

A KENTUCKY BOY GOES TO SEA AS A NAVAL OFFICER

Published by Hellgate Press

(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

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Hellgate Press

PO Box 3531

Ashland, OR 97520

email: sales@hellgatepress.com

Cover & Interior Design: L. Redding

ISBN: 978-1-954163-43-0

Printed and bound in the United States of America

First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated to my colleagues and shipmates in the U.S. Navy who supported me throughout my career and likewise to my colleagues in the Navy of South Vietnam who became like my brothers as did the members of the Armada de Argentina during my tour as an embedded exchange officer in their Navy. I also dedicate this book to the members of the Spanish Navy with whom I worked during my tour as an attaché in Madrid. Finally, I dedicate this book to the Vietnamese refugees I was able to help rescue as Saigon was falling.

A Kentucky Boy Goes to Sea as a Naval Officer

A MEMOIR

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HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

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Introduction

My name is Marshall Van Sant Hall. I am a retired U.S. Navy Commander. When I was awarded a full NROTC (Naval Officer Reserve Training Corps) scholarship to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1968, I became the first person in my family to attend college. At the same time, I applied via my congressman for an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD.

I was approved for the Naval Academy but I had already accepted the NROTC scholarship. At the time, I had no plans to make a career in the Navy so I opted for the NROTC program.

Had I accepted my appointment to the Academy, I suppose it might have been advantageous in the long run to my Navy career which I did end up pursuing. In the Academy, one tends to pick up mentors who can help with matters pertaining to career sponsorship. Those mentors tend to be Flag Officers (or Admirals). Still, I did pick up some important mentors some of which were junior to me during my career progression. I am not sure I really ever needed mentorship.

I have always tended to be rather adventurous. For that reason, after having served two successful tours afloat, I volunteered for potentially hazardous duty in-country Vietnam as an advisor to the South Vietnamese Naval forces operating around the Mekong River. A senior mentor would probably have advised against that in as much as the War at that time was winding down and becoming less attractive on a resume. Furthermore, I later volunteered to be an exchange officer with the Navy of Argentina. A senior mentor would have advised me against that because it was too far outside the mainstream of the U.S. Navy. No one could see the Falkland War coming. Finally, towards the end of my career when I was

serving on the Chief of Naval Operations Staff with responsibility for administrating a three-billion-dollar program of military sales to Spain as that country was entering NATO. I became aware of an attaché position opening up in Madrid. The timing was right in terms of my rotation so I requested consideration for the position. During a business trip to Spain, I paid a call on the American Ambassador at the embassy. I had already established a good working relationship with the Ambassador. I told him I would like to be a member of his diplomatic team and he readily agreed. I asked him to make a by-name request for me via State Department channels which he did. An effective mentor would veto that idea because I was technically going outside Navy channels to get it. A mentor would have pointed out the potential for career suicide. On the upside, as an attaché, I was awarded the Defense Superior Service medal and I was cited for being the most prolific intelligence reporter among my attaché group. In spite of my getting the job and performing it very well, the Bureau of Personnel took a dim view of my initiative. I did not regard myself as just being another brick in the wall. I was more proactive than that when it came to pursuing positions I wanted.

Among my best choices in my career was to learn two languages fluently besides English: Vietnamese and Spanish. When you learn another language, you gain assets in terms of insights and learning how to think thoughts you can't think otherwise. This was of central importance to me in terms of understanding the cultures I was operating in. I am not sure any mentor would have adequately understood this.

For example, in Vietnam I learned they have a much more elastic concept of time. Their sense of past and present is blurred compared to ours. "I go" and "I went" mean about the same thing. If one means to specify one went and that action is now over and complete, one can add a special word to clarify. That can amount to a lot of misunderstanding when it comes to a question like "Did you conduct a patrol?" If the answer is yes you may need to ask when. If

the answer is yesterday you have narrowed down the concept to what I was used to as a Westerner. If the answer is tomorrow, I needed additional clarification. This forced me to realize that I needed to think in the present tense and then deduce the true concept of time I was used to dealing with.

In Spain and to a lesser extent in Argentine culture, heritage is destiny. If you were a male born to a naval officer, you were destined to be a naval officer, too. As a pre-teen, you would be enrolled into the Liceo Naval, a prep school for the Spanish Naval Academy where you would be educated and trained to be a naval officer from the ground up. That would include Spanish naval history, basic seamanship, academic studies, physical education and other skills you would need to progress and build upon.

I personally knew several Spanish naval officers who were descended from as many as thirteen unbroken generations of naval officer forbearers. One such officer had an ancestor who commanded a Spanish ship during the Battle of Pensacola Bay, a little-known battle during the American Revolution when the Spanish fleet was operating with the French fleet in support of our revolution.

