

MY ADVENTURES IN GREENLAND AND POYNER'S HILL NC

By Henry B. Stamps

On Sunday December 7, 1941, I was enjoying a Coca-Cola and eating peanuts at the company store of a mining company in Monterey, TN. It was there that I heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed by Japan. I was almost seventeen years of age at that time. I hardly knew where Pearl Harbor was but it was clear to me that we were at war. The following week several of my friends and I made a trip to the county seat to obtain information and papers to enlist in the navy. I filled out all the forms however there was just one little problem: my parents would have to falsify my age. I was able to convince my father but convincing my mother was another story. She would have no part in falsifying my age and sending her baby off to war!

Three months went by and I still had not convinced my mother to sign the enlistment papers. A friend of mine (Walter H. Jones), stopped by our home and told me he was on his way to join the U.S. Navy. This further stimulated my desire to join. My friend and I talked with my parents about signing those papers. We finally convinced my mother that it was the right thing to do and reluctantly she signed the papers at the notary public's office in Monterey. I had reached my seventeenth birthday by this time, but my parents had to falsify my birth date as January 30, 1924 which was one year early. My friend and I proceeded to Cookeville, TN, where we had a preliminary physical examination. We were then immediately sent by bus to Nashville, TN, where we were again physically examined followed by enlistment into the U.S. Naval Reserve. The date was April 25, 1942. I was quite excited as I thought about my future.

My friend and I, together with a couple hundred other enlistees, were sent to USNTS San Diego, CA. Here I joined Company 640 for boot training at Camp Lawrence and Camp Kidd in Balboa Park near San Diego. After four or five weeks everyone was assigned for further training in specialized fields determined in part by the results of their aptitude test. My friend and I were separated at that point in time. He was selected to go to Whidby Island, Washington, to train in naval air, and I was selected to go to Auburn, Alabama, to attend the Naval Radio School located on campus at the Auburn Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University). New red brick dormitories had recently been built for the civilian students. Cottages previously used by these students now became our navy barracks. There were about 15 men in each of the cottages and I remember that I was in cottage #29. The usual time for the completion of radio school was 16 weeks however I caught the mumps and had to remain an additional month for recuperation and to complete my training. As a southerner, I found the duty rather pleasant and felt the local people were friendly. Unfortunately, some of the sailors from the North suffered culture shock and perceived the local population as unfriendly.

After completing the radio school, another selection was made for assignments as radio operators at naval radio stations, or for further training in radio intercept work. I was selected with the latter group. We were told our destination was Washington, DC, however we had no idea what to expect. We arrived in Washington, DC, were taken to the office of OP-20-G for a briefing and were sworn into the organization. Next we were

sent to the U.S. Naval Radio Station at Cheltenham, MD, for training as intercept and D/F operators. I found the short tour of duty at Cheltenham very educational. The teachers were friendly but firm, the food was excellent, and barracks life was pleasant. I really enjoyed that tour.

I was next assigned to the intercept station at Chatham, MA. The CO was CDR George J. Novack, USNR, and CRM George Alexander was Chief in Charge. I arrived during the summer of 1942. The navy had leased various local Inns which were used for barracks. My first quarters assignment was to the Rose Acres Inn. The lease included maid service to make our beds (not bunks) and we ate in the dining room as guests. All personnel were later assigned to the Hawthorn Inn which was more of a barracks type structure. This was a most enjoyable existence and we had a good time. I recall the weather being warm permitting swimming at the beaches. I recall my room mate Whitehouse very well. Although I cannot recall his first name, I am reasonably sure that he was from Kentucky. He was a very nice person and a real gentleman. We became good friends but did not see each other after the Chatham tour. CRM Alexander shipped out of Chatham and I did not know where he was assigned at the time but our paths were to cross again. I made Radioman Third Class under CRM Alexander.

Our assignment at Chatham involved intercept and D/F activities against the German U-boat menace in the Atlantic. We controlled all the Atlantic U-boat intercept work and were the control for the direction finding network which extended from Jan Mayan Island in the North to Bahia, Brazil in the South. Chatham was an important intercept station and I was fortunate to be in the center of so much activity.

