________

Zip: ___________________________ Country: __________________ Work Phone: (_____) ______________

Chapter # (if known) __________________________ Email Address: __________________________ □ W □ H

I am not a Vietnam Vet, but I want to help Vietnam veterans and their families. Please accept my
donation: □ AVVA Membership
□ $10 □ $20 □ $50 □ Other ($________)

Payment Options: □ Check □ Money Order

Eligibility: Vietnam and Vietnam-era veterans who served on active duty in the U.S. Military (for
other than training purposes) between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975 (in-country Vietnam),
or between August 5, 1964 and May 7, 1975 (for Vietnam-era veterans).

Term: □ 1 year: $20 □ Life Membership: $250 (ages 49 & under), $225 (ages 50-55),
□ 3 years: $50 □ $200 (ages 56-60), $175 (ages 61-65), $150 (ages 66 & over)

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□ $10 □ $20 □ $50 □ Other ($________)

Payment Options: □ Check □ Money Order

Return this application, along with a copy of your DD214, to:

Attn: Membership, Vietnam Veterans of America, P.O. Box 12580, Rochester, NY 14612

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JANUARY 2012
1 SUN • New Year's Day
9 MON • Board of Directors, 7:00 pm
12 THU • General Membership Meeting, 6:30 pm
15 SUN • Nixon orders ceasefire in Vietnam - 1973
16 MON • Martin Luther King Day
17 TUE • Operation Desert Storm began, 1991
28 SAT • United States Coast Guard established, January 28, 1915
30 MON • Tet Offensive began, 1968

In January 1968, the Tet Offensive erupted, and North Vietnamese troops assaulted and breached the U.S. Embassy in Saigon’s security, causing damage to the building and killing a number of U.S. citizens before the attackers were killed and the compound secured.
U.S. Marine Corps photo

MEETINGS

BOD
2012: January 9, February 6, March 5, April 2

NYSC Meetings Owego, NY
2012: February 4, March 24, June 16, September 29

Membership
Now starting at 6:30 pm!
2012: January 12, February 9, March 8, April 12

Vietnam Veterans of America
Chapter 20, Rochester, NY
P.O. Box 12580
Rochester, NY 14612

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24/7 365 days/year
Provides professional counseling to veterans, their family members or friends.

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