Another interesting thing about the Spanish Navy is that they always have a Christopher Columbus as an admiral on active duty. When that admiral dies, the next direct descendent of Christopher Columbus changes his name to Cristobal Colon (Christopher Columbus in English) and assumes all the hereditary rights and titles pertaining to the name, e.g., a Duke. If not already a flag officer he will be destined to become one. I made rank on time throughout my career so I guess I was successful by that measure. I spent way more than my fair share of duty at sea. Basically, I had a great and wonderfully interesting career based upon my own stewardship. I was not destined to be an admiral as will become evident as you read my book. I loved the U.S. Navy nonetheless.

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CHAPTER 1

Early Immersion into the Navy

First Liberty Call—I was twenty years old. It was 1965. I was a Navy midshipman 3rd class (officer trainee). Part of my training involved participation in three summer-long training cruises. My first such cruise was on an old straight decked aircraft carrier of WWII vintage, USS *Lake Champlain* (CVS—57). She was commissioned just a bit too late to participate in WWII. Her factitious nickname was the “straightest and the greatest.” Her main mission was anti-submarine warfare. She carried a variety of helicopters most of which were equipped with dipping sonars. As well, a wing of S-2F tracker fixed-wing two engine propeller-driven aircraft called “Stoofs” were typically embarked. The Stoofs could carry two acoustic homing torpedoes for use against submarines plus numerous sonobuoys the Stoofs could deploy and then monitor. My rank in terms of hierarchy was like whale shit at the bottom of the ocean.

As a result of her older design, the USS *Lake Champlain* had an open bow structure as opposed to an enclosed, more protected “hurricane” bow more common to the newer aircraft carriers. One could walk to the frontmost part of the open bow under the flight

deck and look down to the stem of the ship cutting through the water as she moved forward. If one looked up, a sizable hole was evident in one of the I-beams under the flight deck. I had no idea water under pressure could pierce the web of a steel beam but there was the proof. The damage had occurred some years earlier while the ship was operating at sea during foul weather. The damage was judged as operationally inconsequential and was never fully repaired.

As I looked down from that vantage point while the ship was operating at nearly full power in the Chesapeake Bay, I was surprised to see a large hammerhead shark near the surface. It passed under the ship.

While we midshipmen were embarked, we got to take rides in the S-2F trackers. Our aircraft were launched from the bow with steam catapults. Being a straight decked carrier, and if the aircraft was not properly powered up during launch, it would go into the water dead ahead of the ship and then the ship would run over the aircraft as if it were the large hammerhead shark I had observed.

When we landed on the carrier during our familiarization flights, the aircraft caught an arresting wire. That was a memorable experience. I was sure we had crashed. I could see the various shock mounted equipment moving around on their mountings.

After our operations in the Chesapeake Bay and in the nearby Atlantic, the ship pulled into New York City for a few days of liberty. It was my first visit there. We were wearing civilian clothing as opposed to the rather inappropriate-for-use-ashore midshipmen uniforms we wore at sea. A popular drink in those days was the Singapore Sling which we assiduously sought out in the bars of New York City.

I remember the awful berthing compartment where my colleagues and I were assigned. It was directly under the old wood flight deck through which I could see stars twinkling at night between the openings in the old wood decking of the flight deck. If it rained, we got wet. When planes landed or launched above us, we were

jolted from our stacked bunks. The unsettling thought occurred that spilled aviation fuel could find its way to us if a flight deck disaster might happen.

Naval Officer Reserve Training Corps midshipmen arrived at the ship before a larger group of Naval Academy midshipmen who had been drinking before coming aboard. Being from the academy they had not much experience drinking. The latter group had to pass through our berthing compartment to get to theirs. The academy midshipmen did not like us. A bottleneck developed at a narrow water-tight door in our compartment. Tempers flared and a fight broke out between the NROTC types and the Naval Academy types. A friend of mine, a large Miami University Redskin varsity football player of Hungarian extraction tried to step in and make peace but was punched. Bad, bad mistake. The naval academy guys caught the worst end of the deal by far.

The aim of our first training cruise was to familiarize us with the enlisted way of life. Mostly we performed slave labor such as bilge cleaning during our time aboard. We performed work self-respecting sailors disdained or we stood various engineering watches in the fire rooms (think boilers) or noisy engine rooms. The snipes (boiler techs, enginemen or machinist mates) hazed us without mercy. We weren't yet officers and were therefore sort of fair game for harassment by the enlisted snipes.

We wore a version of the enlisted navy uniform except for our dixie cup sailor hats which had a blue stripe towards the top of the hat. The enlisted crew members spread rumors to women ashore to the effect the blue stripe signified venereal disease.

