

TAPE NO.33M

Coast Guard: Jimmy Alger.

Retired:

Today is Thursday the 27th day of April and I am visiting Jimmy Alger at his home in Pompano Beach and Jimmy has agreed to share his memories of his active Service life and maybe something about his post Service life. Without any further ado, Jimmy it's yours.

O.K. I just want to start off by saying that I was born into the U.S. Coast Guard because my Dad was a member of the Class of 1905!

When I graduated from High School my wish was to go into the Coast Guard Academy but I wasn't old enough, because I graduated from High School at 16. So, I went to College - the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and after two years I said to my Dad that I would still like to go to the Coast Guard Academy and he said "Look, you've finished two years of College, so go ahead and finish." So I did, but in the meantime I was enrolled in the R.A.R.O.P.C. Program in the Coast Artillery Corp. for four years and I took my active training down at Fort Monroe and exercised on their big guns down there and earned my commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Army. About the same time I applied for a temporary commission in the Coast Guard which was open at that point because the Coast Guard was short of Engineers and they had a lot of Destroyers.

(Sam) What year would this be?

That was in 1931. So, as an Ensign - 21 yrs old - with a temporary Commission, I started off my Coast Guard career.

I might say that, as I was growing up, my Dad was Exec., now they call it Assistant Superintendent, of the old Coast Guard Academy at Fort Trum. and so I spent three years there growing up at Fort Trumble and going to school locally in New London so the Academy was very much in my background at that time.

Well, anyway, coming into the Coast Guard it was during the days of Prohibition and as an Engineer I found myself whizzed through the Student Engineering Course in about 6 months and at the age of twenty-two I was Chief Engineer of the Destroyer "McDougall."

(Sam) Now that moved right along, and still an Ensign?

Still a temporary Ensign.

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Following that, when the "McDougall" went out of commission, I turned back to the Navy. I went to the 'Mendota' for about 6 months and then I was ordered to the 'Hunt', the Destroyer 'Hunt' in New York as an Engineer Officer and with the famous Joe Greenspan, whom we called "Regulation Joe", and sooner or later she went out of commission when Prohibition was repealed.

So then, my next ship was as Engineer Officer of the "Algonquin", which was building at P.C. Jones Shipyard, Wilmington, Delaware.

(Sam) That's 165 ft.

A 165ft cutter, configured as an ice-breaker but lacking the power to be very effective in that department, and put in a year aboard her and meanwhile having made permanent commission. About the time I made J.G., in 1935, I was ordered out to the "Chelan", out in Seattle as Engineer Officer, as a J.G. I put in several years on the "Chelan" and then another year on the "Kyuga" on mine duty and then I was ordered to Washington, D.C.

(Sam) Was the "Chelan" included in the Bering Sea Patrol?

Yes. I made the Baring Sea Patrol on the "Chelan", yes.

(Sam) What year?

That was in 1936.

(Sam).. ..and the next year your Dad was a Patrol Commander.

Yes, he was Commander, Bering Sea Patrol later but during the year I put in on the "Chelan" they were finishing up the "Ingle" and she came out and took station. Relieved the "Chelan" at Port Angeles and we took the "Chelan" around to the East Coast, to Boston. So, after a year on the "Cayuga" I was ordered to Washington, D.C. to Head Quarters, Engineering and I had the marvellous good luck to work with the greatest Engineer I think the Coast Guard Ever had - one Harvey Johnson.

While I was there I was sort of a 'Jack of all Trades' taking assignments as they were handed to me - starting in the Design Section of Naval Engineering and, an interesting side-line on that, we were also getting ready for War. Johnson was well aware that we were eventually going to be at War, even although it was a couple of years away.

About that time, the Navy ordered the Coast Guard to degauze 116 of it's ships. They said they didn't have the man-power to do the design and order the material but they had the material, if we would design and order it. And, of course, who got stuck with the job but me..... It was very interesting because it was a new science and the British had the know-how and they had sent experts over to our Country.