After spending the rest of the Summer and part of the Winter of 1942-3 at Chatham, a request was received for volunteers to go for an eighteen month tour in Greenland. Radiomen John Janzen, Paul B. Lavalee and I volunteered. We figured this would be a great way to save a barrel of money because there would be no place to spend it. In March or April of 1943 we were sent to the Boston Navy Yard to await transportation to Greenland. We waited there for several days before a convoy was formed to go to England. I don't recall the name of the ship to which I was assigned, however, it was a merchant ship that included an Armed Guard crew. This was a small navy detachment assigned to man the various guns placed on the ship in case of attack. There were several other radiomen from various stations who were going to Greenland as well. Among these were CRM William (Bill) Skinner, RM Darrell E. French from Winter Harbor, RM Edwin (Ed) Harrelson from Dupont, SC, RM Andy Anderson and others I can't recall. Chief Skinner was put in charge of our group and he made up a duty roster. We were assigned to assist with deck watch duties and to assist the men on the gun positions. This latter job required that we be trained to load and man the 20 mm AA guns. Everyone, except me, could put the magazine on the gun and cock it without difficulty. I was a real lightweight at about 125 pounds and I did not have sufficient physical strength to cock the gun. We had been at sea for several days and several of the men were sea-sick. Fortunately, I was spared from this. One morning at about 0200 our convoy was attacked by a submarine and an adjoining ship was torpedoed and sank. This put everyone in a state of jitters, high tension and extra alertness. Our Captain changed course and headed

for St. Johns, Newfoundland. About 0100 next morning we were awakened by a heavy crunching of metal and by the General Quarters alarm. I assumed we had been torpedoed. I jumped out of my bunk and rushed to my assigned position at the 20 mm gun. Alone, I put the magazine on the gun, and cocked it and had the gun ready to fire. I had never been able to do this before but the adrenaline evidently gave me extra strength. Needless to say, I was really scared. It turned out that we had hit a small iceberg and no serious damage was done to the ship. We proceeded into St. John's harbor with no further excitement. We waited there for about two weeks before proceeding to Greenland. As we approached the mainland of Greenland, Eskimos came out to meet our ship. They entertained us by doing 180 degree flips in their kayaks for a reward of a few cigarettes or a candy bar.

Our destination was on the southern tip of Greenland. The station was on an island about one square mile in size and was called Gamatron. This base was about sixty miles South of the Army Air Base called Bluie West One. I arrived at the Greenland U.S. Naval Radio D/F station (NTG) near the end of April or first part of May, 1943. Our base was frozen in during the Winter, however, during the Summer the route to the Army Air Base was open and a few personnel would take our boat and travel there to pick up supplies. Sometimes goodies such as beer were also available. Beer was very scarce and was strictly rationed at our small PX.

During the first part of my tour there were fifteen or twenty Army personnel, with a young lieutenant in charge, assigned to perform guard duty and to man the one machine gun position. The Army decided their troops were not necessary and plans were made to move them. The lieutenant became restless and began exhibiting very strange behavior. For example, he tossed a grenade out a window causing several windows to be destroyed. We thought he really had lost all his marbles. My collateral duties included being the movie operator. Two days later, while waiting for the movie to start, the lieutenant came in, walked up to the front where the officers sat, pulled a hand grenade from his pocket, tossed it toward the movie screen and ran out of the building. The grenade fuse was burning, making a hissing noise, and was smoking. Of course everyone rushed for the one exit at the same time. I was closest to the door and reached it first. As I ran outside I tripped and fell. The others scrambled over me trying to get away before the grenade exploded. Fortunately, I was not injured seriously in the evacuation but I was fit to be tied from anger toward the lieutenant. With everyone safely outside, and without the grenade exploding, the lieutenant admitted that he had disarmed the grenade by removing the powder. This was one time that I lost my cool and proceeded to express my anger to the lieutenant in front of everyone including our CO. I had learned a few very expressive words in the hills of Tennessee and let the lieutenant hear just about all of them. Our CO did not interfere or even reprimand me for the outburst. The Army personnel were picked up by boat a few days later and I still wonder if any formal action was taken against that lieutenant.

