

# My Friend and Shipmate - Roger

By Wally Wersching



I met Roger Gera while I was in the Navy stationed in Norfolk on the destroyer USS William M. Wood DD 715. He was a nineteen year old ASROC (Anti-Submarine Rocket) gunners mate in the ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) Division. I was also in the ASW Division as a Sonar Technician. I searched for and located the submarines then Roger sunk them with the ASROC. We never actually sunk one but were very proficient in practice runs.

We all worked well together. The ship was small, and eventually I got to know everybody. The ASW Division usually stuck together, and

watched out for each other. Roger and I became close maybe it was because we were both from the north side of Chicago. We decided that on our next liberty, we would fly to Chicago to get my '57 Chevy, and drive it back to Norfolk, VA. It was against the rules because it was way over the maximum distance we were allowed to travel on a weekend pass. We went anyway.



We flew military standby easily out of Norfolk to Dulles International Airport in Washington, DC which is where we encountered a problem. All the planes were full. We went from airline to airline. There were no openings. We were just about to return to Norfolk when we found out about some possible openings on a Northwest Orient flight. We ran to the counter, logged in, and waited. After all the regular passengers got on, the flight attendant started calling the stand-bys. There were many ahead of us. We were last on the list, and we had our fingers crossed. The flight attendant finally called our names, and to our good luck, the only seats open on the plane were in first class. It was great! We had a good meal, a couple of drinks, and a very attractive stewardess. We landed in Chicago on Friday about midnight. We both took the same taxi from the airport – Roger was dropped off first. We agreed that I would pick him up on Sunday morning for the drive back to the ship.

On Sunday morning, we started southeast towards Norfolk. Before we were out of the city, one of "Chicago's Finest" stopped us for speeding – which we were. We pleaded our case, and showed him our military ID's. He had a son in the Army so he let us go. Now we were off again, watching the speedometer more closely. In Indiana, we

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stopped for gas at a Plaza, and picked up another sailor (John) hitch-hiking to Norfolk. Now we were three!

Along the way, we met a carload of attractive young girls driving to New York. We played silly driving games at 75 mph across Indiana and Ohio. They wanted us to stop for awhile but we couldn't or we'd be AWOL. It was a good thing that we picked up John. He knew some short cuts that saved some driving time. We got back to the ship late Sunday night, and didn't get in trouble. It was an exciting experience I'll never forget. It brought Roger and me closer.

Later that year, Roger volunteered for Viet Nam, and was transferred to a Navy gunboat patrolling the rivers. The next thing I heard was that he was wounded. The bullets went through the fiberglass boat, and got him in the chest. He was sent to Hines V.A. Hospital in Chicago to recover.

Every time I came home on leave, I'd have a big party, and invite all my old friends. We all had a good time. Some people hadn't seen each other since my last party. When I came home in June 1968, I called Roger to invite him to the party.

Roger came with his fiancée (a beautiful girl who was his nurse at the hospital). He was an outpatient going in once a week for a check-up. His dad worked for the railroad, and Roger had a lifetime job with the railroad as soon as he was released. He showed me his scar (350 stitches in a crescent shape on his chest and stomach). He was lucky to be alive. It looked like he finally had everything going his way.

I was sent to Adak Alaska for a year, and when I came home in June 1969, I was planning another party. I called to invite Roger. His mom answered, and I asked for Roger. She said that he was dead. On February 9, 1969, his internal organs just stopped functioning, and he died. He was twenty-three years old. The party wasn't the same without him. We were all talking about him, and drinking to his memory.

Later when the Viet Nam War Memorial ("The Wall") was built, the *Chicago Tribune* printed a list of all the local people whose names were on "The Wall". Roger's name was not there. I called to find out why. Because he died in the states so long after his injuries, his name was not allowed to be on "The Wall". This is upsetting because he died as a result of being in Viet Nam fighting for his country. His name should be on "The Wall" with his fallen comrades.

Recently, I learned that if his family really wants his name on the wall, they can petition congress to add his name. (It takes an act of congress to add a name to "The Wall") So far, they haven't, but other families have added names of their loved ones over the years showing that it can be done.

It's been over forty years, and the memory of his face is becoming blurred because I don't have a photo of him. I can still picture him every morning when he put in his contacts, and squinted for an hour before his eyes got used to the lenses. I can also still hear his laugh, and some of the things he used to say.

Every military holiday, and February 9<sup>th</sup>, I have a beer in his honor, and remember the fun we had. Sometimes I try to imagine what he would be like if he had lived. There is always a lump in my throat, and a tear in my eye. I'll never forget my friend, Roger.