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Navy vet was aboard USS Frank Knox when it ran aground

Don Greer gained experience, education while serving country during Vietnam War

By SHELLEY McFARLAND

In the darkened hours on the morning of July 18, 1966, in the South China Sea, the USS Frank Knox ran aground on the Pratas coral reef, and for the next month, was stranded with crew until it could be extricated.

It was a formative moment for all the sailors aboard the Gearing-class destroyer, many of whom stayed with the ship through the removal and repair process.

Don Greer was born in San Jose, California, during the last year of WWII, in 1944. His father was in the U.S. Army, serving at the Presidio in San Francisco. Greer's mother later remarried, this time to an Air Force serviceman who had hopes his stepsons would join the Air Force.

As it turned out, Greer joined the Navy while his brother joined the Army. A high school dropout, Greer enlisted in 1963 at age 18. In 1964, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Congress passed a resolution giving President Lyndon B. Johnson authority to increase military presence in the region.

"I went to high school at Petaluma and my stepfather had a medical discharge. He and I didn't see eye-to-eye. I was going to high school and working, and he wanted me to pay rent. I moved out into a hotel. Kind of tough for a teenager living by himself like that and going to school," Greer said.

"As soon as I turned 18, I joined the Navy and got a good education. I didn't want to be in the infantry, and I was interested in engineering, and the Navy had what I wanted. Initially, I wanted to be an electrician, but they didn't need any, so I became a boiler technician, and I learned a good trade," he said.

Greer attended basic training for three months at Naval

Base San Diego and had an especially challenging time.

"The difficult part was I got pneumonia. We were doing exercises outside at 5 a.m. rain or shine, and I came down with pneumonia, but we didn't know that. I went to the sickbay where I was given a shot of penicillin, and I'm allergic to penicillin," Greer said.

"The doctors thought I had meningitis, and I was paralyzed from the waist down because of the penicillin. They hauled me off to the hospital and quarantined the company because they thought I was contagious and came to find out it was just pneumonia and an allergic reaction. Those 80 guys had to spend another week there, and they weren't too happy."

After three weeks in the hospital, Greer was discharged with full mobility and was able to finish boot camp. With boot camp completed, Greer, now a fireman apprentice, was shipped off to Yokosuka, Japan, where

his ship, the USS Frank Knox (which was built the year Greer was born) was docked. He would be on the USS Frank Knox two years before the fateful night it ran aground.

"I just got off watch in the boiler room at midnight and crawled in the rack and about 2:30 in the morning we hit the reef," he said. "It was on a Sunday morning, so much for the weekend. Couldn't go anywhere anyhow because we were out at sea. It shook everything up pretty good. I had no idea what it was because I hadn't experienced anything like that before. Two years on the ship and we had been through that area many times before."

"This time, the USS Frank Knox was 28 miles off course. The navigator had miscalculated while taking a reading of the stars with a sextant and wasn't able to receive a LORAN



Navy veteran Don Greer holds a photo of himself when he enlisted at the age of 18. Greer would spend a total of 26 years in the service and was on the USS Frank Knox when it ran aground on the Pratas Reef in 1966.

radio navigation reading. At 165 miles southeast of Hong Kong, the Pratas Reef was charted; there is even a Chinese underwater demolition team building at the end of the reef on a small island.

"We hit it dead center. They (Chinese) sent a rowboat out and told us to get off their reef. We'd just as soon leave and were headed for Taiwan for liberty," he said. "There was a lot of flooding, and we had to shut the boiler down because we had a 3,000-degree fire going to make the steam. Everything forward of the boiler rooms flooded including the sonar room, ammunition room — we pulled the ammunition out of the magazines before it flooded."

"After three days we had a lot of support from the fleet with tugboats and barges. We put the ammunition on one of the barges and tied it down right before a typhoon came."

Of the 250 men aboard the ship, 96 stayed, including Greer. For 37 days, the USS Frank

Knox endured two typhoons and one tropical storm. It was known there were sharks in the water, and in case they needed to abandon the ship, each man had a service knife for protection.

