

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Naval Farewell

One of the great blessings of having served in the military for so many years is the association you garner with some of the most outstanding individuals this nation has ever produced. This weekend exemplifies my point.

Late last month Rear Admiral Russell W. Gorman crossed the bar, to use a metaphor written by Alfred Tennyson. He was a month shy of his 90th birthday. To read his biography, or "Bio" as it is referred to in navy parlance, is to take a walk through naval history from the 1950s through the 1980s. He graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York in 1949. One of his first assignments was to Yokohama, Japan where he met Mieko (a.k.a., Eriko), who would become his wife of sixty years.

Though I never got to know the admiral personally, I had heard of him over the years since we lived in the same region of California. Just after he passed away I was contacted by my friend Al Cruz who was put in charge of organizing a Celebration of Life service, and the committal service at the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery where the ashes of both Admiral Gorman and his wife Eriko will be interred.

Al and I go back a lot of years. We both served in Vietnam as sergeants in the Marine Corps, though it would be many years later that we actually met. He had gone on to receive a commission as a Marine officer, retiring as a colonel. Our first contact was when we were both with 1st Battalion 14th Marines Artillery out of Alameda, California in the early 1990s. Al wanted to make this a special military ceremony with all the trimmings, so among others, he contacted me to perform the chaplain duties of offering the Invocation and Benediction.

Since this was to be a formal event, I pulled out my Dress Whites, which are more frequently referred to by Navy personnel as "Choker Whites." And for good reason! The stiff collar must be fastened with metal interlocking connectors right where a man's Adam's Apple is located. Since it had been a few years since I had last worn this particular uniform, I had some consternation about a proper fit. I decided to wait until I arrived at the Sunday afternoon Celebration of Life held at the Veterans Memorial Building in Danville.

I was pleased to find a parking place directly across the street and in front of a small restaurant with an outside patio for dining. As I stood by my car, slipping into the choker white jacket, a couple having Sunday brunch smiled and offered a

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few complimentary words about the uniform. So, instead of wrestling with trying to hook the collar together without benefit of a mirror, I asked the lady if she would kindly do the honors. She agreed, while her husband smiled. Well, it was a tight fit, and the lady was very concerned about hurting me, but after a few minutes she managed to connect all three loops. I thanked them and proceeded to enter the Veterans Memorial Building.

There was quite an assembly of retired military present, both officer and enlisted, along with local government officials as well as friends and neighbors of the admiral. One of the invited speakers was Rear Admiral Tom Brown III. After the program was over I had a chance to chat with him and discovered he had at one point in his career been the commanding officer of the USS Midway aircraft carrier. The Midway is currently a museum, permanently anchored at the pier in San Diego.

The service for the admiral was very nice, and concluded with the playing of the Navy Hymn followed by the Benediction. We all stood while the Navy Hymn was played, but it was strictly instrumental. The words kept running through my mind, and I thought, "There are people here who are not part of the sea services who don't know the song." So, on the spur of the moment as I moved forward to offer the Benediction, I decided to sing the first verse acapella. *"Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arm hath bound the restless wave, Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep, its own appointed limits keep; Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea!"*

Farewell, Admiral Gorman! Fair winds, and following seas.