

USS Caliente (AO-53) Association



PIPELINE

Jun. Jul. Aug. 2013

President's Korner Summer 2013

By Jack Hughes

Hello again everyone! This is the second issue of the Pipeline that I have had the pleasure of writing my column. Where did spring go? It seems like we went from winter right into summer. At least that's the way the weather has been here in Maryland. We went from cold and freezing temperatures straight into the 80s and 90s. I can't complain though, as we have had several years of very mild winters.

I can remember when they were not so mild, some years ago though. I remember the blizzard of February 1958, when I was in Radioman "A" School in Bainbridge, Maryland. It snowed for three days and when it was all over and they had cleared the roads enough for us to leave the base, I couldn't find my car in the parking lot adjacent to the Main Gate! We had received over 40 inches of snow and you could not see one car in the lot. We had to wait several more days until the snow melted enough to be able to find our cars. It was just terrible. We've had a few snowstorms since then, but certainly nothing of that magnitude that I can remember.

Our "Shipmate Spotlight" this issue will be on none other than our former president, Pat Hurton. I haven't seen his write up, but I'm sure it will be as entertaining as Pat is in real life. As we all know, Pat is never at a loss for words. So, tune in to the "Shipmate Spotlight" column for Pat's turn at the helm.

My reincarnation of the Caliente Website hasn't been going well at all. In fact, I'm at the point of possibly giving up on it. The problem that I am having is not with coding the Website, it's trying to satisfy the requirements of all of the various Web browsers that are in use today by everyone. Many people use Microsoft Internet Explorer, which is probably the de facto standard of the industry. However, there are many people that use Firefox, Chrome, Safari, and a myriad of other browsers. Each one of these has its own idiosyncrasies and trying to satisfy them all at the same time is almost impossible. What looks good in one browser may look terrible in another and vice versa. You have no idea how disappointing it is when you think you have a good looking page, then you look at it in another browser and it looks like someone took a hatchet to it.

At some point all of the current pages will have to be replaced because the coding will become obsolete. I perish the thought of that. I sometimes think that this old sailor is also becoming obsolete.

And now for the news that I dread passing on to everyone and news that I had hoped I would never have to tell you. Our Baltimore reunion for 2013 is officially canceled. We waited as long as we could before making this decision, but it had to be made.

As with any association or organization, they grow old, just as we humans do, and ours is no exception. We have an extremely mature association, albeit still fairly active. However, we do not



have the numbers to conduct reunions it appears. If you look at the numbers, they tell a lot. We decommissioned the Cal 40 years ago this year. If you were 20 years old at that time, the average age for a young sailor, you would be 60 years old now. We have members from the Vietnam era, Korean era and World War II. Some of these folks are in their late 80s and early 90s and we can't expect them to be traveling around to be at our reunions. I'm from the Vietnam era and I'm 73, so this gives you a picture of what makes up our membership.

We were hoping to make this a memorable reunion for everyone, it being the 70th anniversary of the Cal's commissioning and the 40th anniversary of her decommissioning. And where better to have the reunion than in Baltimore where she was first struck back in 1943. Alas, it was not to be. We just could not muster up enough members to make it even a break even situation.

Herb Dorsey was able to negotiate a major reduction in the cancellation fee contained in our contract with the hotel. His success prevented a devastating blow to Association finances. I have already informed VADM Sagerholm that we have canceled. He was disappointed, as we are that he could not address our members at the banquet. So, I'm so very sorry that we had to do this, but it was a necessary thing. No one could be more disappointed than I am because it happened on my watch as your president and it has never happened before.

As an association, we, the members, are going to have to sit down and really think things through for determining the future and direction of the Caliente Association. For those who sent money to Pat, we will be returning it. For those who made non-refundable airline reservations, you will need to contact Pat directly to see how we can help out. Those who have already made reservations at the Radisson Plaza Lord Baltimore Hotel will have to contact the hotel individually to cancel your reservations.

Thank you for your comradeship, your loyalty and your patience.