To my surprise, CRM George Alexander from Chatham was at the station and I managed to get my RM2/C rating under him. Another person who helped me in my career was CRM Dave Snyder who convinced me that I would learn more on the material gang than

by being an operator. I had been studying the third and second class manual for some time and as a result had become interested in the more technical aspects of radio. I gladly accepted the opportunity to work with CRM Snyder. One day, after I had been following him around and attempting to learn, the TBK-11 transmitter stopped working. CRM Snyder told me my first big job was to change the final amplifier tube in the transmitter. I think it might have been a 860-A type tube. He pointed to it and left me on my own. I knew enough to turn off the power supply then I opened the side panel, reached in and proceed to remove the plate cap wire. A few seconds later I was picking myself up from across the room. I shakily got to my feet and CRM Snyder said, "That was your first lesson, always discharge the capacitors with this grounding rod before you reach in and try to remove the plate wires." Needless to say that lesson stuck with me. CRM Snyder shipped out several months before I left Greenland and I did not know where he went from there. From him I had acquired a great deal of knowledge about our electronic equipment and was able to diagnose and repair problems on my own. After he left I did a lot of real heavy duty work outside in the cold weather. This certainly was not my cup of tea. For example, I think I replaced the main power cable for the entire island twice. The lead covered flat cable we were using was about an inch in width. The island surface was mostly rock, therefore the cable could not easily be buried. The wind blew the cable across the rocks eventually breaking the lead shield and causing an electrical short. We finally obtained some suitable cable and with the help of a bulldozer managed to alleviate our cable problem. This was a major job getting the cable in place and getting it connected to all the buildings. This was the hardest physical work I did in my entire career in the Navy. We were fighting the extremely cold weather and as well as the heavy stiff cable. This had to be accomplished with a minimum of down time for each of the buildings where our intercept receivers were located. I almost decided to get out of material work if this was going to continue.

We had three Commanding Officers during my 18 month tour on Gamatron. I do not recall the name of the first one, however, the second was Commander Goldsmith. Due to illness he was relieved by CWO "Red" Smith, who was there when I left about July, 1944. Darrel French, John Janzen, Paul Lavallee, Ed Harrelson and I departed together. We were taken to the Army Air Base by boat and from there we flew back to Boston via Argentia, Newfoundland. We were given two weeks leave. The first thing we did after arriving in Boston was to go to a restaurant where we each ordered a quart of milk. We were really tired of the powdered milk we had been drinking for the past 18 months. The four of us then said our good-bye's and each proceeded to our homes where we rejoined our loved one's and old friends. Many of my home town friends had joined the military and others had gone to work in war industries around the country.

After completing my leave, I was to report to the U.S. Naval Radio Station (NTP) Poyner's Hill, NC, for duty. I had no idea where this activity was located so I reported to the FIFTH Naval District Headquarters, Norfolk, VA. After a good night's sleep and a good navy breakfast under my belt I had to kill some time waiting for my transportation to arrive. Finally, a Chief Petty Officer arrived and asked if I was Henry Stamps. He introduced himself as CMM Richardson from Poyner's Hill. Before picking me up he had already been to the commissary and purchased several bags of groceries and supplies

for the station. The groceries were in the back of the big panel van which was called a Command Vehicle. CMM Richardson said we would take the southern route since a recent storm had done a lot of damage to the regular route. We drove for several hours on a small blacktop road identified as Route 158 which went through Currituck, NC. There we crossed the Inland Waterway by bridge and proceeded south on Route 158 to a large body of water which was the junction of Currituck Sound and Albemarle Sound. The bridge across this second body of water appeared to be a very crude wooden structure incapable of supporting our vehicle. The Chief informed me that a recent hurricane had damaged the bridge it but it had been repaired and was safe. We crossed the bridge very slowly and were now on the strip of land known as "The Outer Banks." The bridge ended at a point just South of Duck, NC.. and North of Kill Devil Hill where the Wright brothers made and recorded their famous first aircraft flight.

From this point there was no regular roadway. Using four wheel drive we followed the telephone poles through nothing but sand and an occasional clump of grass. We had to drive around numerous sand dunes as we slowly traveled North through Duck, NC, then Caffies Inlet past a Coast Guard Station until we arrived at Poyner's Hill U.S. Naval Radio Station. I felt that I was in the middle of a desert with an ocean on the East. Sand literally encompassed the horizon. Several large dunes were located to the North of the facility. There were about four old buildings that had shingle roofs and siding which had weathered to a very dark gray or even black. The main administration building and living quarters were repainted a wartime camouflage green color. Seeing the stark facility for the first time, while sitting there all alone on a sand dune, made me feel like volunteering to go back to Greenland.