I worked up the formulas that would accommodate our ships as I saw the problems - slightly different from the Navy's ships. Our ships were more beamy in relation to their length and the ultimate result was coming up with the number of amp-air turns and the size of the wire and the controls and was called temporary degauzing and this was all in the waterways and they wanted to do it in the waterways of the ships and wanted to do it right now..... so that was interesting. Then, having done that, why, Harvey Johnson controlled all the money for the Coast Guard except for pay allowances and a couple of minor allotments.

(Sam) Even Operations?

At that point we didn't have an appropriation called Operating Expenses. We had one called General Expenses but yes, all the money for Procurement, Fuel and particularly what we now call A.C. and I., for Construction was under his discretion and Admiral Goldman, the Chief Finance Office was kind of jealous of Johnson because Johnson had all the money and all Goldman had was the Accountants, the people who were supposed to keep track of them. Johnson had his own Budget Officer, and that was Heiner, Commander Heiner, so Goldman arranged for Heiner to be snatched away from Johnson, figuring he would get control of the money but Johnson put me in the job - so here I am working for Johnson in charge of the money and he was doing all sorts of things that were not supposed to be done with the money - i.e. spending next year's money for this year's needs. In other words - spending the money that we being asked right now before we got it. My job was to keep things straightened out so nobody went to jail.

Judge Harrison was the Chief Legal Officer of that time and Johnson was trying to get him in a proper mood to help him out with these "improprieties", if you want to call them that! One time Judge Harrison said to Admiral Johnson - "Admiral", he said, "I think what your telling me is to find some legal way to perform an illegal act", and Johnson said, "Judge, you've got it just right - that's what I've been trying to tell you right along."

At any rate, War did come and after Pearl Harbour I put in for sea duty and pulled a few wires, or strings, what-ever you call them and got command of the Coast Guard Cutter "Dianne" out of Norfolk. We were immediately very busy

because the Germans had sent over enough sub-mariners to cause a lot of trouble down around Cape Hatteras, which is a normal working area.

For the first six months of WW11 it was a very busy time for us and we learned a lot and we saved a lot of people and discarded a lot of ships and we were ultimately pretty effective for a little 165ft Cutter.

(Sam) You didn't operate independent of Convoys?

Yes, we operated completely independently offshore. We were not with a group, we were by ourselves. They didn't have enough ships at that time to form convoys.

All that is contained in a recent book, which has just been published, called "Torpedo Junction", which tells the story of events of that time very factually and I think that.....

(Sam) Was this author one of your crew members?

No.

Anyway, I sailed on the "Dianne" for 15 months. The last about 8 months of it I was Escort Commander in the Eastern Sea Frontier, we having, by that time, organized convoys so they ran like clock-work and we had no losses, what-so-ever, in my Convoy since we got started with the proper Convoy system but of course this took time. It was really about 7 or 8 months before we got this going real well, but that activity was tapering off and I was detached after 15 months and I was sent to the old cutter "Gresham" which was about the vintage of the Spanish-American war. I put in about 3 months aboard her because the day I arrived I started trying to get assigned to the Destroyer Escort Program and have a proper ship under me. I did indeed get command of a new Destroyer Escort out of Arliss, Texas.

(Sam) You went through the St. Augustine training out of Miami?

No, I went through.... it was required at that time that any prospective Commanding Officer of a Destroyer Escort would have to go through the S.C.T.Z. Training Centre in Miami.

So I did and joined up with our Escort Group, our Division I should say, and Commander Russell Wood was our Division Commanderand we made a couple of convoys across the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and had some fights over there in which we were engaged with aircraft more than the submarines. My ship was accredited officially with downing two , Torpedo Bombers.

So, we kind of pulled out weight there and when Wood, in the "Mantese", - his Flag Ship was torpedoed and he was detached about the same time and Commander French was elevated to Division Commander, Resonant French, Class of 1927 at the Academy, and I took command of his ship the "Low" and finally came to shore in November of 1944. I had been at sea for about 30 months. So that about takes care of that phase in my life.

