

Published November 4th, 2015

A Lifetime of Accomplishment for this Lafayette Veteran

By Daniel Smith



Jim Fernandes Photo Andy Scheck

Jim Fernandes was lying in a hospital bed on Aug. 15, 1945, when he learned of the Japanese surrender. The then-Naval Aviation Cadet was receiving shots of penicillin, clearly misprescribed, for a sprain he had suffered in gymnastics. The war was over, though Fernandes' desire to be a pilot was not: "I was gonna earn my wings of Navy gold," he says.

Forty years of unpredictable twists and turns - all par for the course in Navy life - left Fernandes, now 89, far from his goal. Instead of flying a jet, Fernandes had a four-decade Navy career, a captaincy, three tours of duty in the Pentagon, the command of four destroyers and three land bases, five prestigious service medals, and a pivotal place in ushering in computer technology to the armed services.

The itinerant chaos of Fernandes' life was set into motion just after the war, when the Navy sent him to Saint Mary's College for training. "I have no idea why we had to come cross the country," recalls Fernandes, who genuinely remains baffled to this day. Nonetheless, Fernandes and his fellow cadets, stationed in North Carolina, hopped into a cattle car - with bunks stacked four high - and rode the railroads from Durham to Oakland.

Fernandes was quite smitten by California: "The smell of orange blossoms was everywhere and it was a nice sunny day. That kind of did it for me," he says; but even more so when he met his future wife, Rosemary, a student at Cal.

In the early '50s Fernandes was a reservist ensign on Treasure Island, focusing his time on his wife, three children, and a career selling advertising space for the San Francisco Chronicle. That is, until the Navy recalled him to active duty. Unknown to him at the time, he would remain active until his retirement in 1983.

Throughout the decade he worked his way up to commanding officer of the USS Vammen only to be summoned back to dry land in 1961. Specifically, to the Pentagon. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wanted Fernandes to compile records and 20-year projections for every dollar in every ship in every fleet. His tools: a pencil and a very long piece of paper.

Fernandes wanted access to the Pentagon's IBM 650, which at only the size of several refrigerators, was state of the art. "I went to my boss and said this pen and pencil stuff is really ridiculous. Let me put (the data) on EAM cards," to be read by the 650. His boss acquiesced, but there was one major problem: "I didn't know anything about computers."

Fernandes audited after-work classes at IBM until he learned the 650. Then the Pentagon decided to update to the IBM 1401. Fernandes, undeterred, studied the new model and tirelessly converted all the data to the 1401. On the day he was set to enter it, "the guy who runs the computer floor came and said, 'Guess what! We're going to have an IBM 7090!'" More classes, more converting. After that, though, there were no sudden upgrades and everything "worked just dandy."

In 1964 with the Vietnam War escalating, Fernandes returned to command the USS Wilhoite in combat against enemy patrol boats. After several more moves, which took Fernandes from Vietnam to England to San Diego, Fernandes wound up at the Office of the Chief of Naval Material where he simultaneously worked to outfit ships with modern computers while appealing to Congress for funding. "It was very tiresome," he says of the latter.

Fernandes developed a thorny relationship with one particular senator, who at Fernandes' request remains nameless. "(The senator) had no idea about the military," according to Fernandes, and he leaked inaccurate information to the press. Beholden to his chain of command, Fernandes was unable to rebut the senator's statements in a timely manner - allowing the senator's damaging statements to smolder. That was until Fernandes realized this: The senator's press releases followed a model; he was plugging in words and themes into a premade structure, not unlike a Madlib. Fernandes used this to create his own generic counter; all he had to do was insert the senator's own words and themes. This expedited the rebuttal process and within months, Fernandes says, the senator stopped.

Following several more moves - including Japan - and Fernandes' retirement in 1983, his wife longed to return home. The Fernandes' settled in Lafayette and now as a 15-year resident, Fernandes seems to finally have put his nomadic Navy lifestyle behind him - save for the occasional visit to Ocean Beach. "Lafayette is what California should be," he says.

In this reporter's last conversation with Jim Fernandes - which followed hours of interview and multiple follow-up phone calls trying to stitch together the maddening chronology of his life - I told him, "I think I might finally be able to sort this all out."

"If you ever do," Fernandes laughed sympathetically, "please explain it to me."

Veteran's Day Ceremony at Moraga Commons Nov. 11

A Veteran's Day Ceremony is scheduled from 9 to 10 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 11 at the Moraga Commons Park, honoring all who served in times of war and in times of peace. There will be speakers and refreshments at the free event, sponsored by the Town of Moraga and Moraga Boy Scout Troops 212, 234, 246 and 249.

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