

Jon Soder's Navy Biography

January 1966 – May 1993

My Navy career started in January 1966. I enlisted under a 90 day delayed-entry program that allowed me to finish high school before going to boot camp. I stayed on active duty for ten years, got out and stayed out for five years, then returned to finish up with twelve more years in the Navy Reserve. I retired as a Chief Mess Management Specialist in May, 1993. I enjoyed an exciting and rewarding career living and working with people from all over the world. Here are brief descriptions of my tours of duty.

May - August 1966: Naval Recruit Training Center, San Diego, CA

This is where I went to boot camp. I made the first big mistake of my career here. I scored very high on technical classification exams. I was offered almost any job of my choice including a variety of highly technical occupations like electronic technician, cryptographer, computer programmer, etc. I insisted that I wanted to be a cook because that is what I liked to do and I was already trained as a chef. The interviewer's then had me sign a form to waive my right to attend a technical school and I went on my merry way for over 20 years as a cook.

Now, forty years later, I am working in the technical field of computers. Go figure!

September 1966 – August 1967: Naval Weapons Center, China Lake, CA

This is where they sent me from boot camp. Can you believe it? I join the Navy to "see the world", and they send me to the California Desert right next to Death Valley. The windshield blew out on my car from the heat about a week after I got there.

The Navy work at China Lake was miserable. The galley was an old-fashioned establishment that mass produced low quality food and the management treated their employees and customers like shit (Can I say shit on the Internet?) I found it hard to be a professional chef where I was outranked by co-workers who did not know how to cook and did not care to learn. I took part time jobs catering weddings and banquets in order to keep my sanity.

I really hated China Lake and tried to get transferred there. I was told that I would have to stay at least three years. My only way out was to volunteer for Vietnam duty. It took three formal requests before they finally let me go to Vietnam. The command sent me to a shrink for evaluation because "nobody in their right mind would ever volunteer for Vietnam duty when they could stay in the United States". I finally convinced them that I was not loco and got orders for the USS Hunterdon County (an LST performing River Patrol duty in the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam). I proved that I knew what I wanted – I stayed in Vietnam for 2 ½ years when one year was all that was required.

October 1967 – April 1969: USS Hunterdon County (LST 838)

The USS Hunterdon County was a Tank Landing Ship converted for use as home-base for 12 PBR boats and 2 Helicopters and their crews. This ship and others like it were part of Operation Game Warden. Operation Game Warden was a mission that took place on the rivers of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam for the purpose of denying the Viet Cong the use of these waterways.

Although this was the most dangerous duty of my career, it was also the most exciting and personally rewarding. The crew of the Hunterdon County was small and worked well as a team. We worked hard and played hard.

Most of my 18 month tour consisted of baker duty on graveyard shift. My bread-making and a specialty for caramel and pecan rolls got quite a reputation on the rivers. Sometimes PBRs and other small boats from other units would stop by the Hunterdon County to get some of my fresh bread and rolls.

I met my wife, Esmenia, during a period that the Hunterdon County was in the Philippines for repairs. We had a long courtship following traditional Philippine rules. For example, we always had a chaperone on our dates. I also had to bribe Esmenia's godmother with treats and bingo money in order to get approval for visits and dates. It was fun and very interesting.

The Navy really made extraordinary efforts to discourage marriages to Philippine citizens. It took more than a year of bureaucratic red tape to finally get approval for us to get married.

We had a big wedding planned (most of my shipmates were planning to attend). However, the day of our wedding, the ship was suddenly recalled back to Vietnam and left Subic Bay the day of my wedding. Since I was on leave, I was allowed to stay and finish up the wedding. Then I flew to Japan and subsequently to Saigon to catch up with the ship.

We have been happily married for over 35 years now.

June 1969 – April 1970: USS Coral Sea (CVA 43) - Tonkin Gulf, Vietnam

After getting married and spending a month at home in the Philippines, I reported for duty on the USS Coral Sea CVA 43. The Coral Sea was an aircraft carrier operating in the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of Vietnam

The crew was approximately 4,500 men. It was like a floating city. During my year aboard the Coral Sea, I knew how to get from my workspace to my living quarters, how to get on and off the ship, and how to get to places like the medical services and personnel office. If I strayed from any of my known routes, I would become lost. There were also a lot of places that were "restricted areas" that I did not have access to.

Work for cooks was never-ending (4,500 people eating 4 meals per day plus snacks). There were many galleys (kitchens) and almost 200 cooks. The galleys were specialized in function such as 1 for senior officers, 2 for junior officers, 3 for ships crew, 1 for baking bread, 1 for desserts, and 1 for salads. Most of my tour aboard the Coral Sea was spent decorating cakes and making ice cream. This photo shows an 800lb cake decorated to reflect the 12 days of Christmas with the two Turtle Doves pulled out as a separate cake for the front centerpiece.

