



# WOMPATUCK NEWS

Issue Number 27

Friends of Wompatuck State Park

Spring Edition, 2013



USS Warrington (DD-843) on patrol.



ASROC during maneuvers.



Ron Meade (right) transported the nuclear ASROC to Annex bunker N9 pictured above.

## Off-the-Wall Flashbacks from a Navy Veteran and Annex Workers

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian

Early last year I met Russell Phipps of Hopkinton at the town's monthly veteran's breakfast. I asked him if he had any good war stories since I'm a military history buff and write articles for the Wompatuck News and occasionally the Patriot Ledger.

He entertained me for about an hour with events that relate to the park's former history as an ammunition depot (Cohasset Annex) plus bizarre happenings he witnessed while on active duty for the U.S. Navy. I also shared with him a few of my own stories picked up from former Annex workers who served in World War II and the Korean War.

Phipps served on the destroyer USS Warrington from 1963 to 1967 as a sonar man. He saw action off the coast of Vietnam and hunted Soviet subs in the North Atlantic.

Most of the ordnance on his ship was the type that was produced, serviced and stored at the Cohasset Annex before it closed in 1962. Most notably were the ASROCs (anti-submarine rocket) and the torpedoes.



Russell Phipps

"I witnessed one embarrassing accident with the ASROC missile I'll never forget," said Phipps. "During maneuvers off the Virginia coast in 1967 we fired an ASROC toward one of our

subs that was suppose to track the performance and accuracy of the missile.

"In a normal run, the missile's engine shuts off at a certain altitude and a parachute deploys carrying it softly to the ocean. If it is nuclear, it acts like a depthcharge; if it is conventional, it acts like a torpedo.

"This one had a dummy warhead and the sub was the target. We never used the nuclear version.

"Well, it turns out the steering chute to the missile didn't deploy. Murphy's Law kicks in and the ASROC smashes smack dab into the sub's deck. It stuck out like a harpoon in Moby Dick. We all said: 'Holy sh\*t!'

"Needless to say, the captain went ballistic. I wish the ASROC did. What could we do? It was an equipment failure. There were a lot red faces that day...some with laughter and some with 'o-o-ps.'

"The other ASROC incident took place off the coast of Vietnam in 1967. We fired the missile at the Viet Cong infiltrating south. The missile is designed for water use only, but our captain used it like an artillery piece. Somewhat unorthodox but it did have a 300-pound warhead. We only fired one. But, war is war and we ruined somebody's parade...literally.

"I saw a lot of action off Vietnam. It was wild, crazy, bizarre and tragic. Here's one. While cruising off Dong Hoi in North Vietnam, we picked up on radar

two enemy Migs flying south. They were after one of our small, propeller-driven artillery spotter planes. We radioed to the pilot that two Migs were after him and to take evasive cover.

"He ends up hiding behind a mountain ridge and waited for the two jet fighters to pass. When they did, he shot one down with one of his missiles. The other one took off and vanished.

"Can you imagine that? A small Cessna cruising under one hundred miles per hour shoots down a supersonic fighter. flying near the speed of sound. We called those spotter planes 'Bird Dogs.'

"The two torpedo incidents occurred off the Atlantic coast.

"The first took place near Virginia in 1963. We fired a live Mark 25 torpedo during maneuvers and the thing turned around and headed right for us. The captain yelled out, 'Hard right rudder!' We dodged it. Thank God.

"The second incident happened off of Newport, Rhode Island in 1964. During a torpedo exercise one of the crewman accidentally loaded a live Mark 44 torpedo in the tube. But, luckily the arming wires weren't attached. So when the torpedo hit the Navy target sub...nothing happened. There was a big court-martial after that. However, the crewman had a good lawyer and got off free.

"Other than exercises, our Atlantic duty consisted of hunting down Soviet subs off

Continued on page 2

## Off-the-Wall Flashbacks (continued from page one)

our coast. My job was to ping them with the sonar until they couldn't stand it anymore and make them shoot to the surface. Then, they would take off back home.

"The most comical event happened while docked down in Newport, Rhode Island. For a sailor, rags on board were prized items. We used them a lot because our jobs were invariably messy. This seaman hoarded them by secretly stashing a bunch in our empty torpedo tube.

Destroyers usually had torpedo mounts. That day the captain decided to do a pressure test on that tube. When the tube blew at 600 pounds of pressure, the big ball of rags shot out and smashed into the ensigns shiny, new MG sports car parked on the dock. You should have seen the dent in the door! That officer was ticked!!

"The last incident I can remember was in 1963. A fishing vessel trolling in restricted waters off Norfolk, Virginia caught its net on one of our subs. The sub dove and sank the vessel. The crew was rescued by the sub and nobody was hurt except the fishermen's feelings."

Most of the Annex stories I told Phipps were humorous and, yes - off-the-wall, or plain bizarre. Here's just a few.



**Sam Amonte**

I'll start with the late Sam Amonte (Navy veteran). He was a brakeman for the ammunition depot in the early 1950s. He would flag down traffic at 3A when the ammo train crossed, hook-up trains and operate the switches. He said the funniest incident at the depot was when he and his buddies stole a hot stove from a warehouse. They loaded it on a flatcar and hauled it away to their train shed. He said it was quite a sight to see the train flying down the tracks at night with sparks flying out of the burning stove in the middle of all these buildings full of live ammo. After his depot job he served as a Hingham policeman for 36 years. Maybe he had a guilty conscience.



