

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND CURSE WORDS



COAST GUARD HATS FROM THE 1960's

There is a Coast Guard quote stating that a coastie doesn't cry, that there is no time for blood, sweat, and tears, only time for blood, sweat, and curse words. And while true their motto is Semper Paratus (Always Ready), a secondary motto is perhaps more accurate: Semper Gumbie (Always Flexible).

Al Shams was born in 1943 amid the active WWII Navy comings and goings in Pensacola, FL. He recalled, "I don't remember the WWII activity, but as you know Pensacola remained an active Navy port-of-call after WWII, and still is today. When I was a cub scout we'd go out to the Naval Air Station to see all the big ships and airplanes coming to and fro. One of the biggest thrills was watching the Navy Blue Angels perform. I guess growing up in that atmosphere ingrained the military into our thinking."

After graduating from Pensacola High School, Al earned a B.A. degree from the University of Florida in 1964 and went on to

earn an advanced degree in accounting in 1965. “I remember it was early in 1964 when I was in an accounting intern program and got my notice from the draft board. Luckily, the Dean was able to intercede and postpone my military service.”

By April of 1964, Al was rethinking his options. “By then I was concerned about what I was going to do after graduation. A bunch of guys were going into the reserves so I figured I’d give that a shot. I tried the Army, Navy, and Air Force reserves in Gainesville, Orlando, Tampa, Saint Petersburg, Jacksonville, just to mention a few. Nothing, absolutely nothing, it was almost impossible to join the reserves at that time.”

Al’s luck changed in Mobile, AL. “I was driving through Mobile in December of ’64 when I noticed a sign advertising, ‘JOIN THE COAST GUARD,’ so I thought, ‘Gosh, let me try the Coast Guard’ and went in to talk to the recruiter. I had a couple of buddies from Gainesville serving in the Coast Guard, but I still wasn’t that hopeful after being turned down by three services. So I just crossed my fingers and asked the guy, ‘Do you have any spots open?’ Well, when he said, ‘Yeah’, I couldn’t believe it. It was like a God-send, then he stated, ‘You’re in college, right?’ When I confirmed his perceptiveness, he said, ‘Just stay cool, finish your schooling, and we’ll make sure we get you after you get out of school.’ And that’s what happened.”

Earlier that year, in August of ’64, Al had just finished taking his last final exam and was shooting pool and drinking with buddies when the radio music was interrupted with, ‘*We interrupt this*

program to bring you a special bulletin from the White House.' Al said, "President Johnson addressed the nation with, *'Our ships have been attacked on the high seas. Bob (Secretary of State Robert McNamara) tell them what we're doing.'* Well, as we listened, McNamara said, *'Mr. President, we're bombing here and here and here.'* My buddies and I looked at each other as if saying, 'Oh, hell, they're starting a war. We're about to graduate from college and they're starting a war!' That's what prompted me to join the Coast Guard. I knew I'd drafted right out of college. A bunch of my buddies did get drafted."



Graduating in the spring of 1965 with an advanced degree in accounting, within a month, July of '65, Al was in basic training as an enlisted man at the United States Coast Guard Training Center at Cape May, NJ. He recalled, "The training consisted of two thirds class room study and one third marching, discipline, and military life. We didn't go to sea but did learn to handle small boats in the surf. Basic seamanship stuff. The course lasted about 12 weeks."

A double-hernia during his last week of basic sidelined Al to a military hospital for a month. He recalled, "Yeah, that was a bit unfortunate, but I came back and went into the fleet as what

