

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

4 years, 1 month, 25 days and 6 hours was the length of my active duty in the US Navy. I went active on October 4, 1965, and got out on November 29, 1969. My military service encompassed many more years than those listed.

It all started when I registered for the draft when I was eighteen early in 1962. Vietnam was just ramping up, and I was worried that I was going to get drafted. When I was nineteen, I was ordered to get my physical. The weekend before I was supposed to go, I injured my left leg when it was crushed between two car bumpers. I got a doctor's excuse not to have to go for the physical. That kept me out of the draft for almost two years.

When I was twenty, I was ordered to get my physical and tests. I passed the physical, and was good in the English language so they asked if I wanted to be an interpreter after I learned a foreign language. I didn't say anything. Never volunteer!



I received my draft notice a month before my twenty-first birthday, early in 1965. Vietnam was going strong by then, and I didn't really want to go there. I had been working with the Navy recruiter for the past few months so I joined the US Navy instead of being drafted in the Army. I had a choice of when I wanted to report, and I chose October 1965. I spent the whole summer enjoying the fact that I was twenty-one.

When I left for active duty, my dad dropped me off. That was one of the few times that he was emotional. It made me feel good that he showed that he cared.

Boot Camp was at Great Lakes Naval Training Center just north of Chicago. I was placed in a holding company because I needed glasses, and I also need some dental work done. The whole company was made up of guys who had something wrong with them. We were Company #599, and even with all our problems, we made "Color Company" – the best in our class. Our drill instructor was a real character – First Class R.R. Tyndal. He pushed us hard but he was relatively fair as long as we all did it his way.

The last day of Boot Camp, I got my orders to report to the William M. Wood DD715 (a destroyer or "Tin Can") as a Sonar man. I had good hearing, and was good at determining differences in pitch – required for active sonar. But first, I had two weeks leave.

Every time I came home on leave, I had a party. I invited old school buddies along with old work friends. Sometimes the party goers only saw each other at my parties. It was great to get together at least once a year with my civilian friends.



I was dating Marge all summer, and she was still there for me when I came home on leave. We had a great two weeks until I flew to Norfolk, and the ship. The Wood was

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

an ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) destroyer, and because I was designated for sonar duty, I didn't have to spend the mandatory six months as a "Deck Ape" chipping paint and other dirty jobs. I was scheduled to get some OJT (on the job training) for about six months then go to Key West Florida for "Sonar School".



The first time we went out to sea was a little scary. I wasn't big on boats or swimming growing up - even though we lived close to Lake Michigan. Once out at sea, I was introduced to "Sea-Store Cigarettes". After we were three miles out, the ship started selling cigarettes for eleven cents a pack. I smoked Camels and Luckys at the time so it was great to get them so cheap. The reason they were cheap was that there wasn't any tax seals on the top of the pack. These were tax free cigarettes.

My next indoctrination was to go on "Mail Buoy Watch". It was winter, and I was sent to the forecastle (front of the ship - on deck with the cold spray hitting me in the face) to watch for the "Mail Buoy" so we could get our mail. I was told that there were

many "Mail Buoys" scattered throughout the ocean, and our mail was dropped off by helicopter. I stayed there for a couple hours until I realized that it was all a joke. At least I didn't fall for the "Go get me some Chow Line, or Water Line" gag. I felt silly, and everybody laughed.

It didn't take long to get used to ship-board life, and all the different watches. I liked the mid-watch (from midnight til 4 AM). The ship's bakery was always baking fresh bread (and gave out samples), and I also got to sleep in past reveille.

There were about three hundred men on the Wood, and after a few weeks, I knew them all. I knew their wife's or girlfriend's name, and how many children they had. It was like one big family.

At sea, I was on duty twenty-four hours a day. I could be called on at any time to do a number of things. One of which was "Refueling Detail". The ship would pull along side a tanker or even an Aircraft Carrier to refuel. A line was tossed, a cable pulled over, and secured. Then a large hose was pulled over, and inserted into the ship. Once secured, the tanker would start pumping. If the hose ever came loose, black oil was everywhere. It happened once, and it took us



weeks to clean it up. No matter how calm the sea was, between the two ships was very rough sea. Many times we were swept up by the waves as they washed up on deck. We never let go of the line. If we did, we'd be washed overboard.