I worked mostly graveyard shifts. I was always under pressure to come up with new flavors (I actually invented peanut butter chocolate chunk in 1969). My goofiest new flavor was when I discovered that I could get sherbert-like flavors by putting powdered Jell-O into the mix. I made several flavors, sent them down to the freezers and went to bed. I was roused at noon the next day by the chief. He asked "What the [expletive deleted] did you do to the ice cream last night! He made me follow him up to the serving line for a look. It was the funniest thing I ever saw – scoops of ice cream that bounced like Jell-O when it hit the tray!

I reenlisted while on board the Coral Sea. I took advantage of a special program that allowed for a choice of duty in return for signing up for another six years. Of course, I took the Philippines for my choice. Since many US Navy Sailors were Philippine citizens and most of them were cooks, it was really hard for the Navy to give me this choice. I did not get a job as a cook, but I did get orders to report to the Navy Exchange (Something like a K-Mart store).

May 1970 – May 1972: Navy Exchange, Naval Air Station, Cubi Point, Philippines

Duty and life in the Philippines was really great. Life was real laid back and the work was both interesting and not too stressful. My daughter, Sharon was born in the Naval Hospital in Subic Bay on January 23, 1970. It is not very often that a sailor gets to live at home with a new family for the first 4 ½ years of their first child's life.

My job was “Customer Service Representative” in the Navy Exchange Retail Store. I spent most of that time selling stereo equipment and handling customer complaints or inquiries. I rarely wore a uniform (I was actually a white shirt and tie kind of guy during this tour). Twice a month I would work as “duty manager” of one of the Enlisted Men’s night clubs (mostly telling the shore patrol what to do). I also rode shotgun (Actually a 45 caliber pistol) in the armored car on Monday mornings to make the bank deposit for the weekend sales (about \$2,000,000 per deposit).

There was plenty of time off for recreation. My normal shift was 3 days on, 2 days off, 2 days on, three days off. There were so many beautiful places to visit. Parties on the white sand beaches were one of our favorite activities. Food and booze were cheap (examples: T-Bone Steaks \$1.15 lb, Seagram's 7 \$1.75 quart, San Miguel beer \$1.60 per case). Huge parties with cookouts of steaks and lotsa booze were common. Road trips to the mountains and other scenic areas were another fun thing to do.

I really hated to leave the Philippines. Great weather, many very close friends, and a fun job made this one of the best periods of my life. I wouldn't mind retiring there if the government becomes a little more stable.

July 1972 – February 1975: Miller Dining Hall, Naval Air Station, Beeville, TX

The Naval Air Station at Beeville, Texas was another one of those bases located in a desert area. There were very few trees and we kept our lawn mowed real short so we could spot the rattlesnakes easier. There were so many rattlesnakes that the town had a big celebration every year that included a "rattlesnake roundup" and picnic. Snakes, lizards, goat were some of the favorite foods at the festival.

My duty at Miller Dining Hall was a changing point in my career. Chief Elias Jones saw some potential in me and really drove me hard to excel. This is where I started taking on more leadership roles. I was selected as sailor of the quarter twice and sailor of the year once. I quickly got out of the daily routine of cooking and baking and took on new roles which included: Storeroom supervisor, Training Petty Officer, and Career Counselor. In the training role, I found "no-cost" supplies and built a classroom in the back of the dining hall. Then I developed training curriculum and delivered formal training to about 20 cooks. As a result, several of the cooks were able to pass advancement exams and get promoted during a period when promotions were hard to achieve.

I also brought two women into the cook's rating and helped them get a career start in a field that was not available to women in the past. In fact, there were no standard uniforms for women cooks in the Navy. One of the women, Lynne Chevalier, really excelled. She even designed a new uniform for women cooks and submitted it the Navy Uniform board and Navy Food Service Systems. Her design was accepted and this uniform became the standard uniform for all female Navy cooks.

Although we were in the desert, we were close enough to Corpus Christi, Texas to enjoy lots of recreational activities. Our favorite was fishing from a pier located on the Navy base. We never got skunked because we used live shrimp for bait (If we caught no fish, we could return home and cook the bait).

I also took a part time job as a disk jockey in a night club (this is 1972 – a long time before it became the norm). I enjoyed full-house crowds and lots of free beer while I rocked the house and did goofy tricks.

At the end of my tour, I originally had orders to be a member of the commissioning crew for the USS Spruance (first of a new class of destroyers being built in Pascagoula, Mississippi). Just before my transfer date, the shipyard at Pascagoula went on strike and I got new orders to the USS Flint (an ammunition ship).

March 1975 – January 1976: USS Flint (AE 32), WestPac cruise

The USS Flint was a real downer for me. I arrived full of ambition and left wondering if the Navy would survive this era. During the time I was aboard, not one single person who was a second class petty officer or higher reenlisted. I even saw Chiefs with over 18 years in the Navy call it quits on their reenlistment date rather than spend another day aboard. I did not find out until years later that many of those who left stayed out for at least six months and then reenlisted at a recruiter's office as way to get off the Flint, but still finish their career.