So, folks, as I close this column for this issue, I want to wish that all of you will have a great summer and enjoy yourself. Stay safe and please stay in good health. None of us are getting any younger. May God bless those crew members or their spouses that we lost this past year. And remember, we need your support if we are going to keep things going. Additionally, if you have articles that may want to have published in the Pipeline, please send them to our editor Karl Seitz. I'm sure he would love your inputs.

So long for now.

Taps

We are sorry to note the passing of four shipmates, one of their wives and the widow of a fifth.

James B. Arbogast died Nov 9, 2012 at age 82 at his home in Sun City, AZ, with his wife, Ellen, and daughter, Zola, at his side. He served on the Cal from 1965 to 1968 as a LT. He was the engineering officer.

James Coope died Dec. 18, 2012, at age 84 in Florida. He served on the Cal from 1946 to 1947 as a Seaman First Class. He is survived by wife, Dora, children, James J. Coope, Gregg Vassari, Margaret Guglielmo, Patti Ann Coope, Diane Ward and Doreen Yagasits, 11 grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.

Honorary Life Member Carol Heckadon of Willamina, Ore., died at age 81 on Jan. 13, 2013. Widow of Charles Heckadon who served on the Cal 1952 to 1956 as a SN, she is survived by daughters Linda Carol Scott and Ellen Lou Mathis, both of Willamina, brother Donald Cox, six grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.

Jerry G. Spedowski died at age 69 at his home in Big Rapids, Mich. He served on the Cal from 1962 to 1965 as a CS3. After his naval service, he returned to Michigan where he owned and/or operated restaurants and other small businesses. He retired from Ferris State University where he worked in dining services. Diagnosed with ALS in 2011, he volunteered to be in a clinical research program. He is survived by wife, Nancy; daughter Dena (Steve) Gebrowsky, son Danilo Spedowski and their mother Evangeline Spedowski; step-daughters Michelle (Scott) Lyon, Kristi (Jeff) Wyman and Jeni (Jeremy) Sauve; brothers Joseph (Nancy), Jeffry (Barbara) and Jordan (Jackie) Spedowski and 11 grandchildren.

We have belated been notified of the deaths of Harvey W. Turnage Jr. and his wife, Gloria. Harvey died at age 74 on Jan. 20, 2011 in Kinston, NC. Gloria died at age 75 on April 12, 2011 in Kinston. Harvey served on the Cal from June 1956 to Sept. 1957 as a BT3. He was a retired mechanic with DuPont. The couple is survived by daughters Karen (Don) Stec and Gail (A.J.) Outlaw and five grandchildren



USS Caliente Association
President: Jack Hughes
Vice President: vacant
Treasurer: Pat Hurton
Pipeline Editor: Karl Seitz



The Pipeline is the official quarterly newsletter of the USS Caliente Association. It is a place to share your memories and pictures. Please send them via e-mail to seitzao53@gmail.com or by regular mail to Karl Seitz, 1212 30th St. South, Birmingham, AL 35205-1910.

Association dues are \$10 per year due Jan. 1, payable by Jan. 15. Checks should be made out to The USS Caliente Association and mailed to treasurer Pat Hurton, 156 Greenfield Drive, Chico, CA 95973-0185.

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Masthead picture of USS Caliente (AO-53) used with permission of Dan Davis.

Back From the Dead!

By Jack Hughes

We have a real human interest story to pass on to everyone. I received a phone call from Tom Dotson a few months back. Tom does not have a computer, but a friend told him that he was listed in the Caliente roster as “Deceased.” He has been deceased in our roster for quite some time and it is unknown where we got that obviously erroneous information. In any event, he called me to personally let me know that, **“I’m far from dead!”** And that’s also what he inscribed on the back of the photo that you see here, which is dated 10/31/12.



I don’t know Tom’s exact age, but he’s somewhere in his 80s and rides his motorcycle quite frequently, which you see in the picture. I’m glad I was the first to welcome Tom back from the dead and if any of you want to contact Tom, here are the details:

Tom Dotson
P.O. Box 1562
Mountain Home, AR 72654-1562
phone 870-580-0498.