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

When we shipped out to the Caribbean, the Wood stopped at Ocho Rios, Jamaica. It was the first time I wore my “Whites” – everything except my shoes was white. I hated wearing white clothes – anything gets them dirty.

Jamaican rum was dirt cheap but the Cokes were very expensive. Wilson Fletcher Bullivant “Bull” and I bought a quart of rum and a six-pack of 7 oz Cokes. We ran out of mix before we finished – but the two of us finished it! We were at a resort where I met a couple on vacation from Chicago who invited us for dinner. Bull was drunk, and was trying to make out with a beautiful Swedish girl who was on her honeymoon. Her husband was playing cards at another table, and was watching Bull closely. I got Bull out of there before the husband could get a hold of him. He was really wasted that night – and lucky!



All during my time in the Navy, Mom and Dad sent “CARE” packages to me every week. Mom baked her famous chocolate chip oatmeal cookies, wrapped them back to back in aluminum foil so they wouldn’t break, and packaged them in a box with real popcorn. Dad wrapped it up, and brought it to the post office. Whenever I got a



package, everyone was my friend. I shared with everybody – even the Captain. Later, I sent Mom a thank you card with all the signatures of those who enjoyed her cookies (and popcorn) which included the Captain. One character (Rich Pecorarie) wrote on the card that I didn’t share enough with him, and wanted a box for himself. A month later, he got a little “CARE” package from Mom. He walked around for the next week carrying the box like it was gold – but he wouldn’t share. It was his box!

I got my orders to go to Sonar School. The ship was going on a Med-Cruise, and I really wanted to go with them but I flew home for some leave, and then

drove my 1957 Chevy to Key West, Florida. Sonar School was interesting with the physics of sound travel in water, and all the different sonar gear.

In October 1966, Hurricane Inez (known as “The Crazy One”) came right over Key West. In fact we went out of the buildings when the eye passed over. It was calm with a beautiful blue sky – we played catch. Then the back half hit us. It didn’t hurt any of the Navy buildings but it took its toll on the cars. The high winds picked up small pieces of corral, and the cars were sandblasted to bare metal. Then they instantly rusted from the salt water rain. Many cars were totaled. I got a new paint job on my 1957 Chevy but the salt water got into every crack, and the car eventually rusted from

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

the inside out. Before Inez was over, the Category Four hurricane left some 1,500 people dead, and produced millions of dollars in damage with top winds of almost 190 mph.

A few weeks later, Mom and Dad drove down for my graduation, and then continued on their Florida vacation. Key West was a very interesting place. There were many bars and restaurants, and I ate conch (a very large snail) for the first time. I also remember standing beach watch with an unloaded Springfield rifle – Cuba was only ninety miles away, and in 1966, they were our enemy.



When I went back to the ship, I noticed that some of my friends had moved on – either transferred or discharged. Most were still there. It was a pleasant reunion.

The Wood went into the Portsmouth, Virginia dry docks for an update of the Sonar gear along with the new ASROC (Anti-Submarine Rocket) that launched rocket thrown torpedoes or nuclear depth charges. We stayed in a barracks while the changes were made. Bull was a real character – one of those you never forget. He brought his Triumph motorcycle onto the base piece by piece. He carried it into the barracks

where he rebuilt it in an upstairs room. When he was done (which was the day before we had to go back to the ship), he fired it up, and rode it down two flights of stairs, out the front door and off the base.

Later in 1967, we went on a Med-Cruise. On the way over in the middle of the Atlantic, we lost all power. One of the two main shaft bearings had locked up, and we were adrift in the middle of the ocean. After a few hours, we got under weigh on one screw ,and limped into Valetta, Malta where we spent a couple weeks repairing the bearing. There were many beautiful young women in Valetta. They were all looking for American husbands to take them off the island.



Even though the Wood was an ASW ship, we had two twin 5 inch 38 gun mounts and we occasionally had “General Quarters” (GQ) to fire them. When that happens, all the hatches are locked down, and nobody can move about the ship without permission. When we are not on an ASW drill, the ASW division just sits around, plays cards, etc. until GQ is over.