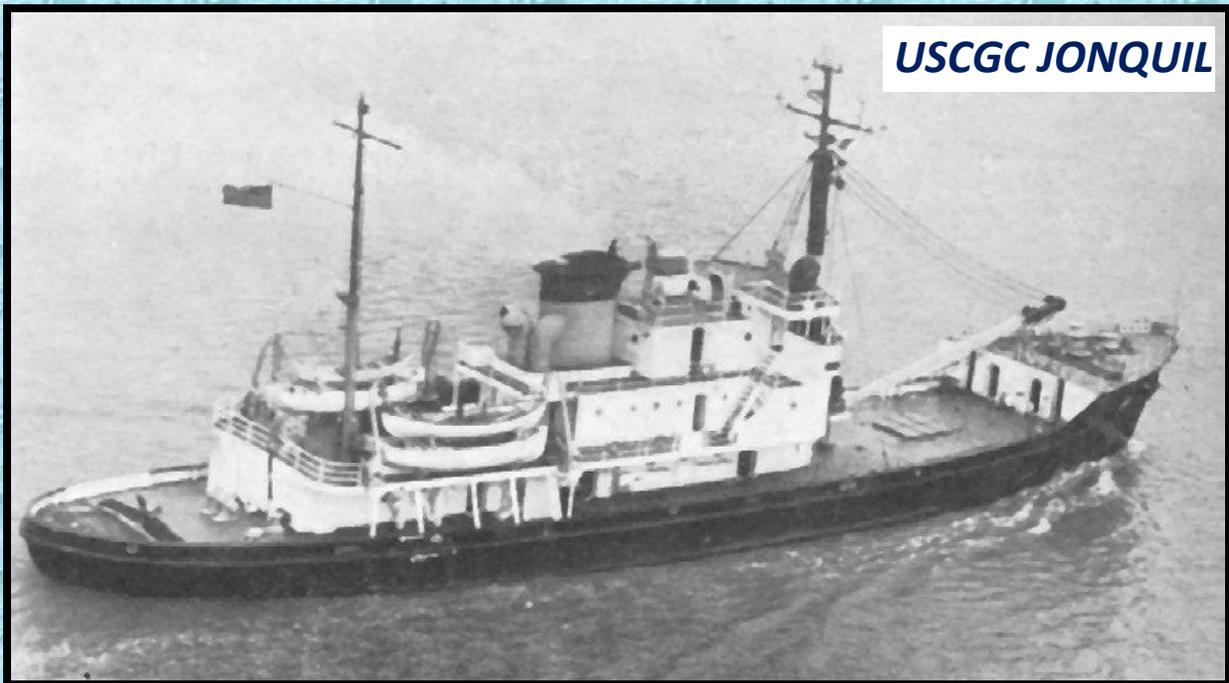
they called ‘a general hand.’ I went aboard the USCGS *Unimak* for three months. She was an old WWII Navy seaplane tender converted into a Coast Guard Cutter. I did some on-the-job training as a helmsman, the guy that steers the ship. I watched and learned, then took over the wheel. The conning officer or Captain will shout the steering order, you repeat it, watch the compass, and follow his order. The only thing I kept thinking was, ‘I hope I don’t run into anything!’ We made cruises up and down the East Coast, from Boston all the way down to Puerto Rico. Cadets from the Coast Guard Academy were also aboard; we were pretty much a training ship. I also trained as the ship Quartermaster, the storing and distribution of supplies.”



After three months on the *Unimak*, Al pulled duty on base at Cape May. Asked his duties, Al replied, “I was stuck in the PX, the base grocery store. I actually worked in a grocery store for

another two to three months. My father owned a grocery store in Pensacola so it was really no big deal, and certainly not much of a challenge.”

After land duty at Cape May, the Coast Guard assigned Al to the base at Morehead, NC, also known as Fort Macon. He recalled the duty, “I was back at sea on the USCGC *Jonquil*, a small ship compared to the *Unimak*. She was a buoy tender. Buoys are the traffic lights of the sea and inland waterways. People don’t realize their importance. Without them you’d have a traffic jam of boats. We’d service the buoys; pull them out of the water, sandblast them, replace batteries that power the lights, maybe repaint them, and drop them back in the water. Seasickness is a problem. Most ships plow through the water. A buoy tender has a round bottom, so you sort of sail on the water like a cork. I was on the *Jonquil* for six months.”



Comparing stateside Coast Guard duty to service in Vietnam, Al said, “Shoot, compared to Nam, we had great duty. I suppose I shouldn’t complain, but on the *Jonquil* we slept in hammocks, five-guys high with a ceiling of about nine feet. I had a steam pipe right above my head. That ship must have been built in the 1930’s.”

NOTE: USCGC *Jonquil* was originally launched as the USS Bastion, a Chimo-class minelayer, commissioned on 9 April 1945.



Al continued. “I served 18 months active duty and 4½ years in the Reserves. I went back to sea once on the *Jonquil* for about two weeks. And let me say this about the Coast Guard in Nam.

That was extremely dangerous duty. The US Navy didn't have small ships to patrol near the coast for interdiction duty, so the Coast Guard used its smaller cutters to interdict contraband en route to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. The guys never knew what a sampan or small vessel may be carrying and had to be on alert every time one was stopped and/or boarded. The Coast Guard also covered the rivers and Mekong Delta early in the war."