Tom served aboard the Cal from 1946 to 1947, his rate is unknown. As a side note to this story, after I related the story to Pat Hurton, and we all know Pat’s sense of humor, he wrote back to say, “I want to thank you for breathing new life into the Association but I didn’t realize how instrumental you would be. Bringing shipmates back from the dead is amazing. You’ve got a position for life. How do I contact you after I’ve gone? I think I gave away my Ouija board some time ago.”

So, as an end to this story: Welcome back, Tom, and you’ll be receiving your personal copy of the next issue of the Pipeline. Please stay with us for a long time to come.



A reminder if you are on Facebook, President Jack Hughes has created a Facebook group for former crew members of the USS Caliente (AO-53) and their families.

Largely unknown veterans' benefit

By Karl Seitz

Thanks to Warren Froscheiser for calling attention to a little known veterans' benefit for which some Caliente crewmembers may be eligible. Although the Veterans Pension program with its Aid and Attendance and Housebound supplements has existed for more than 60 years, very few veterans and surviving spouses have taken advantage of it.

In large part, this is because the Department of Veterans Affairs does not publicize the benefit. Even VA employees are largely ignorant of its existence, particularly the so-called A&A provisions, which are most likely to be the provisions that qualify applicants.

Even individuals who discover the program's existence may assume they don't qualify because of the disability and income limitations. However, both are somewhat misleading in the way they are often presented.

To be eligible for the program, a veteran must have been discharged under other than dishonorable conditions and served at least 90 days active duty with at least one of those days during a designated period of war. An unmarried surviving spouse qualifies on the veteran's record. Under unusual circumstances for Caliente crewmembers, a veteran's child might also qualify. For Caliente vets, the applicable wartime periods are 7 Dec 1941 to 31 Dec 1946, 27 Jun 1950 to 31 Jan 1955 and 5 Aug 1964 to 7 May 1975. The last period starts on 28 Feb 1961 for veterans who served in the Republic of Vietnam.

Some, but not all, VA publications say the pension is only available to veterans who are permanently and totally disabled or are patients in nursing homes receiving skilled nursing care or are receiving Social Security disability benefits. What the VA doesn't always mention is that it considers every vet age 65 and older to be disabled for the purposes of this benefit.

Congress sets the income limits for pension eligibility each year. There is also a somewhat vague requirement that the veteran's net worth not be excessive. The current annual income limit for a basic pension is \$12,256 for a vet with no dependents or \$16,051 for a vet with a spouse or dependent child. Not all income counts toward this limit (for example, Supplemental Security Income, more commonly called SSI). And unreimbursed medical expenses that exceed five percent of the above income limits (\$602 or \$802) are subtracted from your income in determining eligibility.

Vets who don't meet these income limits but otherwise are eligible for the basic pension might still be qualified for a pension under either the Housebound or Aid and Attendance (A&A) provisions, both of which have higher income limits. You cannot qualify for both.

Housebound means you are substantially confined to your immediate premises because of a permanent disability. The maximum income after deductions is \$14,978 for a vet with no dependents and \$18,773 for a vet with one dependent.

The A&A benefit is available if you meet one of these conditions: (1) you need help to perform daily functions, which may include bathing, eating or dressing; (2) you are bedridden; (3) You are a nursing home patient; or (4) Your eyesight is corrected 5/200 visual acuity in both eyes or your visual field is 5 degrees or less. The maximum income after deductions is \$20,447 for a vet with no dependents and \$24,239 for a vet with one dependent.

Actual pension payments are determined by the difference between your adjusted income and the maximum income specified for your pension category. Maximums are adjusted for additional dependent children.

Applications are made through a VA regional office or at www.ebenefits.va.gov.

You can call the VA at 1-800-827-1000 for more information.

A non-VA source of information about these benefits is the Website VeteranAid.org.