(Sam) I would like to interrupt for a moment. Something that has been bugging me and I overlooked it time and again and now it has come to mind. Back in your Destroyer days, I remember stories in the Ward Room of various ships that I served, about one of the Destroyers who had a leopard or a mountain lion...?

Oh yes, it was a leopard and it's name was Jerry and he was aboard the "Hunt" and she was under the command of a very colorful character with a red beard called, Steve Yeandle.

Jerry was quite a character - he liked to come up to the Bridge at night in the dark - of course leopards can apparently see and have no problem in the dark and if a visiting officer happened to have the deck why it was kind of disconcerting, to say the least, but, anyway, there's a very funny story connected with Jerry. The one thing they couldn't break Jerry of was licking fresh paint and any time they put fresh grey paint on there he would come around and lick it up. So, he developed lead poisoning which made his legs shakey and obviously this wouldn't do at all, so, several members of the crew finally decided that Jerry had to be taken off for treatment, so they put him in a car and took him up to the Bronx Zoo. This was all duly reported the next day, I might say in the New York Daily News, but anyway these two sailors - one forward and one aft carried Jerry up the main entrance to the Bronx Zoo with people scattering in every direction, including Zoo attendants, because leopards are notoriously unpredictable. Well, anyway, they finally got him admitted and they put him in a cage and would treat him and the crew would go back and visit him every so often because he liked sailor suits.

But, anyway, the New York Daily News had an item the next day which said, and I can quote - "Ship's leopard docks at Zoo as timbers shiver!" I thought that was pretty good.

(Sam) One of the exploits of Jerry that I heard, and maybe you can answer, was that he would lie on the gallows frame, the Destroyers had the gallows for the life-boats and that he would casually reach down and part the hair of some-one who was passing under.

Well, that's almost correct. He would come down the ridge

pole of the awning, like the focal awning, and where the stays came through was a hole and he liked the comfort there, apparently it was a cool place on his stomach and if something went by, like any friendly cat, he would reach down and....

(Sam) Stir things a bit? And he also had an antipathy for ladies.

He did not like women at all but the one he particularly hated was the Pie Man, for some reason. They had some civilian outfit who delivered little pies to the General Mess and he had these long racks of pies stacked up high and he would carry three or four racks and he would come over the gangway and Jerry would see him coming. I don't know what would have happened if someone had not caught on that Jerry had bad intentions towards this Pie Man because he would go wild every time the guy came aboard.

(Sam) Well, you've covered and explained an episode that has bothered me for some time. You were interrupted as you were telling about the end of the War.

Oh, the end of the War....well, at the end of the War I was sent to the Coast Guard Yard at Curtiss Bay, Maryland, and had no particular job at the time. I think I had a title but I got myself in trouble real fast there as the War was still going on and I found that one of my tasks was to approve the Draft Deferment of people, civilian employees, which apparently had been done routinely. We also had a problem with absenteeism, so I decided I was not going to sign these routinely, instead I would ask the Shop Master if Joe Blow had done his work and all that. And I would get an answer, perhaps, "That S.O.B., why that bum...." I said, "Don't go any further and I wouldn't sign it. Well after a few non-signings why I was approached by the Industrial Manager who said "You know. You're getting us into trouble. If you don't sign these deferments, why the War Man Power Commission is not going to see that we are properly staffed here. We'll lose our priority. "Well", I said "I'm sorry, maybe you had better get some-one else to sign them because I can't find it in my heart to do it."

Well, the net result was, a back fire on me because when the War was over about 7 or 8 months later, some of these bums started coming back with super seniority and bumping the good man that we had kept because they worked and here we were with the reduction of status and we had to take the bums and fire the good guys. I didn't win on that one!

(Sam) Well you had some satisfaction.