Working conditions were miserable. Add to that the high incidence of drug use, numerous racial conflicts, and high onboard crime rate and you can see why career people were leaving.

While on board, I made one more WestPac cruise. I worked mostly as a "Mess Deck Master at Arms" supervising the "worst of the worst". All divisions were required to send people to work in the Galley/Mess Decks for a period of 90 days. Guess who they would send – the people they couldn't handle. I ended up with a 30 person crew of the ship's worst misfits. During my short stay on the Flint, I went to 46 Captain's Mast for conduct problems ranging from marijuana use to theft to assault with deadly weapons.

When my reenlistment date came up, I applied for the GUARD II program that enabled one to reenlist for 6 years and get their choice of duty station. I was approved for the program but was informed that I would have to remain on the Flint for two more years before I could exercise my choice of duty option. I turned it down and did not reenlist. Instead, I met with VA representatives and worked with them to develop a "Restaurant Manager" apprenticeship program under the GI Bill. I also applied for and got a 90 day early out. This enabled me to work as an assistant manager for a California-based restaurant chain and receive GI bill benefits until I was promoted to manager.

April 1981 – February 1983: Reserve Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 25, DET 1225, Duluth, MN

After I was discharged from the Navy in 1976, I worked in California as a restaurant manager for about one year. Then I moved back to Minnesota and worked as a banquet chef for about two years. Then I signed on with a trucking company and began driving 18-wheeler trucks around the country. The truck driving was very rewarding. It paid well and gave me the opportunity to travel around the country.

It was while driving truck; I became real close friends with one of my co-workers, Ramon Clairmont. Ray was an old-style Boatswain's Mate. Ray finally was able to convince me to rejoin the Navy as a reservist. Ray and I had lots of good times both at work and in our Navy Reserve jobs.

My first tour in the Navy Reserve was with RNMCB 25, DET 1225. The highlights of this tour were when we would go to YMCA and other youth camps to do construction and repair work for them. We did the work free while they provided the chance to practice and maintain our skills. During these weekend work trips, we were often allowed to bring our families, camp out, and have great picnics mingled with the work.

February 83 – October 1988: USS Connole, NRFF 1056 - Newport, RI

I transferred to the USS Connole in February of 1983 as soon as a billet became available so that I could be in the same unit as Ramon. I stayed on the Connole until Ramon retired. Soon after joining the Connole, I changed civilian jobs and began working for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. My family liked this better because I would be at home more often.

The monthly meetings at the Navy Reserve Center were really boring, but the times we got out of the center to do some hands on training were the best. We would normally go to the USS Connole at her homeport in Newport, RI. Newport was a great place to spend liberty time in. It was expensive, but worth every penny. Ramon and I frequented seafood restaurants, the Jai Lai arena, local pubs, and did a lot of general sight-seeing. We even brought home live lobsters on several occasions.

The crew of the Connole in Newport really liked to see Ramon and I come aboard. Although Ramon was a Boatswains Mate, they would allow him to work with me in the Galley. One time we took the baking shift and wooed the crew with hot breads and pastries. Another time, we let all of the ship's company cooks go to work on their rehab projects when the ship was in dry-dock while we took over the Galley completely. We worked on a barge and fed the crew what they thought was "real home cooking". Ray and I received letters of commendation for that adventure.

October 1988 – May 1993: Mobile Inshore Undersea Warfare Unit 111, Superior, WI

After Ramon retired, I moved on to a new unit. When MIUW 111 was announced, there was a flood of people applying for billets on it. This is because it was going to be a totally "hands-on" unit with trucks, equipment, and a unique mission. Every weekend would be doing actual work instead of attending boring classes.

I was one of the first people accepted into the unit. I assisted the new commanding officer with keeping track of those he interviewed and selected for his new crew (yes, there were so many applicants that he could interview and pick his own crew). The unit was commissioned in 1988. I baked and decorated the cake for a public commissioning ceremony held in Duluth.

This was an exciting unit to work with. Our mission was surveillance to protect narrow waterways. We were a self contained unit that could mobilize and be setup anywhere in

the world within 48 hours. During the period I was with them, these units participated in drug interdiction activities in various locations and in harbor protection in Saudi Arabia during and after the first Persian Gulf War (Desert Storm). We were a self-contained and cross-trained unit.

One of the best or worst aspects of this unit was the extensive amount of work and travel expected of everyone. Instead of sitting in classroom on weekends, we would do maintenance work on our equipment. Instead of work one Saturday and Sunday each month, we would add Friday work to the weekend. We would also travel to another state or country at least six weekends out of the year and the usual two week active duty requirement always turned into three weeks or more. This huge amount of time commitment made it hard on some people and their employers. I was fortunate enough to have an employer that fully supported my Navy Reserve duty requirements.

After a few years, I began tiring of the extra time involved. I loved the travel, but I felt a need to spend more time with my family. I retired in May of 1993. Now I do my traveling in the form of "real vacations" with my wife.