There were enough provisions, and they often ate sandwiches. During moderate nights sailors would sleep on the top deck of the ship, but during inclement weather they would have to wade through seawater to get to their bunks.

Salvage companies brought liquid Styrofoam, which Greer helped mix and set into the flooded compartments. The Styrofoam expanded pushing the water out of the compartments.

"We would have sunk once we came off the reef if we had all the water weight. Without the water, we were still buoyant. At low tide we were sitting in 13 feet of water, and we needed 19 feet to float the ship. At high tide, which was 18 to 19 feet, a destroyer called the USS

Cogswell came at us at full speed, and before they got to the reef, they turned and created wake and the wave gave us extra lift," Greer said.

"Five tugboats had cables rigged and they pulled us off once we got the extra lift. Everybody was happy and excited, and I had been up all night watching cables. It was a big party without the booze."

There were a few injuries, but no loss of life during the ordeal. Greer traveled with the ship to Taiwan for one month where the damaged parts were welded, then to Yokosuka, where the ship was fully repaired in dry dock over 18 months.

In 1966 Greer, now a petty officer second class, left the Frank Knox after one year in dry dock and joined the Seabees (U.S. Naval Construction Battalions) at Chu Lai Air Base in Vietnam for three months.

"I saw a few things with the Seabees. We were next to the First Marine Division. I was in the Naval Support Detachment where we helped take care of the warehouses and unloaded ships when they came in," he said. "Between us and the Marine Division was the Puel Hospital, where lots of casualties came in; lots of helicopters flying in day and night. I felt sorry for them. I was fortunate I was in a secure area."

Boiler technicians were needed in Southern Vietnam at Vung Tau, and Greer worked in the engineering department.

"I was supposed to be there a year, but they needed boiler technicians in southern Vietnam, so that's where I went," he said. "We were in the harbor swinging from an anchor (moored and swinging with the tides) doing repair work on the river patrol boats and swift boats. Lots of fuel and water on the 700,000 gallons of diesel, and when they needed fuel they would come and see me, and I'd get it to them."

Greer left Vietnam and attended boiler engineering school in Philadelphia where he earned another stripe. When he picked up another ship in Vietnam, the USS Tutuila, a Luzon-class internal combustion engine repair ship, he over-

saw the boiler room.

Greer would leave the Vietnam War theater in 1967 to return to the states to attend engineering school. After another stint in Vietnam on a ship, Greer was injured when a steel hatch smashed his hand. Greer also eventually would get cancer from Agent Orange used to spray fields while at Chu Lai. Today, he is cancer-free.

"We were doing shore bombardment and I was stationed in the boiler room. I took a break, and I came up out of the boiler room just as a wave washed up on the main deck and slammed the hatch shut. It caught me across the wrist and cut all the nerves and tendons," he said. "I was patched up on the ship, and a few days later, I saw a surgeon in Da Nang harbor, and he ran a needle clear through my hand and I couldn't feel it. The surgeon did a great job, and the feeling returned and no side effects."

In all, Greer spent 26 years serving his country — nine years in active duty and 17 years in the reserves, retiring as boiler technician chief. He earned his GED while at sea and his associate degree from Mt. Hood Community College.

He married and remarried, and his wife, Irene, died in 2013 after 26 years together. With his engineering expertise, Greer worked for various companies working in machinery repair, even working two years in Saudi Arabia and a stint in Hawaii before retiring from civilian work in 2008.

Greer said the time he spent in the Navy was exciting, and he treasures his memories and shares his experiences with the Happy Valley Veterans Group and the Frank Knox Reunion Association.

"People thank me for my service, but I should be thanking them because they are the taxpayers, and I received an education for it. There's no place like home. I should thank them because I got the education, the experience and to see the world," he said. "I've been to Africa, the Persian Gulf, across the Indian Ocean, all over the Pacific, to Australia, Alaska, all over Asia. I've done a lot and seen a lot and the taxpayers said for it."