Shipmate Spotlight

SK2 Patrick A. Hurton (1962-1966)

What influenced your decision to join the military?

Immediately after finishing high school my father carefully explained that after eighteen years of supporting me it was time for me to support myself. My dad told me I could follow him in the construction industry or choose whatever field of employment I wanted. However, if I wanted to continue to live at home my portion of next month's rent would be \$50.00 or so and that the rent was due on the 1st of July. I searched my pockets and found I was about \$49.50 short. With only a couple of weeks to go until my rent was due, and no income in sight, I laid out my options. The first option was to follow my father in construction. The second option was to venture out on my own and find a job or, the only other option I could think of, was to join the military.



The first option was easy, my dad had already lined up a job for me and I would have received a paycheck in time to pay the rent. I had worked with my dad over the past few summers and the thought of a career requiring physical labor relegated this option to third.

The second option would require preparing a curriculum vitae. In reviewing what mine would look like I decided an employer might not be impressed with the following. I had taken a fairly relaxed attitude toward grades and as long as I was on track for a diploma decided it was not necessary to attend all those boring classes when I could be out with my girlfriend and still pass necessary tests. I would be applying for a nice clean office job but my job history was in construction and, if asked, my reason for not going to college was that I was bored with school. This probably would not have put me above other applicants. This stayed the second option.

The only option left was to join the military. I considered the military options: The Army and Marines – both involved crawling around in the dirt and potentially getting shot at and sometimes camping in places where there was no carpet between the bed and the bathroom (let alone no bathroom). These two services didn't seem to be ideal for someone who hadn't even been camping before. The Air Force didn't seem to be exciting unless you were actually flying a plane. With less than 20-20 vision that didn't seem to be an option for me. The Coast Guard didn't

seem to travel the world much so that left the Navy. I was born in England and the British were always proud of their Navy so I went to see my Navy recruiter.

After a visit to my Navy recruiter and having taken a couple of tests, the friendly chief assured me I would be assigned to Electronics School where I would have three squares a day, a place to sleep and a pay check every month. Electronics seemed like a nice clean field so I told him I would sign up. He then said I would need security clearances and, noticing that I was born in England, asked me if I was a citizen. I told him that my mother, father and I had just filled out the paper work and were waiting to hear from immigration. He said OK and then made a phone call. He asked me if I could be at the Federal Court House in San Francisco the next morning at 10:00 AM to be sworn in as a citizen. I said I could and probably attained citizenship faster than your average applicant. As a side note, it took my parents another four months before they were sworn in and they had to go to classes. When the government really wants something or someone it can move fast.

What was your service career path?

After my swearing in as a citizen, my recruiter had me muster with the rest of the recruits in Oakland for swearing into the Navy and the traditional turn your head and cough ceremony. We were then put on buses for the trip to San Diego Naval Training Base. The highlight of my basic training was never having to fire a gun. The day we went to the shooting range I, along with four other recruits, were told to report inside one of the buildings and were told we would be cleaning the guns instead of shooting them. It was a very hot (approaching 100 degrees) that day and the thought of lying in the sand and heat all day vs. staying in the shade made cleaning guns a great option. Anyway just around noon the first class gunner's mate told us to clean up and get ready for chow. We were first in line for chow properly cleaned while everyone else looked extremely hot and uncomfortable. Somehow we were all certified to shoot guns.

Post boot camp I was assigned to Electronics School at Treasure Island, San Francisco. While awaiting a billet at ET school, I was sent to a tug at Mare Island Naval Shipyard. It was a YTB (Yard Tug Big) and we assisted ships coming alongside the ammo pier or subs undergoing repair at Mare Island or cruised down the bay to Hunters Point Naval Shipyard and assisted putting bird farms into dry dock. If we weren't assisting ships to dock we would run ammo barges up to Concord or Stockton ammo dumps or down to San Francisco. Beside E3 me there were a first and third class boats, a first class engineman, a first class electrician, a first class cook on the tug. The first thing I was told was that I would be getting comrats as we couldn't be assured we could get to a chow hall for meals. Of the \$30 or \$35 a month we got we put \$15 into the ship's mess and kept the rest. We ate like kings and I had all that extra money. The tug was great duty as we sailed all over the San Francisco Bay and up and down the Sacramento Delta all day. I learned how to walk the tug sideways into the pier and thought the Navy was great. After four months I got a billet at ET school. What a difference. From no supervision on the tug to a high school-like atmosphere where no individual thought was necessary.