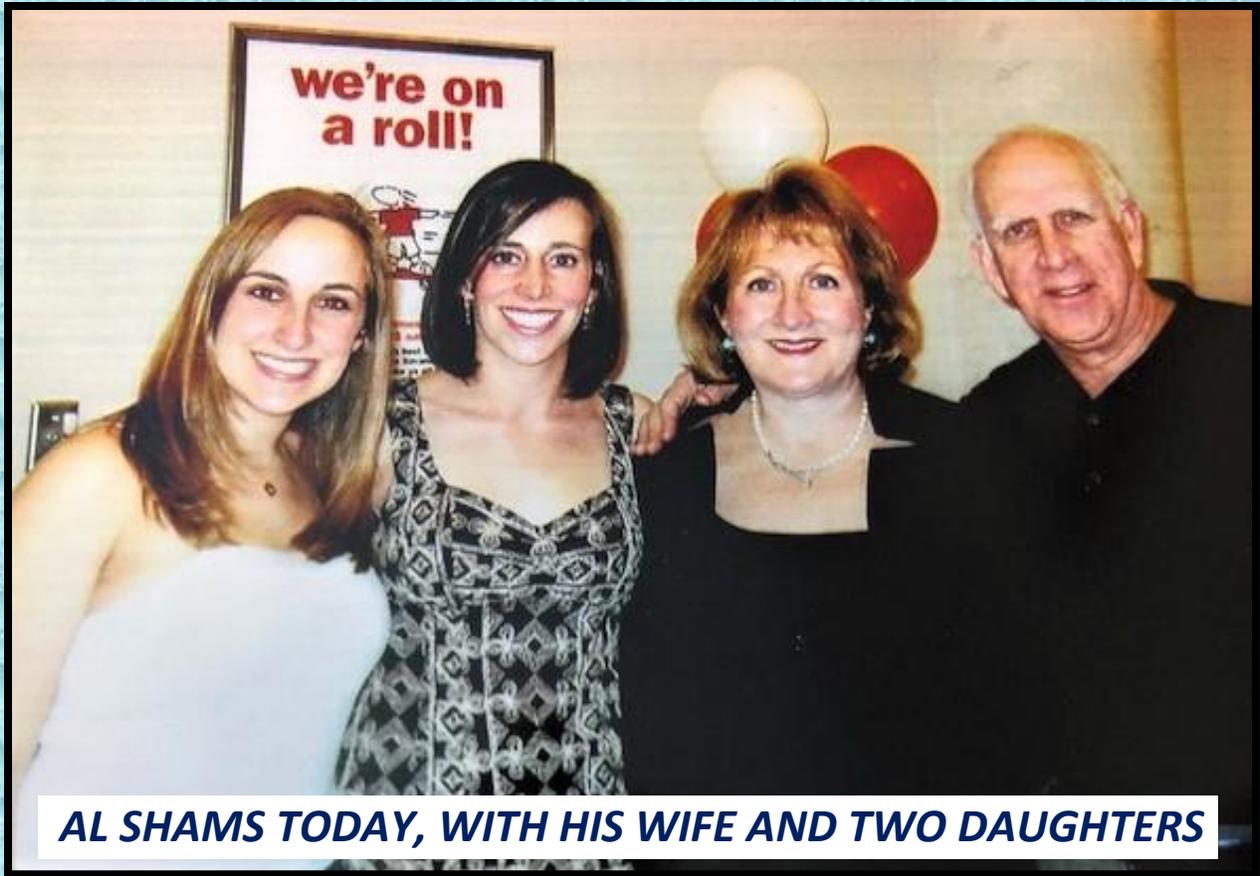
Asked if he'd do it again, Al responded, "Yes, I'd do it again. I liked helping people and saving lives instead of taking lives. I loved the Coast Guard."

Asked **why** some boaters ended up in trouble on the high seas, ran out of fuel or engine trouble bad enough to require Coast Guard assistance, Al replied with one word, "Stupidity." Stands to reason another Coast Guard quote is: Never underestimate the power of stupidity.

