

NAVY VETERAN SAW WWII, KOREA AND VIETNAM ACTION

by Amye Wright

Today, Jim Ganson proudly displays his medals and photographs collected during his years of service in the Navy. His tours include service in WWII, Korea and Vietnam. Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea

COOKEVILLE -- If you ask 84 year old Jim Ganson if he'd be willing to jump on a Navy ship one more time, he'd more than likely respond with a very emphatic "YES!"

"I'd go one more time if I could," he said.



The Herald-Citizen first spoke to Jim nearly 10 years ago and, since then, a lot has changed. His beloved wife of 57 years, Gini, passed away and he's since remarried.

Jim recalls most of his past with ease but wife Elaine helps him through some of the parts that have become fuzzy with time.

"It's all a big mess up now," he said. "I can't get it all straight ... it's been too long."

As he chews on the earpiece of his glasses, his gaze drifts off to another time. One where a nation was still recovering from the Great Depression and the world was erupting into a second great war.

He was a Depression Era child and when his parents couldn't afford to care for their five children they were sent to live in a children's home.

When he was 10, Jim was sent to live with a couple in Ohio but the arrangement didn't work out. He eventually ran away and lived with his mother for some time doing construction and railroad work.

He was now a young man, too young to join the Navy, when the United States dove into World War II. It was 1944 and a 17 year old Jim begged and pleaded to join the Navy.

"The Navy wouldn't take me because I have a heart murmur," he said. "So, I begged and pleaded (and) told them I'd do anything so they finally took me."

Jim was warned that one heart-related issue and he would be out of the Navy.

His mother agreed and signed the papers allowing him to enlist and Jim was on his way to boot camp.

"They made a military man out of you," he said.

During the 14-day Navy boot camp, he learned everything -- except how to swim. He was able to swim to one side of the pool but struggled to make it back to the first side.

The sergeant told Jim that was "good enough" and passed him. It wasn't long before he was headed overseas to fight. He was offered an assignment with the Beach Jumper Unit but declined and ended up serving on an LSM, Landing Ship Medium, the ship which hauled tanks and carried troops to the beaches.

Jim found himself in harm's way over the years and most of those times were from friendly forces.

He recalls one instance when he was on the LSM that came around a US battleship as the ship began firing on the enemy. The concussion from the U.S. guns sent shock waves through the water knocking the LSM sideways, nearly swamping it.

"I didn't know it but the battle had already started," he said. "I could feel the ship coming around and all of a sudden it jumped up 10-feet it felt like, sideways ... it scared me to death."

Jim was at the bottom of the ship in an enclosed room, steering the ship from underwater using headphones to follow instructions coming from the captain on the bridge.

He recalls the announcement that the war was finally over. Germany had already surrendered in the spring of 1945 and in the late summer, the United States -- and the world -- held its collective breath as atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"They made us line up and wait to see what happened when they dropped the bombs," he said.

Then, the announcement came that the bombs had went off and that Japanese forces were surrendering.

"They shouldn't have told us that because them guys got them machine guns going -- on our ship," he said. "Boom, boom, boom, boom ... shooting up in the air."

Ganson, who survived the war -- and the victory celebrations -- came home looking to make an honest living and lead a normal life. He worked with his father for some time, then meandered back into construction work and then, finally, landed a job with the railroad. He falso married his sweetheart, Gini.

He didn't stay with the railroad for very long and left after only a couple of months.

By that time, Jim was 26 and tensions in Korea were mounting.

A career in the Navy was looking pretty enticing and, in Jim's opinion, Korea seemed much less dangerous than working on the railroad. In 1953, he became a quartermaster and later a signalman on the USS Robinson.

The Navy became a part of Ganson's life.

"The better I got about it the better I liked it I guess," he said. "I really liked it. I liked the buddies, friends and shipmates. I just stayed with it."

Eventually Jim was moved up in rate to Chief Signalman. Of course, he had to go through an initiation just as all of the other chiefs beforehim. Initiation consisted of a small hog trough filled with eggs and other stuff mixed. Exactly what , however, he didn't say.

"Then you have to get down there and eat it like a pig and grunt," he said with a laugh.

During his service, he ended up circling the globe -- twice -- during his assignments. But the traveling came with a price. With the busy schedule of assignments and traveling, Jim was only state-side for three months out of the year. Gini, meanwhile, stayed behind to care for the couple's four children.

Each time he went out, it always seemed his crew was leading the way wherever Navy support was needed.

"I've always gone on the first ship in the squadron," he said. "I don't know why."

In 1961, he served on the USS Compton and found himself in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Their job was to stop each ship and find out who they were, what port they were going to and what they were carrying.

Five years later, Ganson found himself on the USS Sherman, the first of a new class of destroyer which was being constructed to patrol the waters off the coast of Vietnam. They patrolled the beaches at night and went in with all of the lights out. Running by radar close to the beach the ship was going too fast -- about 25 knots -- to stop or turn. The goal was to draw enemy fire to the ship in order to pinpoint where the fire

was coming from.

Through all the years, the long months at sea and seemingly endless series of wars Jim admits he would occasionally get homesick.

In 1968, Jim was transferred to Cookeville, became a recruiter.

Since then, things have surely changed but if he had it to do over again it's doubtful Jim would do anything differently.

He says he doesn't have any "big" plans for this Veteran's Day.

He said, simply, that he will put up the flag -- the flag that he, like so many before him and so many after him, have fought to defend.

"We had a lot of fun," he said thinking back to all the years of service. "I miss it ... we did so much stuff that it never dawned on us how important it was."

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*Read more about Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>