

**Alan J. Greczynske
Veteran**

**Interviewed on
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at the American Legion Post
“Saugerties, NY**

Q: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

AG: I enlisted in the Coast Guard, in the summer of 1973.

Q: Where were you living at the time?

AG: Queens, New York, in fact I enlisted out in Freeport Rhode Island. I went to boot camp in New Jersey. It was very cold, in January. We arrived there at around one o'clock in the morning it was completely pitch dark.

Q: Why did you join?

AG: The GI Bill, I guess a bit of patriotism. You know you do your part, and at the time a lot of people questioned your sanity if you joined at the time of the Vietnam conflict.

Q: Why did you pick that branch of service?

AG: I was going to go Army of Engineers and my father had a friend of his that was in the Coast Guard. He said that they had engineering, well an engine room. That is how I ended up joining the Coast guard and becoming their machinist technician.

Q: What was your first day in the service like?

AG: Two o'clock in the morning it was cold freezing it was Cape May the wind was blowing they put us in a barracks with 300 other guys in a squad bay.

Q: What did it feel like?

AG: We were packed in there like sardines in a can, it was a unique experience I will call it that.

Q: Tell me more about boot camp training.

AG: Ours was the second longest to the marines. The marines were sixteen weeks ours was eleven. That was because they had a lot more small boat training. Most of the Navy ships were big. Coast guard had a week of firefighting and a week of small boats. They took out 30 foot boats out into Delaware Bay and Wildwood. It was cold freezing again it was in February 1974. They put them on these 30 foot boats about eight to ten guys. They learned navigation and basic ship familiarity.

Q: Do you remember your instructors?

AG: Oh yeah! Chief Sitler, like Hitler with an S. Then there was Chief Chambers. Then there was an ex-navy seal. His name was George C Marshall. He had the same name as the WWII general. He was an EX Navy Seal. They specialized him as a recruit DI. He was an interesting character. After that I went on to Machinist School in York Town. York Town was very nice. It was end of winter early spring. I was there until the end of August. After that I got sent to the Evergreen which was Ice Breaking Ocean and Graphic. We also tested a lot of sonar for the Navy. We worked with the system center in Connecticut. We did a lot of war games with the submarines to test out their sonar. Then we did ice patrols off the coast of Greenland. It was a very desolate desolate area of the earth. It was hundreds and hundreds of miles without even a village. It was an interesting time and when that was over I got out in September of 1976. Then I went to Ulster County Community College for a few years.

Q: You mention that you were in the Arctic Circle area. They had storms and so forth. Tell us about that.

AG: We had trips to the Caribbean also, we got one diller of a storm. I'll never forget it we got hit with a wave. It took off a small boat, a small Avon up on the damage control shack. We had a P250 which was a firefighting pump and about five, 5 gallon cans of gas that get swept over.. There was gas all over and we went to general quarters because we thought there was going to be a fire.

Q: Did you have any casualties? Did people get hurt?

AG: A couple people just got banged around. I had a hatchet slam on my hand one time but it didn't break anything. Just black and blue. We took another wave and I was taking a water sample. I'll never forget this, the hot water spilled on my arm and it took the hair off it. It was chromated water to keep the engines from rusting. They were diesel electric, two big Cooper Vestmere engines which propelled the generator that propelled the motor. She was an older ship, built in WWII. This was 1975-76 and she was built in 1943 in Duluth Minnesota. During WWII she took a lot of supplies to Greenland. The Evergreen was always in the North Atlantic. We did have an interesting time, we went over the Titanic which was in March of 76. We scanned the bottom and we did find something large down there. I went to my captain to look through his records to be sure we were in the same area that the Titanic was lost. It was the only thing on the bottom that was big enough to come up on the sonar. It was nothing like it was ten years later when they had submarines to go down and find it.

Q: I remember when you told me you were involved in the Mariel boatlift in 1980.

AG: I was working for the post office about a week when they called me to go down to New Jersey. It was actually supposed to be Cuba, but then they changed it to Florida, and then they finally changed it to New Jersey.

Q: You were in the coast guard reserve at that time?

AG: I was in the reserve, we were relieving the regular patrol boats the old 95 foot coastal patrol boats. We had 82 and 95. A lot of the old 82's they gave to the South Vietnamese.

Q: Tell us what the Mariel boatlift was all about?

AG: Castro had emptied his jails. They sent everyone over here. They just loaded them on boats and told them that they were going to be free in the United States. Of course you know this was the criminals and dredges of Cuban society. There was a lot of people that just wanted to get away from Castro, too. If I was involved in it, I would have wanted to get out of there, also. So that was in 1980. It was the end of June. It was three weeks that I was involved in that.

Q: Why did you do that with the Mariel boatlift?

AG: I just relieved the regulars. They gave them an extra 30 days off because they had been at sea so long. We just took the patrol boats and went up and down the coast.

Q: Were you trying to pick up refugees?

AG: Yes, but we didn't see any Cubans or anything like that. We just went up and down the coast of New Jersey.

Q: You mentioned that you were awarded certain medals and citations and so forth for your service.

AG: Just National Defense and the medal for Coast Guard Activation. It was the biggest activation between Korea and the 1st Gulf War.