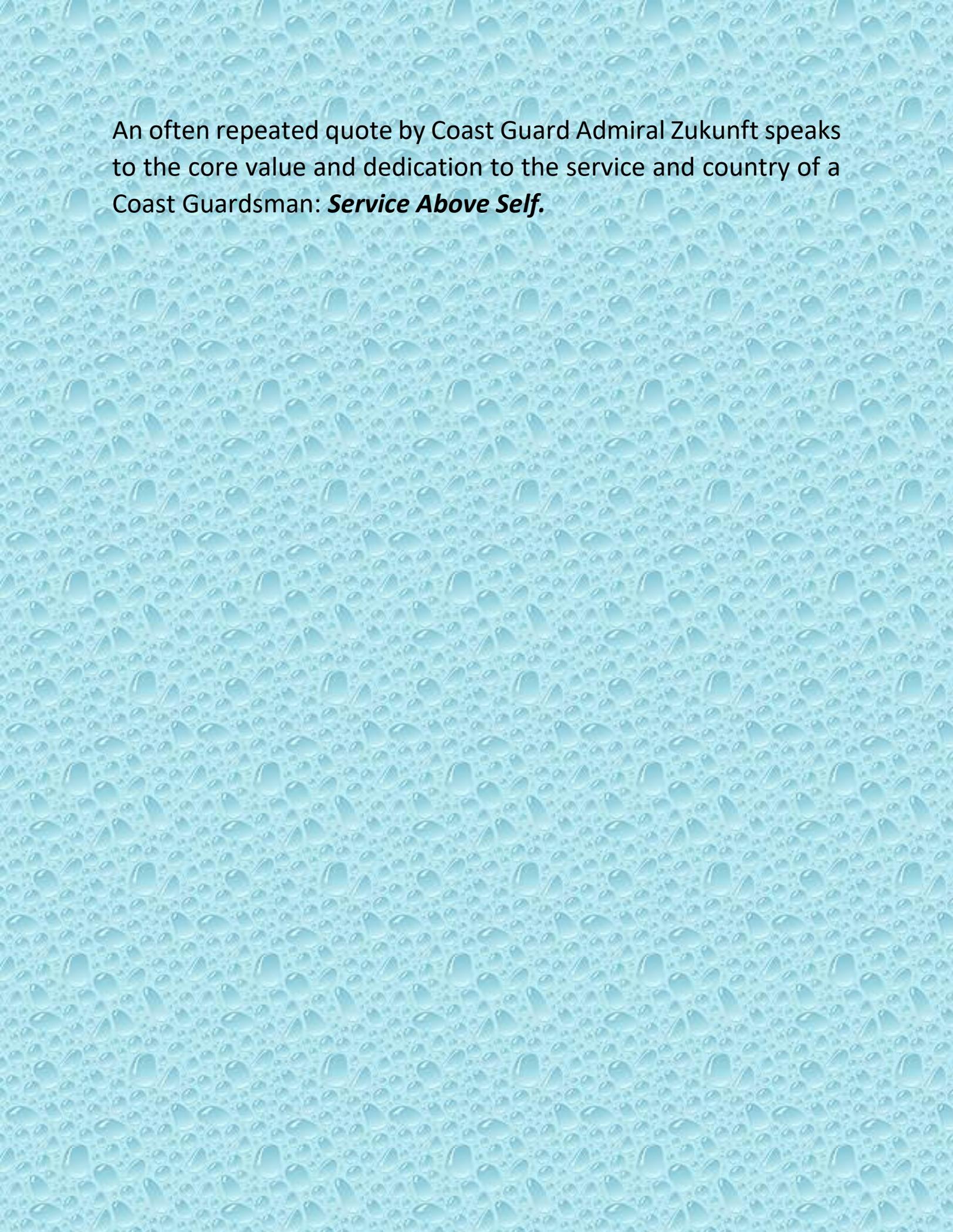
Closing statements: "I didn't lose any close friends in the Coast Guard. But a lot of high school and college buddies ended up in Vietnam. A lot of guys from Pensacola joined the Marines, real macho-type guys, tough as nails. One buddy from high school was killed in Nam serving in the Army, and another guy from the University of Florida that I knew became a chopper pilot. He was shot down and killed."

Pausing a moment, Al then stated, "You know, I was lucky, that is the truth. The Coast Guard is a fantastic organization and it had and continues to have very professional men and women. I

did my duty, I did what I was supposed to do, I didn't complain, I was a good sailor."



His thoughts returned to boot camp. "Oh, I forgot to tell you I ended up being the drill instructor's yeoman in boot camp. I kept the books, kept track of the schedule, sick calls, supplies, all that sort of stuff. Well, we were inundated with too much 'stuff', pencils, paper, office supplies, you name it. I had more supplies than I could handle. Shoot, I just packed them up and sent them back to the main supply base. I soon got a letter from the Commandant of the supply base saying nobody ever returned supplies....this was unheard of! I did. Darn proud of it, too."



An often repeated quote by Coast Guard Admiral Zukunft speaks to the core value and dedication to the service and country of a Coast Guardsman: ***Service Above Self.***