ET school was 36 weeks long. The first 32 were classroom and the last four were for practical application. During the first couple of weeks of school, I changed barracks and for some unknown reason my name was left of the duty roster. This suited me just fine as I was from San

Francisco and, after Mare Island, was used to seeing my friends when I wanted to plus I didn't have to be interrupted by boring watches sitting on the end of Treasure Island at 3:00 AM staring at the Golden Gate Bridge. After 32 weeks and after taking the final academic test, I got into a heated discussion with a chief warrant officer. Only four persons had passed the test out of about 30 and he was bound and determined to find out how we had cheated. I carefully explained to him that the four that passed were almost at the four corners of the classroom and if only four of 30 some passed, something probably was wrong with the test, not those that who had passed. About the same time someone had found out that I had never stood a watch and accused me of not doing my duty. That was an interesting discussion. Trying to explain to someone that it probably wasn't my responsibility to make up the duty roster or point out to someone that my name was not on it. Failing to come up with either proof that those of us that passed the test had cheated or that it was my responsibility to report myself, things went down hill. The only thing the Warrant could come up with was to just "write me up" for stuff. When I got to XO's mess I explained my side of the story to the XO and that I now wanted out of ET school and back to the "real Navy." He explained that I was probably taking the wrong course but dismissed all accusations against me and assigned me to the REU (re-evaluation unit). After long discussions with a chief personnelman, and being of sound mind (?), I was given orders to the USS Caliente (AO-53). The orders were to report aboard her at Port Hueneme, California.

I dutifully reported to Port Hueneme and was told by the Marine at the gate there hadn't been a tanker within miles of the port in years. I reported to personnel, got my orders stamped and was given another couple of days to report to Long Beach. After arriving at Long Beach I was again told that the Cal was not there and apparently no one knew where she was. I was assigned to temporary barracks and told to report to personnel every morning. After three days of reporting to personnel at 0800 then going on the beach at 0830 I was told the Cal was at Willamette Iron and Steel in Portland, Oregon. I was given another couple of days to get to Portland so I stopped by to see my friends in San Francisco on my way to Portland.

After reporting aboard and being told that the crew's quarters were all torn apart, I went to a bunk on the APL tied up alongside. My only experience sleeping six-high. The next morning at muster, the Chief Master at Arms, a chief gunner's mate, told me I had been AWOL for about six or seven days and he was going to write me up. He told me the Cal had got notice of my assignment to it and that I was supposed to report six or seven days ago. I asked him if he had looked at the back of my orders, he said no, so I invited him to do so. They, of course, contained all the necessary endorsements and he reaffirmed my suspicions that the Navy was AFU when it couldn't find the Cal. He then told me I was assigned as Chiefs' Mess cook until they sorted out what division I might go to. This was great duty. All I had to do was keep the chiefs happy and the coffee pot full. One of those chiefs was a current member of the Association, J.C. Van Deusen. Van was not always an early riser so my biggest problem was how to clean the Chiefs' Quarters without waking him up. While all the rest of lowly non-rated were chipping and scraping I was making coffee, eating whatever I wanted, watching TV and had no duty. When it came time to chip and scrape the Chiefs' Quarters I was given three E2s to work for me and my only job was to make sure things completed on schedule.

During my time as Chiefs' Mess cook, the Chief Storekeeper (Slokbauer) asked me what I was going to strike for. He took me into the office and told me I could be working in there learning the requisition process, keeping the OPTAR budget logs, calculating the fuel transfers and working in supply department where I would have access to the galley, the ship's stores and all the storerooms. Now I knew I made the right decision when I chose to get out of Schools Command. I could have the job that I thought about when confronted by my dad after graduating from high school, an office job. I took the chief's offer immediately.