Q: For the Mariel boatman?

AG: President Carter gave the Commandant authorization to activate the reserve units. They activated us, so we went off to New Jersey and did a week in Connecticut on the Cape Fairweather, a patrol boat.

Q: Now after you left the Coast Guard Service, you returned to civilian life?

AG: Right.

Q: Eventually you became a member of the National Guard?

AG: They closed our reserve unit in Albany and going to Governor's Island was a long haul from Ravina once a month so I joined the 10th Mountain Division Infantry. I always liked hiking and camping so I joined the 10th Mountain Division for one year.

Q: You achieved the rank of Staff Sergeant?

AG: Yes, I made the e-6 of the Coast Guard. In fact I was just about to make e-7. I was getting ready to make Chief of the Coast Guard. I left in February 1983 and if I had stayed in and passed the test and waited my time, I would have been Chief.

Q: When you were in the service, the Coast Guard, how did you keep in touch with your family?

AG: I would call them when we were in port. I would drop them letters from Newfoundland. I called a young lady in Saugerties for a date from Newfoundland. It was like \$6 which was astronomical amount about 30 years ago. It was mostly writing or when you were in port, you could call. We would be out for 3 to 4 weeks or 5 weeks sometimes. One time we were out for 7 weeks then we came back in port for two weeks. We went back out on another ice patrol down in the Caribbean. I went to Bermuda, twice. I went there in August 1975 and January 1976 and Bahamas. We were supposed to stop in Haiti. I am glad that we didn't and we went to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Q: What was the food like in the Coast Guard?

AG: Good, good. Most of our cooks were Filipinos. Very good, especially the fish. Fantastic, in fact a couple of chiefs coming back from an ice patrol went fishing and caught fresh fish. We had quite a Luau in the mess hall. Very interesting time. I will never forget it.

Q: So you augmented your supplies by fishing?

AG: Yes, it was a fishing boat. We had the sonar so we could catch them.

Q: Very sporting?

AG: Yes, it was.(laughs)

Q: Of course you always had enough supplies and everything?

AG: Well sometimes we ran out and they would send a c-130. One time we had to find these Navy underwater sound buoys. They wanted to pick them up before the Russians picked them up and we stayed out another 2 weeks. We barely made it back with the fuel. The Coast Guard C-130 would drop stuff. We would do parachute extraction, big orange floats. We would take the small boats and go out and pick it up...food, ice-cream and everything.

Q: So the C-130 would drop the skid in the sea and you would recover it from the sea?

AG: We would take the small boats out and they were basically inflatable balls that would hold everything up. The wood you could chop up just pallet basically. Everything else was in plastic bags so they would not get wet. We would bring everything on board the ship and have another week supply of food.

Q: Did you feel pressure or stress while you were serving?

AG: There were a couple of storms. As I said, we had that one storm that tore off Avon and some of our gear. One time the Coke machine broke free from the mess deck. It went flying around. It took about 8 of us to get it back and secure it, again. We went through one storm after another. We wouldn't even sleep sometimes. She was only 180 feet long and rolled like a bathtub. It battered that thing to pieces.

Q: Did you have a fear that the ship might sink.

AG: No, she was a pretty seaworthy ship. We had our small boats that were self-inflatable and you had emergency gear. No, I didn't think the Evergreen would ever sink. I was more afraid of a fire or something. She had a lot of fuel. We were always loaded. There was gasoline for the small boats up on the fantail. We had a small electrical fire in the battery room. It wasn't anything really big. We had it out in 5 minutes.

Q: Did you have occasion to feel pressure while you were in the 10th Mountain Division?

AG: No, that was just National Guard. We didn't do anything. There were no riots or anything like that or any law enforcement type thing. It was strictly training.

Q: A lot of people go to sea and have superstitions or things they do for good luck. Did you have anything like that?

AG: Not me. A couple of other guys did. I know that ships don't have 13 and sailors are very superstitious. One of our guys who was former Navy used to say "There are only two ships that are good to a sailor. The one he is on and the one he is going to." The one he is on presently on, stinks. He can't stand it.

Q: What do people do to entertain themselves?

AG: They had a lot of movies. B Movies...terrible, terrible movies. Most of the time I would play chess with the chief radio man and the chief electronic technician. I would go up to the dry lab. That is where I first got into computers. Those Honeywell computers would be ancient history today. That was cutting edge technology at that time.

Q: Did you ever have any kind of entertainment shows? USO shows?

AG: No, we were too small and in too much of a remote corner of the world for anything like that.

Q: You mentioned a number of places that you did travel while you were in the service. Did you get a chance to do shore leave or anything like that?

AG: Oh Yeah. We went to the town of Nova Scotia. It is a Canadian Norman Rockwell town. We were guest of honor, us and a Canadian destroyer. We were guest of honor at

the lobster fest. They don't have a 4th of July but the 4th, 5th and 6th of July is a Lobsterfest in Nova Scotia. It was neat. Halifax was a very clean city. St. John's, Newfoundland was a little more remote and much more rugged. A real frontier type of town.

Q: Did you remember any particular humorous events or did the Coast Guard personnel play pranks on each other?

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