Yes, well I stayed on there and eventually became Planning Officer, which was a responsible job, and I then I realized, after a few years at the Yard, that a number of people who hadn't had any seniority during the war were saying that - "Oh well, during the War anybody could get a command", so I decided I had better get a Coast Guard Command, I was sure I could do that to. So I put in for a cedery and they let me go conditionally, I had to go to Charlestown Ship Yard and be attached there to receive four A.B.P.'s. The "Chickadee" the "Obsequim", the "Coose Bay" and.....I've forgotten offhand the names. Four of them anyway.

They were towed up from the Reserve fleet in Arliss, Texas - and fit them out as Coast Guard Weather Ships - and then I took Command of the last one out, the "Chickadee".

I put in a year aboard the "Chickadee" and then my past started to catch up with me and I was voted to Head Quarters, after having had that command, to relieve Charlie Herrington, who had been there quite a while, in fact I think he had been there 6 years, as Budget Officer. So I served in that job for 3 years. I was a little out of my "box" you might say, but it was interesting.

(Sam) What year would that be?

That would have been 1950 - 1953. Then I was sent back to the Coast Guard Yard again and still a Commander I might say. I had been a Commander for about 11 years at this point, having made it just before the end of WW11, I didn't revert but held my rank.

Anyway, I made Captain, four stripes, on 1st November, 1955. I remember it well because Jiggs Webb, Class of '31, retired prematurely and I got his number. Simultaneously with making four stripes I got ordered to the "Tanee" as Commanding Officer, in Alameda. So that was a very lovely assignment and we enjoyed the West Coast and enjoyed the lovely ship and the fine people and when that was done, to my surprise, I got ordered to the Coast Guard Academy, to be Maintenance Officer.

At this stage of my life, after 26 years service, this was about the pits as far as my career was concerned but, what I didn't know at that time, was there was a plan to upgrade the Academy with the addition of, first of all, a very big addition to the Permanent Cadet Barracks from the temporary buildings of WW11. It was a particular challenge because Congress had passed this on the floor of the House and there was no way to go back to a supplemental in case we couldn't do it with the 2 million dollars appropriated. So I had that to chew on and we costed the job all right and meanwhile, the Assistant Superintendent, George Fennemiller, retired about a year after I got there and so at Admiral Leamy

apparent insistence I was made Assistant Superintendent of the Academyand I held that job until Admiral Leamy retired and he was relieved by Admiral Hadley Evans and finally in 1961 I was selected for Flag Rank, so I left the Academy.

For a year I was assigned as Chief Officer of Engineering. Up to that time There had been a statutory office of Engineering Chief.

(Sam) Was Cowlett the last?

No, Cowlett was next to last, Eddie Phiele was the last. He decided to retire prematurely, that's why I was originally going to be Chief of Personnel, but when he retired prematurely I was assigned Chief of Engineering. Meantime, that was the last year of service of Admiral Richmond Hershfield and Admiral Rawland came on, first to relieve Hershfield, who retired slightly prematurely as Assistant Commandant, as they called it then, now Vice-Commandant of course, and Rawland came in and then he was selected as Commandant and he turned things upside down his way and seconded me to be his Chief of Staff.

Up to that time there had not been a full time Flag Chief of Staff. I was an additional duty for the Assistant Commandant, as he was called, but actually it was run by the Deputy Chief of Staff.

(Sam) That's the job that Walt Capers had?

Yes. So I also found out, when I got that job, that it entailed also being Chief of Reserve, and that was too much for one person to do right. To be full time Chief of Staff and full time Chief of Reserve just couldn't be done. So, with a little help from history, when Congress had declared that reserves must be run by a full time Flag Officer and no other, it was enough to convince them of that and Admiral Rawland took it to Treasury and got authorized an additional Flag Officer.

Cliff Sayer was bought on board as the first the first Director of Reserve, full time.