I was introduced to Yeoman Burns who took some information from me for his files and had someone show me to my quarters. We walked from the office across the large concrete patio that surrounded the main building and across the sand for about 75 yards to one of the old dark gray buildings. This was previously a Coast Guard building and was quite ancient. My first quarters was a small room on the second deck heated by an old steam radiator that sometimes worked. A hurricane had passed through the area the week before my arrival and sand was everywhere even to the second deck. I came to realize sand was part of the local package. Sand would be a part of my life for as long as I was to be here. It would get into your bunk and even into your ears as you slept. In the mornings you had to empty your shoes, and when you walked outside you eventually learned to go barefoot or empty your shoes when you went from one building to another. We sometimes beat the sand by wearing boots or high top galoshes.

To my great surprise I found that CRM Dave Snyder had been sent from Greenland to Poyner's Hill. I did not mention to anyone that I was previously on the material gang while in Greenland and for several weeks I went on the regular duty roster list where I stood Intercept and D/F watches. After a few weeks CRM Joe Vallastro (Then spelled Ballastro), the Chief in Charge of the station, called me to his office for an interview. After a short conversation he asked me how I would like to be the assistant material man under CRM Ed Posey. At first I said that I didn't think that I was qualified for the job. He said that Chief Snyder had recommended me for the position based on my

work with him in Greenland. After telling him of my unhappy experiences with laying power cable during the winter in Greenland, I added that I preferred regular watch duty. Chief Vallastro tried to convince me that they needed someone with experience to help CRM Posey. He assured me there was no heavy work involved. Guess who won this argument?

Ed Posey and I became good friends. In addition to learning more about radio electronics, I also learned about *Pusher* type boats. Ed had such a boat, about fifteen feet in length, propelled by an aircraft engine mounted in a wire cage on the aft section. Steering was accomplished by two rudders that could be turned left or right by the steering wheel. The air stream would then steer the boat left or right. I helped work on the boat from time to time. It was great fun racing across the water in Currituck Sound. As we skimmed along we sometimes hit small grass marshes that are spotted over the sound. The boat drew probably less than an inch of water when traveling at a high rate of speed and when you hit a grass marsh the boat would go airborne for just a second and give you an excited real feeling of flying. His boat was named *SIDRA* which was his wife's name but spelled backward. CRM Ed Posey and CRM Dave Snyder left Poyner's Hill for other assignments and I never saw either of them again. Both of these men were great influences in my life and I am glad to have had the pleasure of working with and under their supervision. I am a better person for it. I was saddened I did hear of Ed Posey's demise several years ago. I think that he was still a relatively young man at the time of his death.

After Chief Posey left Poyner's Hill, Chief Vallastro assigned me the full responsibility of servicing all the electronic equipment at the station and let me choose someone to be my assistant. I choose RM2C John Janzen to work with me as an assistant because I knew he was interested in furthering his knowledge of radio electronics. We were good friends from our tours in Chatham and Greenland. RM1C Ed Harrelson was also assigned from Greenland to Poyner's Hill. We stayed together until 1945 at which time the station was closed as a U.S. Navy D/F Station.

The Chief in Charge of Poyner's Hill, Joe Vallastro, had been in charge of the station since 1941. He had six children, four daughters and two sons. The eldest of the daughters and I met just shortly after my arrival. I was picking up my mail when she came to pick up her mail. She had been helping her mother prepare a meal and arrived with a sharp kitchen knife in her hand. She tapped me on the shoulder with the knife and asked me to check if they had any mail. When I turned and saw the knife pointing my way I became a bit nervous. I always feared knives more than guns. I said something smart about not liking knives being pointed at me. She apologized and I went on my way but I was immediately impressed with her appearance. Because she was the daughter of the man in charge of the station I was a little hesitant about getting on a friendly basis with her. The beach at Poyner's Hill was one of the best beaches I have ever been privileged to use for recreational purposes. At the time I didn't realize how good the duty was there. We had our own private beach for miles each way and were not too distant from the liberty cities of Elizabeth City, NC and Norfolk, VA.