After getting into Supply, I worked for another member of our Association LtJg (now Capt.) Herb Dorsey. With the Chief teaching me everything about supply and Mr. Dorsey letting us do our jobs things were great. After Mr. Dorsey fledged-up Mr. Naiva took over as supply officer, I made 3rd then 2nd, the crew's quarters got air conditioning and things couldn't have been better. With keys the reefers, galley and storerooms there wasn't much I went without.

In 1964, I called a friend of mine in San Francisco and told him I had a 72 and asked if he could get me a date. He arranged the date for me with a friend of his girl friend. It was then I met my wife. I continued to correspond with her and met up with her when I could get home on liberty. While we were deployed in 1964, I wrote and proposed to her. She accepted and we set May 8 1965 as a wedding date. The Cal was in Long Beach and we were supporting underway training for ships in the area. We deployed in mid-April for two weeks and were supposed to back into Long Beach by April 30. Well the Netches, or one of the other tankers that was supposed to relieve us, broke down and we were told we would stay out another two weeks. This presented a dilemma. I went to Mr. Naiva and asked what I could do. He told me to talk to the Captain. I did and he said if I could find a ship going back in that met my needs, he would authorize hi-lining me off. I found a can going into San Diego on Thursday, hi-lined off the Cal on Tuesday, got back in on Thursday and made my way to San Francisco on Friday.

Needless to say this presented small problems with my future wife and her family regarding the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner etc. My future wife had been calling every Navy installation she could find and was told that they couldn't discuss ship's movement. The first I could communicate with her was late Thursday evening. My future mother-in-law had told my wife that she didn't care if I showed up or not but my wife was going marry someone on Saturday after all that work.

After having spent from February 1964 until October 1966 on the Cal my time was up. We were operating out of Olongapo, Philippines and had just got underway for a couple/three weeks cruising of Dixie Station when we got the word that the presidential extension imposed by Nixon was lifted. Given that I was eligible for discharge, I asked Mr. Naiva about getting off the Cal and going home. He told me, once again, talk to the Captain. I did and was told if I could get a ride to a base from which I could get to my discharge station (Treasure Island) I was free to go. I talked to every ship coming alongside asking them when they were going in (seems I had done this before). I found a can going into Olongapo in a couple of days. I rushed to personnel and asked for discharge orders. I received orders to Treasure Island. I hi-lined off the Cal and went home via Olongapo, Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, Tachikawa, Japan and Travis Air Force Base in California. Never had a better trip! After a week at Treasure Island I was OUT!

What profession did you follow after the service and what are you doing now?

After my life in the Navy I worked in the Aerospace/Defense Industry for 32 years retiring in December 1999. One of the most novel times I had in industry was a trip to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The US Air Force is responsible for installation, operation and maintenance of the Satellite Control Network. It has stations around the world and, of course, subcontracts the installation and upgrading of these installations. As part of the first major upgrade to the facilities (initially built in the '60s) the US Air Force reached an agreement with British Government to build a new facility on the island of Diego Garcia. The company I worked for was responsible for the implementation of this new facility. When it came time for final testing and sell off of the facility, I was told by my boss that I would be the company representative responsible for the sell-off. I made my way to Singapore where I awaited Air Force transportation to Diego Garcia. I had to check in every day to see if I could get on a flight. Anyway, after a rough six days (including New Year's eve) in Singapore I was put on a C-140 and spent a pleasant five or so hours sitting on a thin cushion on an aluminum seat flying to Diego Garcia. After we had completed testing and had "sold" the site to the Air Force, we noticed the runway on Diego Garcia filling up with KC-135 Tankers and B-52 bombers. The day after the runway was filled with airplanes we were told our flight back to Singapore was on hold. A couple of days later we notice that all the B-52s wings were now almost touching the ground. They were loaded with bombs. Around three in the morning in January 1991 the tremendous noise of jet engines filled the island. We all awakened, put on clothes and rushed to the runway. All the KC-135s were taking off to get on station to refuel the B52s when they took off. The B-52s took off next and the first Gulf War was underway. Diego Garcia was the staging area for most of the B-52 bombings as the planes did not have to fly over any nations to get to Iraq. The ones out of England had to go around France and Spain and over the Mediterranean. Note: After another couple of days we finally got a ride on a C-5A to Okinawa. The pilot didn't want to take us because the plane was carrying Class A ammo. One of the Air Force contingent with us talked him into it. Great flight, the C-5A has about 75 regular seats in the tail section and the ten of us had plenty of room to stretch out and sleep. The pilot also let us up into the cockpit and showed us all the equipment. Great airplane!