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

When we were in Istanbul, there were protesters who didn't like Americans. We had to wear hard-hats when we went on liberty. When our small liberty boat went under bridges to get to the landing, they would drop rocks on us. It wasn't a very friendly place.

I really enjoyed visiting places like Gibraltar, Athens, Greece, Naples, Italy; Valetta, Malta, Valencia, Spain and Istanbul, Turkey. We also went into the Black Sea (Russia's private training ground). I tracked a Russian submarine for about an hour. We saw many Russian warships and planes. They looked very formidable and much more modern than the Wood (which was built during WWII). It was an experience I'll never forget.



Another ship board moment that sticks in my mind was when we were in the Mediterranean Sea during a severe storm.

We were making turns for ten knots but only making about four actual. The swells were huge! (It reminded me of a cartoon where this little boat went up and down in the swells during a storm but actually going nowhere because the storm was so furious.) We were just trying to make headway when a staff officer (we had COM DESRON 36 on board – that's the Commander of Destroyer Squadron 36 for non-Navy personnel) ordered right rudder, and put us parallel to the swells. The ship leaned over to the starboard, and didn't want to come back. It stayed there and shook for what seemed like an eternity. Books were flying at me as I was looking up at the wall from my chair in the sonar room. Many guys jumped out of their bunks, and headed for the hatches. It leaned over 37 degrees which was one degree from the max where it would flip over. If we had leaned to the port instead, we would have flipped – the port max was only 36 degrees. Needless to say that the staff officer who gave the order was not allowed on the bridge from then on.

Most of the time at sea was peaceful and uneventful. The days were beautiful and clear. The cigarettes tasted funny in the salt air. The nights were breathtaking when you could read a book from the light of the stars. It was a pleasant and structured time in my life.

One time when we came back to our home port of Norfolk, Virginia, I was going on leave the next day. I had the duty the day we arrived so I got permission to go ashore to get my car out of the guarded parking area. When I got there, my car was gone. I reported it to the guard on duty, and he relayed it to the base police. They said that I should look around – that sometimes it's taken for a "Joy Ride", and left on base. Two of my friends and I started walking around the base looking for my 1957 Chevy. I was about to give up when I heard my friend yelling. He had found the car. I got there just as the base police got there. They wanted to confiscate the car but I needed it to drive home the next day. We discussed it, and I took possession of the car. I checked it over. It was over two quarts low on oil, and second gear was gone. The trunk was full of dirty uniforms with a couple guys names stenciled on them. I gave the clothes to the

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

base police. They eventually found the two guys. Their story was that they bought the car from a guy named “Frenchy” – no last name. I don’t know what ever happened to them. All I wanted was my car back.

The drive home was uneventful. I just had to drive in 1st and 3rd gear. When I got home, I went straight to Marge’s apartment. I noticed that there was another name on the bell. I thought she took in a roommate. I rang, and she answered. She took in a roommate alright – a husband. She said that she needed someone to be there for her, and I was away in the Navy. It was completely unexpected so I called Speros, an old high school buddy, and we both went out and got drunk.

I had heard about “O” School, which was shore duty. It was working in “SOSUS” (Sound Surveillance System). It was a passive sonar system with a series of listening hydrophones on the bottom of the ocean strategically placed to hear Russian shipping. It sounded interesting so I put in for it, and I was surprised when my orders came to go the Key West again – this time for “O” School. By now, I had made third class petty officer (STG3), and I would change my designation to STO3.

There were many exotic places to be stationed after “O” School. Point Sur, Centerville Beach, Pacific Beach, Coos Head were all along the Pacific West Coast. I applied for all of them, but the one that I got was Adak, Alaska. Adak is an island in the Aleutian chain where there’s never enough sun to grow anything. The GIs planted four foot trees for the Adak National Forest after WWII, and now in 1968 they were still four feet tall. I would be there for a full year. If I was married, I could bring my family if I



stayed there for eighteen months. One year was all I could take. All I did was drink, watch movies, drink, sleep, drink, and work. Did I say that I drank a lot? There was nothing else to do! It was a very difficult time for me. The only women there were wives or daughters of fellow sailors.

Almost every day there was an earth quake or two. Every shelf in the barracks had a lip on it so the books and stuff wouldn’t slide off.