I sat in that job for 2 years, having been then 3 years at Head Quarters and I was very anxious to get back to the working Coast Guard, having been up at the Academy and been at Head Quarters, with the most marvellous good luck I managed to be made the Commander of the first Coast Guard District in Boston. One of the most delightful jobs I ever had life and my wife and I enjoyed it. We stayed there two years and then I had one year still left before retirement and that was spent at Governor's Island and I relieved I.C. Stevens as Deputy Commander on the same day as we took over

Governor's Island from the Army and it was a very, very colorful event. A very colorful day. We had some dignitaries from Washington from the Pentagon and from the Treasury and the Coast Guard. The Army and the Coast Guard worked together to make this a beautiful ceremony.

We set it around the main sally port of Fort Jay where the Coast Guard van was on one parapet and the Army van was on the next parapet. The Army colours were carried out through the sally port and stood there while the band played martial music of every period that the Army had passed through during their occupancy of Governor's Island, which went way, way back in the 19th century. Then they retired their colours through the sally port and the Coast Guard colours were brought out and a similar scenario was played and a fly-over by our aircraft took place. It was a very lovely ceremony. That was 1966, June 30th, 1966 so that was the start of my last year of service and I retired a year later. My title at that time was Commander Eastern Sea Front Area, now it's Atlantic Sea Front Area. Also at that time it was a two star job and now its a three star job.

(Sam) As far as I can recall, Admiral Winbeck was advocating strongly, forcefully, that the responsibilities that were vested in the Area Commander, he should have three stars so that he could buffalo the two star people and it wasn't until quite some time after he had gone on the retired list that Head Quarters saw the wisdom of it.

Me too.

(Sam) If you had a strong District Commander, he might just not take your orders.

I might say that I was Area Commander and District Commander.

(Sam) I know.

There has recently been some major overhauls of the Coast Guard structure and I have no knowledge of all that has happened but I did learn that there is no longer a District Office in San Francisco. It has been moved to Long Beach.

Like-wise, in New York, there is no District.

(Sam) It's a support organization based on Coast Guard Island, and that is the name now for what used to be Governor's Island - it is now Coast Guard Island.

We can call it anything we like but on the map it's Governor's Island.

(Sam) No, on the State maps now, it's Coast Guard Island.
Yes, I checked on that.
Well, you retired, when?

I retired the 30th June, 1967.

(Sam) And what did you do?

Nothing interesting enough to talk about really except to catch up on life generally and the freedom I was afforded by retirement.

(Sam) Now, you didn't take a formal job?

No.

(Sam) Punch a clock, or anything like that?

No, no job.

(Sam) Golf.

No. Sailing has been my hobby - all my activities have been based around the water front.

(Sam) When did you come down here?

Came down here in 1968. We spent one year in Maryland, spending the winter down here and the summer up there and decided to make it permanent down here and never regretted it.

(Sam) There are quite a few retirees down here. I'm happy to see so many of them here, not up in the Seattle area. I find personally that I'm uncomfortable with the heat and humidity, although I grew up in Tacoma Park, right outside of Washington.

Well it never gets as hot here as it does there in the summer.

Not nearly as hot.

(Sam) In the latter part of November I was down here in the K.O.A. in North Miami and made notes that I was going to call you, and four other people in the area and ask for this type of interview, at that time. I was so miserable the whole time - I didn't call anybody. I kept an appointment that I had made to have some work done on my machine and as soon as that was finished I high-tailed out of here.

So, you have had a very interesting career and I thank you for sharing your memories.

Well, Thank You. I didn't think I had anything to talk about until you started needling me.

(Sam) Well, there is only one man, so far, who definitely said he had really nothing really to talk about - oh, yes, I've got one thing - and he talked about trying to find Green Cove Springs, not knowing where it was. Of course, he knows now - he got his ship there safely - and he talked for all of five minutes and had nothing more to say and yet, you mentioned his ship, the "Menzies", it was torpedoed, and he has many other things.....

McCabe, you talking about?

Yes.many other things he could have talked about but "Oh no, everybody knows those stories", so.....

Well, I'll shut this machine down.