How has military service influenced the way you have approached your life and career?

I had a great time in the Navy and a great career in civilian life allowing me to retire at age 56 in December 1999. My wife and I (48 years last May) do various and sundry volunteer work and live within 45 minutes of our two sons and their wives, seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren in the small northern California city of Chico.

Did You Know . . .

Among the first "Germans" captured at Normandy were several Koreans. They had been forced to fight for the Japanese Army until they were captured by the Russians and forced to fight for the Russian Army until they were captured by the Germans and forced to fight for the German Army until they were captured by the U.S. Army. (And, no, they were not forced by the Americans to fight for us!)

Memories



Dean Goodrich, MM2, 1965-67, took this picture of the late Richard Kunkel, EN3, 1963-66, next to one of the Caliente's twin screws in drydock in Sasebo, Japan, in February 1966. As Goodrich remembers it, the venture was a little frightening. The wall behind Kunkel is the gate to the drydock. The ocean is on the other side.

The trip to the Panama Canal

By Dennis Pedersen, LTJG

1962-1964

I read with great interest Richard (Spider) Irwin's article in the June 2012 issue of the Pipeline. I, too, was on the Caliente during the Cuban missile crisis and our convoy to the Panama Canal.

We left for San Diego in great haste with a large part of our crew on leave. We joined up with 30 amphibious ships out of San Diego. I was a green ensign at the time, with very little sea experience. We went to an officer watch schedule of four hours on the bridge and eight hours off. Due to the shortage of officers, I was immediately considered qualified for Officer of the Deck duty. Until then, I had never stood OD watch alone, nor had I ever steamed with another ship. I suddenly found myself as an OD on the bridge in the middle of a huge formation.

My first watch as an Officer of the Deck was a mid-watch. The seas were calm, and we were steaming at 12 knots and "darken ship" with no radar. The bridge was extremely quiet. We were pretty much in the middle of the formation surrounded by other ships at intervals of between 500 and 1000 yards. We kept our position in the formation by using our field glasses and estimating the other ships distance from us.

The “telephone talker” on this particular watch was our postal clerk who had no previous experience on the bridge phones. In the pitch darkness, he started laughing. I remember saying “Stephenson, what is so funny?” He replied that “those guys in the engine room told him that they lost their vacuum on the port plant.”

To me, this news meant that our speed would soon drop to about 5 knots, and we had the USS Iwo Jima with her 50 helicopters directly astern of us at about 500 yards! I lit up the Caliente with every light she had and carried out emergency procedures.

The task force commander ordered the formation to reduce speed and for the other ships to steer around us so we could leave the formation. I will always remember how huge the Iwo Jima looked as she went by us on our port side at about 75 yards.

Editor’s note: Stephenson is James F. Stephenson, PC3, who was on the Cal from 1961 to 1962.



Another Dean Goodrich photo. The arrival of this jumboized fleet oiler to refill the Cal’s tanks meant the Caliente would spend an additional two weeks off the coast of Vietnam.

Did You Know . . .

More U.S. servicemen died in the Air Corps than the Marine Corps during World War II. While completing the required 30 missions, your chance of being killed was a 71 percent.