One evening I was standing watch in one of the engine rooms alongside a petty officer. Another unseen fireman shot a salt pill at me with a peashooter. In those days, salt pill dispensers were located throughout the sweltering engineering spaces of the ship. Whap! The salt pill hit me with considerable force on my neck. The petty officer seemed to sympathize with me. He told me to fill a bucket with water. Then he gave me some rather complicated di-

rections that involved going up and down ladders and around various machinery equipment. He told me if I followed his directions carefully, I would find myself a deck above my tormentor where I could dump my bucket of water upon him. I did as he said but when I finally got there my tormentor was not where he was supposed to be. He was a deck above me. He dumped a bucket of water on me. It was impossible for me to maintain any dignity at all.

The Navy has a serious fascination with boxing events called smokers. I remember that one particular sailor, a member of the crew, was very skilled as a boxer. He was a serious contender at the fleet level. While we were at sea aboard the *Lake Champlain*, we midshipmen participated in a smoker. We boxed against other fellow midshipmen in the hangar bay. I do not think any of us midshipmen covered ourselves in glory. We had no finesse and did not bob and weave to any real degree. We simply slugged one another senseless.

We also watched movies in the hangar bay after the evening meal at sea. I remember seeing the movie *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. It was a new release.

The ship was home ported at Quonset Point near Newport, Rhode Island. By fortuitous circumstance, the annual Newport Jazz Festival was in full swing. I enjoyed that greatly and I remember the musician Dizzy Gillespie in particular. We were quick to learn that nobody ashore carded us including the Newport package stores.

One weekend when we did not have duty, another midshipman fool and I decided to check out Cape Cod which neither of us had ever visited. I don't remember how we got there but I do remember finding an impromptu band and a party on a beach in the Falmouth area. The band was using a loud generator to power their musical equipment and had to turn up their amplifiers for the music to be heard over the loud generator. Later that rainy night, my friend and I sought shelter in a nearby baseball field dug-out.

As my other fool colleague and I sat on our bench in the dug-out

we noticed an attractive young woman wandering around on the baseball field in the drizzling rain. She apparently failed to take notice of us because she dropped her pants and peed on the home plate. We were close witnesses. After a short polite interlude, I called to her and invited her to share our meager shelter and a pint of Myer's Dark Rum which I had illicitly scored from a Newport package store. Obviously embarrassed and mortified, she nonetheless decided to accept our hospitality and passed much of the evening in pleasant social discourse with us. Looking back, that is the most remarkable memory of my real liberty runs ashore. It set the tone for many, many such runs ashore during my 21-year career in the Navy.

The second-class midshipman training cruise came between our second and third year of college. It consisted of two phases: the first phase was basic naval aviation training at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, Texas. We were given classroom instruction, homework study assignments and supervised instruction in the tandem seat aircraft where the instructor pilot had a good view of his students. As I recall, it was the T2 piston driven air craft we trained in. I had been randomly selected to be a company commander of the midshipmen. Unfortunately, that duty took my attention away from the homework assignments. I was ill prepared and sleepy the next morning and had to ask my instructor pilot to guide me through the process of starting the plane and taking it down the runway. My instructor was not very impressed with me.

Both phases of the training involved considerable physical training as well as daily marching drills. The second phase of the second training cruise had us in the amphibious navy and took place at the Navy Amphibious Base at Little Creek in Virginia. The culmination of that training towards the end of our cruise had us embarked on an older, cramped personnel transport. We constituted an amphibious landing force. We slept in stacked bunks only inches apart vertically and laterally. Our rifles were secured to the side of our bunks.

We scrambled over the side of the ship by climbing down rope netting into bobbing and swaying LCVP (Landing Craft Vehicle & Personnel) amphibious craft idling next to the troop ship. We were carrying full packs and rifles. One of my colleagues slipped on the way down the net and was suspended upside down by his ankle over the LCVP. Someone managed to free his foot and he fell into the craft but he did that with class. He landed on his feet and smiled at us. He was lucky. He could have broken his neck.

The various landing craft milled around in circles off the beach long enough to get many of us sea sick. Then, we arrived at the beach and the landing craft bow gate opened and fell down into the surf. We waded in through the water and once ashore we assaulted our objective area of the beach which had pill boxes and other fortifications. Our M1 rifles were loaded with blanks.

After our assault, we were herded into bleachers where we observed the second wave of troops landing. Those troops, active-duty marines were there to show us how it was supposed to go. They stormed ashore with real weapons and munitions including satchel charges. They blew up several bunkers. It was all very authentic. I'm unaware of any of us being seriously injured during the training.

