

# **Richard Sydnes**

## **Petty Officer 3rd Class**

### **U.S. Navy**

#### **USS Diamond Head AE-19**



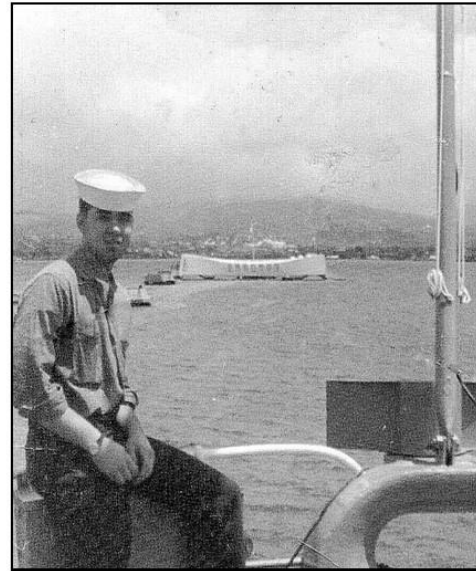
**Deck of the Diamond Head**

I joined the Navy Reserves in the fall of 1965. I was still a senior in high school. Basic Training was in the Great Lakes Naval Station in Chicago, which included two weeks on a Navy ship. Then I went back home and attended weekly meetings.

On September 12 I was on active duty and went to Norfolk Virginia. After four weeks I got my ship, the USS Diamond Head, which was an ammunition supply ship. I was an electrician in E Division, Petty Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Class. It was hard leaving Sandie Sorenson, my girlfriend.

First we went to Guantanamo Bay in the Caribbean, then back to Norfolk until December, then back to the Caribbean for two months to get ready for Vietnam, then back again to Norfolk to load the ammunition. Not a lot; we waited until we got to the Philippines before we really loaded up with ammo. We headed out and went through the Panama Canal, then stopped at San Diego to drop off something at the Naval Station there. Then we headed for Hawaii and spent a few days there. We were parked right next to the Arizona Memorial. Anybody that was on the Arizona—there were like 1700 men killed—if you did get off, when you died you could have your remains on the ship, your ashes. It's really a sight that everybody should see in Hawaii.

Next stop was the Philippines. That's where we loaded up with ammo. There's quite a storage area there. A lot of the stuff was World War II, especially the bombs. In fact we had some ships that were aircraft carriers that really didn't want them. We had



five holds, three in the front of the ship and two in the back, three decks deep. We filled all those with ammunition. We took 2 x 12 planks on the main metal deck and stacked ammunition all the way around the ship. To show you how nonchalant I was about all this firepower, there's a picture of me, changing a light, standing on a powder keg.

The captain of our ship was Zeb Knott. Zeb had been the commander of the Blue Angels flying group. He was a hero in World War II, shooting down planes as a pilot. Why they ever stuck him on that ship I have no idea. He was one of the nicest guys I ever met.

Once we were loaded up with ammo, we would head for Vietnam and rearm ships off the coast. They wouldn't let us get too close, because even though the Vietnamese didn't have a navy, they didn't want to take a chance. We were about ten miles out. We could see land; you could see the clouds and the mist. It looked like it was raining over there, but we had sunshine and ninety degrees. There were two hundred ships that we rearmed, some of them two or three times, including the Enterprise. It was the first nuclear powered aircraft carrier.

When rearming ships, we'd be going down a path, and the ship would come up beside us. We would take like a shotgun and shoot a string across to their ship. They pulled the string attached to a rope, then pulled the rope, and then there would be a cable. Then they'd hook the cable and load the ammunition, which was already on pallets, and then they'd haul

that pallet over to their ship on the cable. We transferred some ammunition to a destroyer, a fairly small ship, during a storm. We lost a pallet of ammo in the ocean there. The waves take you down and up and if a wave takes you up, that puts tension on that cable and could snap it. It would be higher than the deck of the other ship. That's at the Gulf of Tonkin. We transferred an Admiral that way too, but it was nice weather. He rode across!

I used to get seasick the first day out. The water could be as smooth as glass, but the first day I would always get a little seasick. Then after that I was fine. And we rode out a typhoon in Japan. The front of the ship would actually go under the water, the water would come up, and the screws in the back would come out and just shake the ship. There was no water around them and they had nothing to grab. That didn't bother me. Once I got my sea legs, I was fine. But it was difficult eating and sleeping. And no one was allowed outside of the main part, you couldn't go out on the deck. It was just too dangerous. You'd be fish bait.

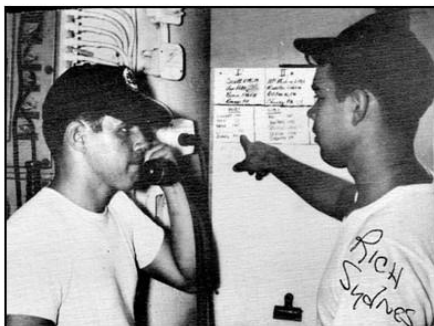
We could stay out for about four weeks. Then we had to go back to Subic Bay and load up with more ammo, which took about six days, then head back. We did this eight times in ten months. During that time, we got to Sasebo, Japan, or Hong Kong as well.

We didn't have any injuries on our ship at that time, and everything was going pretty well. Until July 30<sup>th</sup>. The Forrestal, which is an aircraft carrier, had just gotten to Vietnam and was in the Gulf of Tonkin. They were getting their planes ready to make bombing runs. We went alongside and gave them an enormous number of bombs. They were all World War II and the captain of the Forrestal didn't want them, but when they found out that's all we had, he took them. It was a couple of hundred tons of bombs, five hundred pounds apiece.

We got done and split apart. The planes were getting ready and loaded. The last thing that they do before they take off is—they have rockets underneath each wing. There's what they call a pigtail that they plug in, and that's what gives it the juice, the electricity for takeoff. They're very sensitive. When a plane was pulling up, as soon as it faces the ocean, ready to take off, only then they plug the pigtails in, in case one went off. Well, they got behind, and somebody plugged them in before they made the turn. They shot a rocket right through John McCain's plane. He crawled out the front and got down. That started a chain reaction of bombs. There were 134 men that were killed. Most of those 134, I think eighty or ninety, were in their bunks underneath the catapult. The gas ran down and I think it blew, like, seven or eight huge holes in the deck of the Forrestal. She stayed afloat, but it was tough. Our ship was really close, so our captain called the captain of the Forrestal and said, "I can come around on the side that's not on fire, and we can transfer any firefighting equipment that we got that you could use." Zeb said that it got really quiet. Then pretty soon the captain of the Forrestal came back on and said, "Zeb, I don't think the Navy wants an ammunition ship alongside a ship that's on fire." That was the worst tragedy of the whole Vietnam War as far as I was concerned. It was sort of self-inflicted. She was able to limp back to San Francisco, the west coast.

The only trouble I had was that the Army drafted me while I was in the Navy. I was supposed to tell the Board that my status was changed, but I didn't. So my mother got a letter and she went up and nicely told them that I was already in Vietnam.

When I got out we were back in Norfolk. I got out about a month early because the ship was headed for a cruise to Europe and my time was too short. So they put me in the transit building until my time was up and I headed home.



**Left: Rich on duty.  
Right: the Diamond Head**

