

ANOTHER KIND OF VETERAN

BUT A VETERAN NONTHELESS

Historically, "veteran" is a term describing anyone who has served in the Uniformed Military Services of the United States. While all who served are veterans, are not all the same. Likewise, while most veterans have a story describing their service, their stories are not all the same. The most interesting and captivating stories frequently involve Medals of Honor, prisoners of war, combat wounded, bombings, special operations, pilots, snipers, and those individuals who had a host of other "engagement with the enemy" experiences. Veterans who participated in these necessary and overwhelmingly dangerous military activities deserve all the accolades and respect the country can provide. They fit the stereotypical definition of "veterans".

But there is another group of folks that have served who are not often recognized for their contributions to the success of the veterans who do "engage with the enemy". These are the scientists, engineers, physicists, mathematicians, chemists, computer scientists and other technologists that invent, develop, improve and test the equipment and capabilities that give our combat troops the edge they need to successfully "engage with the enemy" in battle.

I am one of those veterans.

I was born in Minnesota after WWII along with millions of other baby boomers. While not rich (and more like poor), my parents insisted on me continuing my education beyond high school. With the 1950's Sputnik launch and the cold war, it was clear that the country needed more scientist and engineers to technologically match and eventually beat the Soviets. I was all in to become a scientist and be part of the cold war effort.

In 1968, at the height of the cold war and the intervening Viet Nam war, I was just a year short of earning a PhD degree in chemistry from North Dakota State University when I was notified of my impending military draft notice. I elected to enlist in the Navy, the service in which my father served in during WWII. Fortunately, the Navy delayed my entry into active duty until my PhD degree was awarded. Upon activation, being a low ranking enlisted sailor with a PhD made me extremely unique in the Navy. (The word was that I was the only E-4 in the Navy with a PhD). It wasn't long after my initial assignment to the aircraft carrier the USS Enterprise (CVN-65) that technology leaders in the Navy felt I could contribute more to the Navy as a scientist and I was reassigned to the Naval Weapons Laboratory in Dahlgren, Virginia. For the remainder of my enlistment, I worked as a research chemist on technical projects at the Lab, including testing of face masks to protect against gaseous and particulate chemical poisons, and developing fire resistant coatings for ships.

While at the Lab as a sailor, I found I was interested in, and reasonably successful at working with, the overwhelming civilian technical staff. The Lab cadre consisted of about 3000 civilians along with 60 uniformed military personnel. Upon release from active duty, I was immediately hired as a

2nd Place – Gary Grittner

civilian research chemist at the Lab. With the obvious synergism of “dual” jobs, I continued in the Navy, accepted an officer commission in the Naval Reserve, and embarked on a 27 year military career in parallel with a 25 year government civil service career.

During my scientific career, I worked on many state-of-the-art military projects involving stealth, intelligence intercept and processing, submarine detection, large guided weapons, shipboard command and control systems, anti-air defense, and weapon and ammunition lethality and reliability.

As a civilian, I spent two years in Hawaii as the chief scientist at the Commander-in-Chief-Pacific (CINCPACFLT), a Naval command headed by a 4 star admiral. I served over a year as the Surface Navy Science Advisor at the Pentagon, identifying technology opportunities that might be incorporated into future Navy operations. As a Lab manager, I was in charge of working on early artificial intelligence to solve large problems, as well as leading several organizations of up to 450 scientists, engineers and technical support personnel. Among my proudest accomplishments was heading a team of engineers and computer scientists that developed new supersecret software for a squadron of reconnaissance/surveillance/spy airplanes, one of which was shot down by the Chinese.

The Cold War, which started right after World War II, was essentially over by 1989 when the Berlin wall came down, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. We had defeated the Soviets and had proven that a capitalistic economic system was superior to a centrally planned system.

It was time for the country to demilitarize and for many of us to “go home”. I retired from the Navy as a Commander in 1995 and from the Defense Department shortly thereafter.

Many of the projects and concepts I worked on years ago have now found their way into the operational military – although some are still shrouded in secrecy. Along with thousands of other uniformed scientists and engineers, our work during the cold war and beyond helped form the scientific underpinnings to many of the civilian technologies the country enjoys today, including GPS and drones.

As I humbly state; “Along with 40 million of my closest technology friends, I won the Cold War.”

I am proud to be a veteran, even though I never personally “engaged with the enemy”.