After seeing her on the beach several times, I finally approached her and we talked a while and walked up the beach together for a short distance. We repeated this from time to time but never had a date as such. I finally made a date with her and we attended the Carnival at Elizabeth City and also saw the movie *The Princess and the Pirate*, with Virginia Mayo and Bob Hope. We later went to the USO where we played ping pong and talked until our Poplar Branch, NC, transportation arrived. That small village was across the sound from Poyner's Hill. She spent the night there with one of her girlfriends and I stayed with the rest of the sailors in the *I-TAP-A-KEY*. That was the name of our clubhouse which we rented so that we would have a place to stay when we came on liberty and had to stay overnight.

We continued to see each other regularly after that. In 1945 when the station closed she and her family moved to Lynchburg, VA, her home prior to WWII. Her father stayed at the station for about a week, together with a few of us, to turn the station over to the U.S. Coast Guard. A few days later, August 29, 1945, CRM Joseph I. Vallastro was released from active duty. I was transferred to the U.S. Naval Station at Bainbridge Island, Washington. I was working in the PX serving ice cream, sodas and beer when we heard the news of the surrender of Japan. That was a day to be remembered! I served more beer that day than I had ever served before. I was working there with William (Bill) D. Keim Jr. a person who would later become a very good friend when we worked in a civilian capacity at NSA.

I was sent to Memphis, Tennessee, for separation from the service on November 6, 1945 and returned to my home in Monterey, TN. After a year I decided to reenlist. I received orders to the Great Lakes Navy Base for assignment as a RM1C. When the orders arrived I was a patient in the Mountain Home Veterans Hospital. On release from the hospital I decided not to reenlist and to end any further thought of a naval career. Even though I was a civilian, I continued to meet and work with many of my former shipmates in my civilian career.

I continued to visit Joe Vallastro's daughter on occasion and we corresponded at least once a week. I asked her to marry me and she consented. We were married in June 1947 and in March 1948 I went to work as a civilian at Naval Security Group Headquarters, 3801 Nebraska, Avenue NW, Washington, DC. I worked at that site until 1957 when I was assigned for two years in Tokyo, Japan. There we met many new friends as well as meeting old shipmates. I worked closely with the R/D Navy group at Kamiseya and also with the Air Force at Wakkaini, Japan. When I returned to NSA in July 1959, my office had been moved to Ft. George G. Meade Md. I worked there until March of 1980 when I retired. I certainly have enjoyed every minute of my retirement and still remember and miss my old navy and civilian friends. I keep in touch with some of them and I also keep in touch with my former shipmates who are members of NCVA and FRUPAC. Occasionally I attend the NCVA reunions. I am a member of the FRUPAC radio net and keep in touch with several old friends that way.

Prior to WW II CRM Joe Vallastro lived in Lynchburg, VA where he worked for the CAA. He was re-called to naval service on September 24, 1939 and worked at the

NOB Norfolk, Virginia, then at Poyner's Hill. He had already retired from the Navy prior to the war before moving to Lynchburg. He remained in service until the end of the war and was released from active duty on August 29, 1945. He moved back to Lynchburg, VA, and returned to work with the CAA which later became the FAA. He worked at the Lynchburg Airport until his retirement. He and I enjoyed an unusual relationship because I never thought of him as my father-in law but as my friend. We knew and respected each other before I really got acquainted with his daughter at Poyner's Hill station. He was also a radio amateur (W4MCD) and we communicated via radio for many years. We had a lot in common and went to Ham Fests and enjoyed being together. I always thought of him as Joe rather than my father-in-law. He became a Silent Key in March, 1995, just a few days short of his 93rd birthday. His spouse had passed away in November of 1994 and he was living alone and continued to do his own cooking and housekeeping until a week before his death. He wanted to be independent as long as possible and never moved in with his children. We all miss him and his 'Sea Stories' and think of him often.

To my two dear friends and shipmates, John Janzen (recently deceased) and Ed Harrelson (departed several years ago) I wish them smooth sailing and think of them often.

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