For a strenuous couple of days, we were introduced to special warfare frogman training. At that time frogmen were UDT (Underwater Demolition Team) members as opposed to the later SEAL (Sea Air Land) designation. Our brief indoctrination mostly consisted of beach training. We were assigned six-man rubber boats operating and racing in the surf. I remember the boat I was in leaked badly. In spite of that handicap, we managed not to come in last in the races. Maybe the last boat in the race leaked worse than our craft.

Our third and final training cruise had an objective aimed at introducing us to the duties and the life of junior officers aboard ships, mostly destroyers. It came during our junior year of college. We wore uniforms that were closer to making us look like officers.

Smaller contingents of us first class midshipmen were assigned to destroyers. I was assigned to USS *Steinaker* (DD-863), a Gearing Class destroyer, based in Norfolk, Virginia.

We occupied officer berthing quarters and we were served meals in the wardroom with the officers of the ship. In port, we stood quarterdeck watches as officers of the deck under instruction where we were trained in matters of traditional protocol such as rendering proper honors to visiting or embarked senior officers. We were also trained as boat officers in that we learned how to supervise the boat crews, how to navigate the boats in harbors, how to properly render passing honors, etc. We also learned from practical exercises about operating anchoring equipment and how to properly moor or anchor a ship.

At sea, we stood various watches such as Junior Officer of the Deck or in the Combat Information Center (CIC) under-instruction, where we studied basics relating to maneuvering the ship and Junior Engineer Officer of the Watch in the engine room. Further, we rotated around enlisted watch stander stations learning about what signalmen and a variety of other watch standers do including look-outs, helmsmen, etc. At the same time, we followed certain officers around such as the Navigator, Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) officer or the Gunnery Officers to become familiar with what they did on a daily basis. Sometimes we functioned as messengers for officers.

A friend recently asked me why I chose the Navy over other services. Truth is, the Navy chose me more than I chose it. A high school guidance counselor told me about a Navy scholarship program which she thought would be a good fit for me. I agreed and I applied for the scholarship.

The testing, both physically and scholastically was very challenging. I also had to undergo a thorough security screening process by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. If I were successful in becoming a midshipman it would eventually lead to a commission as a regular Navy or Marine Corps officer as opposed to a reserve of-

ficer. I decided to pursue a Navy commission and was very hopeful for the NROTC scholarship. I managed to pass all of the hurdles and I got a full ride: tuition, books and even a modest cash allowance for incidentals (beer mostly). The Navy was the only service that offered such a good deal. Conditions of the scholarship were rather ample. I was prohibited from majoring in certain areas not related to the Navy such as architecture. I also had to go to school where the Navy sent me: Miami University in Ohio. This was okay with me since I was familiar with that fine institution. While the process of testing and security clearance worked itself out, I also applied to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis via my congressman. I was nominated for the Academy but as first alternate. Turns out the guy ahead of me flunked his physical exam and I became the primary nominee. By then I had decided to go with the NROTC scholarship. At the time, I had no intentions of making the Navy a career. That decision came some years later.

I became a member of the NROTC unit at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, along with about sixty other midshipmen in my class. About half of us were Regular Midshipmen meaning we were recipients of full scholarships while the remainder were Contract or reserve students eligible for a reserve commission upon graduation. The NROTC unit was organized as a battalion. The unit also had a lesser number of enlisted Navy and Marine members who were selected from the ranks to pursue commissions upon graduation. Those members did not drill with us midshipmen nor were they referred to as midshipmen. They were referred to as NESEPs (Navy Enlisted Science Education Program). They typically did not wear uniforms nor did they study the naval courses required of midshipmen. They mostly studied pure science courses of study. I imagine the NESEPs probably were sent to “knife and fork” finishing school for final training before commissioning. The midshipmen wore uniforms once a week and drilled on the same day.

I basically pursued a liberal arts education. Early on I was accepted into an honors creative writing program and majored in



My Commissioning Ceremony as Ensign, U.S. Navy, at Miami University, 1968. *Left to right:* Charles (father), Betty Ann (mother), Ensign Hall, Michael (younger brother), Tony (youngest brother)

English. I also studied psychology which was interesting to me as well as trigonometry. Further, I studied Naval Science including navigation, propulsion engineering, naval history and weapons not to mention a variety of other academic electives. The Naval Science courses were taught by Navy or Marine officers on the NROTC staff. I was later surprised to learn NROTC graduates had a higher retention rate than our Naval Academy colleagues. My academic experience at Miami University was spotty because I was not very focused at first. For the first two years, my grades were mediocre. They got better as I went along. By my senior year I was getting straight A's.