

**Edmund Lewis Fitzsimmons, Jr.** interviewed October 22, 2007

Petty Officer Third Class, US Navy, August 1954 – September 1957

In 1954, Ed had just graduated from high school and was looking for a job. The problem was that employers didn't want to hire men who had not yet fulfilled their military obligation. There was a draft at the time and employers were concerned about hiring someone who could be drafted after they were hired. Ed decided to get his military obligation over with so he enlisted in the Navy. The Navy would take him within two weeks, but the Army could take up to two months and Ed was anxious to get going.



Ed was sworn in to the Navy with about 100 other men in Philadelphia. After taking the oath, they boarded buses to Bainbridge, MD for boot camp. Ed remembers his first night in the barracks, when he didn't know anyone or what was going to happen, laying in bed thinking "Why did I do this." They learned basic seamanship, how to identify planes and ships, duties of different job classifications and general knowledge about life in the Navy. Everyone had to qualify on a rifle, but otherwise, this was not emphasized. They did march and drill in companies of nearly 100 men and the different companies would compete against each other.

Prior to enlisting, Ed had taken some aptitude tests and had scored high enough that he could choose almost any field of work in the Navy. He chose to attend Electricians School at Great Lakes, IL. During the three month course, he had classroom and hands on training for Interior Communications (IC). This job involved keeping all of the internal communications systems on the ship running. These systems included telephones, on board broadcasting and even the ship's main gyro compass which communicated with repeater compasses around the ship.

#### Choosing a Ship...

Near the end of school, a choice of assignments was posted on the bulletin board and the fifteen men in the class were able to request the assignment they wanted. Ed chose the destroyer USS Stickell (DDR888) because he didn't want to be on a large ship. A destroyer has a crew of about 300, and the Stickell was stationed at Norfolk, VA on the east coast. Ed reported to the Stickell and boarded with some apprehension. When he introduced himself, the sailor at the gangway called down to the IC room and said "Broman, your replacement is here." Tom Broman was the crewman he was replacing and during the two weeks Broman had left on the ship, he showed Ed the ropes, which was a big help. When Broman left the ship, Ed felt apprehensive again, but it turned out fine as Ed had already made friends on board and was able to handle the IC job.

The Stickell was a radar ship whose job was to make a picket run from Cuba to the North Atlantic above Greenland and back down. They would be at sea for about two weeks at a time and would then set into port, usually for a weekend. They would stop most frequently at their home base of Norfolk, but they also made stops in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia; New York; Savannah, GA and New Orleans, LA. They would monitor the air with radar and below the water with sonar while working with the other three

destroyers in their division. One time, they followed some unidentified submarines for 10 – 12 hours while the crew was at general quarters in preparation for any trouble.

While at sea, Ed's job was to repair any problem with the ship's internal communication systems. In order to be available for any problem, he would sleep on a cot in the IC room which also housed the gyro compass. Most of the problems developed because of the corrosion of the salt air and water on the system. Problems were fairly predictable and Ed was able to handle most of the repairs himself. One time, he was on the bridge around 3 am working to repair the repeater compass there. He was holding his flashlight under his chin in order to free up his two hands. The Captain came in and saw what he was doing and said "Fitzsimmons, let me hold that flashlight for you." This was a welcome surprise as Ed didn't interact with the Captain very much.



Ed Fitzsimmons at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, 1954. Lake Michigan is in the background.

Ed remembers that the food in port was good and the food served during the first week at sea was also good, but after that, the ship ran out of fresh food. Ed enjoyed being at sea and would sit on the fantail sometimes at night and look up at all of the stars that were visible out at sea, away from all of the lights. The crew was very young with an average age of about 20-21. Ed recalls that most of the men were responsible although they also had some problem sailors who were to be avoided. He also remembers a lot of gambling being done on ship. While this was against the rules, the officers looked the other way unless someone was being hurt.

They could receive mail while at sea, usually from an oil tender or an aircraft carrier which could have the mail flown out from shore. The longest time they were out to sea was 36 days and during that time, they only received mail two or three times. This meant that they had a stack of letters delivered all at once and one had to read the postmarks in order to open them in the right order. It was difficult to stay connected to the outside world and sometimes, Ed's parents would send him a copy of a newspaper they thought might be of interest to him. Otherwise, they didn't get radio broadcasts at sea and if something noteworthy happened in the world, the Captain would make an announcement to the crew.

#### A Scary Repair Job...

The most frightening incident Ed remembers is the time the wind measuring device out on the yard arm came loose and was hanging by one bolt. It was Ed's job to climb up the mast and shinny out onto the yard arm to remove the remaining bolt and lower the device to deck. While he was out on the yard arm, the Captain had the ship slow down, but the ship was rocking back and forth and Ed could look down and see that there wasn't anything but ocean under him part of the time



USS Stickell (DDR888)

as the ship rocked. Ed yelled down to have the Captain increase speed to reduce the rocking. The device was successfully retrieved and was able to re-install it when they were safely in port.

After two years on the Stickell, Ed was transferred to the USS Laffey (DD724) which was heading out on a Mediterranean cruise, but didn't have anyone with Ed's skills on board. At first, Ed was disappointed about leaving the Stickell, but things turned out alright and he soon made new friends. The Laffey was older than the Stickell and had been in WWII. Although he didn't know it at the time, the Laffey had quite a story. It had survived 11 kamikaze attacks and even with a stern that was nearly under water and a jammed rudder that only allowed the ship to go in circles, the Captain refused to abandon the ship. Despite this heroic history, Ed says that the men on the Laffey weren't told the story of their ship's



USS Laffey (DD724)

WWII service. Today, Ed still goes to see the Laffey at Patriots Point in Charlestown, SC where he volunteers a few times a year to do maintenance on the ship which is now a floating museum.

Ed spent five months in the Mediterranean on board the Laffey during 1956 and 57. They visited the ports of Barcelona, Spain; Cannes, France and Naples, Italy, spending about a week in each port. When the ship approached a port, the men would ask the more experienced members of the crew about places to go in port and places to avoid. While there, the men could do some sight seeing and Ed took a bus trip in Spain to see a winery and the countryside. Christmas was spent in Naples and arrangements were made to bring about 25 children from a local orphanage aboard for Christmas dinner. Another memory Ed has about the Mediterranean is that the water was a lighter color than out in the Atlantic.

When the Laffey returned to the US, Ed took a few weeks of leave. The time left on his enlistment was growing short and he was anxious to get out. He had a few interviews with officers who tried to persuade him to re-enlist, but Ed had reached his goal of fulfilling his military obligation. Ed was also looking forward to getting away from the routine of Navy life.

Ed made many friends in the Navy and is still in touch with some of them, including Tom Broman, the man he replaced on the Stickell. It was in the Navy that Ed began to attend church on a more regular basis. He was 17 when he enlisted and he said being on his own in the Navy made him think about things more and that is why he went to church. On shore, they could go to a regular chapel, but at sea, they didn't have a chaplain on board so one of the men would lead the Sunday service.

Back in civilian life, Ed went back to National Cash Register where he had applied out of high school and told them that he was back and his military career was behind him. They hired him, in part because of the skills he had learned in the Navy and he ended up working there for 36 years. In all, Ed is thankful for his time in the service and feels that he grew up in the Navy and learned a lot about responsibility.