I passed the test for second class while I was there. I was now an STO2. As soon as I did, the old Warrant Officer came to me, and wanted me to teach a class during the day. I asked him what I had done wrong because most of the screw-ups went on days, and off the watch schedule. I liked the watch schedule – 3, 3, 3, - 72. (3 mid watches, 3 evening watches, 3 day watches then 72 hours off). Each watch was an eight hour shift.

He persuaded me that it wasn’t punishment so I accepted it. My classroom was an old trailer that used to house the watch when the weather was too bad to get back to the barracks. I had a week to set up lesson plans and a course outline for a three week course. I was going to teach the VP (Visual Patrol) Squadron how to read their equipment. It was called Project “CLAP” (Coordinated LOFARgram Analysis Program). LOFAR stood for Low Frequency Analysis Recorder. It was how we tracked ships from the info from the hydrophone arrays. The P3 Orion airplanes dropped the Sonar buoys,

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

and the info transmitted up to the plane was similar to what we saw from the arrays. I was asked to train them in interpreting their equipment.

I will never forget my first day as an instructor. As I was standing up at the board drawing some of the common sights on a LOFARgram, I heard the unmistakable sound of a beer bottle opening. Then, there was another. I turned around to see two of my three students drinking an “Oly” (Olympia Beer). I told them that that was not allowed, and one of them reached into his parka, pulled out another, and offered it to me. I told them that the Warrant Officer would be in to check up on us, and to put them away when they heard him coming. That was just the beginning of a fun time. There was a lot of drinking and learning. I went on a flight with them to see how their equipment worked. I only remember that we dropped sour milk on Russian trawlers who were giving us the finger – I guess that’s a universal sign. I saw Russia too.

I was thinking about shipping over (staying in the Navy) because I really liked teaching. I worked six days a week, and went to the NCO Club every night. One night as I was at the urinal, the guy next to me said in a drunken slur “You need a haircut”. I told him where to go. My hair was not long but it had been awhile since I was able to get to the base barber. The next day, I made arrangements for someone to take my class for a couple hours, and made a haircut appointment with the barber.

The next night when I went to the NCO Club, that same drunken sailor was now sober, and in a first class PO uniform. He stopped me at the door, and said I needed a haircut. I told him that I had made an appointment for the next day but he didn’t believe me. I had to shave my sideburns off before I could get in the NCO Club, and he gave me a “Haircut Chit” to be signed by the barber. This was starting to piss me off. I was a 2nd class petty officer, and had been in the Navy for almost four years. My word should mean something.

The next day I went to the barber. There was a huge sign on the wall that said “Regulation Haircuts Only”. That’s what I wanted so I sat in the chair, and he cut my hair. When I was paying him the thirty five cents, I gave him the “Haircut Chit” to sign. He started yelling at me, and said that I should have shown him the chit first. Now I’ll have to get back in the chair so he can cut my hair even shorter. I sat back in the chair, and he all but shaved my head. I was really burning now.



Next, I had to take the signed chit to the “Master at Arms” office. When I walked in, there was an E3 (seaman) sitting behind the desk. I dropped the crumpled up chit on the desk. He opened it, and read it. Then he looked up at me, and ordered me to take off my hat and turn around. I was lucky that I kept my mouth shut. If I had said one word, I would have been Court-Marshalled – I was so mad!! That was so “Chicken-Shit” that it turned me off to staying in the Navy.

After a couple days short of a full year, I shipped out. My next duty station was on the island of Grand Turk in the Bahamas. From one extreme to the other!

4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

I flew home for a few weeks leave. My brother was home from the Air Force. We had a great party for the two of us that time.

Then I drove my car down to Cocoa Beach, and checked in at the naval base. I had to find someplace to store my car while I was at Grand Turk. I'll be coming back about every six weeks for liberty. One of the Base Policemen had an extra garage, and he let me keep it there for twenty bucks. I had a few days before the plane to Grand Turk so I drove around seeing the sights.

One night when the club I was at was closing, I noticed a British sailor slumped next to the building. I asked the bouncer why he hadn't called him a cab, and got him back to his ship. He said that a cabbie wouldn't touch him in that condition. I asked him to help me get him in my car. I was going to take him to his ship. I located his ship about 3:00AM. It was a submarine. I hailed the watch, and a couple big guys came and carried him in. I was invited back the next day for a visit.

I got there a little after noon. It was "Rum Time". I was invited down to their air conditioned mess decks to visit, and have some rum. They all had heard what I did for



one of their mates so every one saved me a shot of their rum. After about an hour of doing shots, we made plans to meet later, and make the rounds of the local night spots. As I walked out on deck, it was about 95 degrees, and I was instantly drunk.

We met later, and visited night spots til dawn. I dropped them off at their sub, and I found the Base Police officer to store my car. I just made the flight. The plane was an old prop job where half the plane had passengers and the other had cargo (and animals). It was hot and smelly which didn't sit too well with the way I felt. By the way, that was the same day the US launched the first men to land on the moon. If I had stayed one more day, I could have seen

the lift-off.

When I got to the island, I was told that it was one mile wide and six miles long. It was also very flat. There was a small village of locals that put up with us. There was a lot of drinking and sex. On a later visit to the mainland, I bought a Honda 90 motorcycle. It was a great way to get around the island.

One morning after I had worked all night as we were standing at morning formation, I was called up to the front. The commanding officer read about what I had done in Adak during Project CLAP, and I was awarded the Navy Achievement Award Medal. I was surprised that they really appreciated what I had done because we had so much fun doing it.

Because we were considered "Isolated



4 Years, 1 Month, 25 days and 6 hours

By Wally Wersching

Duty”, we had all kinds of benefits. Occasionally we had lobster for dinner or spaghetti with Chianti wine – just like an Italian restaurant. We could request free alcohol and mix anytime we wanted to have a picnic – and we often did that. I remember one time when one of the locals and I split a quart of gin while sitting on the back of the base pickup truck. We talked about everything from women to world events. We spent the whole afternoon there. It seems like every where I went, there was lot of drinking. The Navy actually encouraged it at times.

I was separated from active duty the day after Thanksgiving in 1969. It was one of the happiest days of my life. I drove one of my buddies home to West Virginia on the way home. I knew that I’d never see him again.

When I got home, I really didn’t want to go to work, and I had the GI benefit package so I went to college. I also stayed in the Reserves for the balance of my six year obligation. It was extra money. I would have stayed in the reserves longer but they were getting pretty “chicken-shit” so I didn’t re-up.

First I went to a city college – Wright City College where I got an AA degree. Next I went to Northeastern Illinois University (the old Chicago Teacher’s College) where I double majored in Physics and Math. I graduated with an overall 4.68 out of 5.0. I thought of becoming a teacher because I enjoyed teaching in the Navy.

I contacted my Navy recruiter, and we discussed my options. I applied to become a Nuclear Power instructor. All I would have to do it start my Masters during the first six year enlistment, I would be an officer, and I could retire at age 47. Then I could teach at any university in the country. It was a great plan. The first thing was to take the test. I had so much knowledge in my head fresh from school that I got 96% correct. The recruiter was ecstatic. It would be a feather in his cap if he recruited a Nuclear Power instructor. The next thing was a personal interview with Admiral Rickover (The Father of The Nuclear Navy). They were going to fly me to Washington, DC for the interview.

After a few weeks without hearing anything from the recruiter, I called him. He said that Rickover would not waive my age. I thought that he was going to cry on the phone. He couldn’t believe it. I was 31, and the max age for this position was 30. In every other program, the Navy subtracted your active duty from your age – I would have been 27, well under the 30 limit.

Admiral Rickover was 75 at the time, and had outlived his usefulness. He was forced to retire at age 82. I met several people later who had worked with him, and they said that he was not only a little eccentric but he was just plain nuts. I’m sure that he never gave it a second thought on how he changed my life. That was just the way things turned out.

Those were only a few of my memorable moments with the US military. Over the years, the memories may be slight distortions of the truth but that’s the way I remember them.

I had many more close friends during that time that I have never seen again. That was the way it was in the military, and I guess that it’s the same now. Recently, the William M. Wood Association contacted me and put me in contact with a few old friends.

I’m glad that I served my country the way I did, and if I had to do it again, I would only change a few things.

SOSUS - <http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/systems/sosus.htm#end>