**Donald Guilfoyle**

Donald Guilfoyle (Army veteran) supervised the Transportation Department at the Annex in the 1950s. His most comical memory of his federal career occurred at the Boston Navy Yard during an Open House. While a Cub Scout troop was touring one of the Navy subs, an overweight Den Mother got herself stuck in one of the hatches and had to be rescued by the fire department. Chance

would have it, she was his next door neighbor.



**Leo Parenti**

The Annex worker with the most unforgettable stories was the late Leo Parenti. In World War II he drove an ammunition truck for the 26th Yankee Division. During the Battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944, he would heat up cans of beans on the manifold of his truck for a hot meal. During one convoy mission one exploded. He thought he was being ambushed and dove for cover. He didn't get a Purple Heart, just a messy truck. After the war ended, Leo worked for the Transportation Department at the depot and later the park.



**Bill Handrahan**

The next story isn't funny but a near-miss episode. Bill Handrahan served with the Army Air Force in World War II. While stationed in Europe on leave in Britain, he and his GI buddies decided to wet their whistles at the nearest pub. After a night of whooping it up, 'Bloody Yank' style, they called it a night and headed back to the barracks. No sooner than they were five minutes down the road when a German V-1 buzz bomb flies over their heads and blows the pub to smithereens. I told Bill that God was looking after him. He replied, "Tell that to the bartender." Handrahan served as an inspector while at the depot.



**Dave Sturgis**

Another near-miss episode befell the late Dave Sturgis. Dave was a Marine communications grunt during the Korean War. While laying cable with the South Korean Army, he noticed they all started to run the other way. Then they started yelling at him in Korean. It turns out he was walking on a mine field. Luckily, it was winter and the field was frozen. Sturgis gingerly tiptoed out of there. After the war Sturgis served as a Marine guard at the depot.



**Guido Guaraldi**

wounded three times. While bivouacked

during rest and recovery, the Army engineers rigged up showers for the troops. As the GIs were washing away their battle dirt, a German ME-262 jet fighter swoops down and drops what looks to be a bomb. The nude soldiers scattered through out the German village to take cover. But the bomb was just an empty fuel tank. Nothing happened except the villagers got an eye-full and laugh from all these naked American soldiers darting to and fro.

He said the funniest incident at the depot took place in the 1950s. The Navy told two workers to clean out an old vault in the side of a hill and use it as an office. Much to their macabre surprise they found a dead body in it. Apparently, the vault was once part of the Hingham Poor Farm Cemetery.

For a highway double take tale, Ron Meade provided an amusing one. He was the truck driver who transported the nuclear ASROC from Quonset Point, Rhode Island to the Annex. The

convoy consisted of six vehicles protected by Marine guards and supervised by a warrant officer. The speed was limited to 35 miles per hour. Once, a rookie police officer stopped the convoy because it was going so slow. Little did he realize it was on a secret mission to pick up a nuclear weapon. After a top brass complaint, the cop was later set straight by his chief.

The final story relates to my past next door neighbor in Rockland, the late Clarence "Rebel" Vaughan. He supervised the nuclear ASROC bunker N9. Like a lot of ex-Marines, Rebel loved his tea...and I don't mean Tetley. After work at the Annex he would regularly have a few rounds at the Central Club in Rockland. He always walked there through the St. Patrick's Cemetery across from his house. One night he did not come home. The neighbors freaked out and called the cops to find him. Turns out, he fell into a freshly dug grave and passed out. The cops found him the next morning with a "Schlitz" smile on his face. He was okay and resumed his duty the next day overseeing the ASROC nuclear depthcharge bunker at the Annex without a hitch. Rebel ended up dying for real on a golf course he loved in 1983. Called "Rebel" due to his Southern roots, you couldn't find a better neighbor. ■

He said the funniest incident at the depot took place in the 1950s. The Navy told two workers to clean out an old vault in the side of a hill and use it as an office. Much to their macabre surprise they found a dead body in it. Apparently, the vault was once part of the Hingham Poor Farm Cemetery.

For a highway double take tale, Ron Meade provided an amusing one. He was the truck driver who transported the nuclear ASROC from Quonset Point, Rhode Island to the Annex. The



**Ron Meade**

convoy consisted of six vehicles protected by Marine guards and supervised by a warrant officer. The speed was limited to 35 miles per hour. Once, a rookie police officer stopped the convoy because it was going so slow. Little did he realize it was on a secret mission to pick up a nuclear weapon. After a top brass complaint, the cop was later set straight by his chief.



**Clarence Vaughan**

The final story relates to my past next door neighbor in Rockland, the late Clarence "Rebel" Vaughan. He supervised the nuclear ASROC bunker N9. Like a lot of ex-Marines, Rebel loved his tea...and I don't mean Tetley. After work at the Annex he would regularly have a few rounds at the Central Club in Rockland. He always walked there through the St. Patrick's Cemetery across from his house. One night he did not come home. The neighbors freaked out and called the cops to find him. Turns out, he fell into a freshly dug grave and passed out. The cops found him the next morning with a "Schlitz" smile on his face. He was okay and resumed his duty the next day overseeing the ASROC nuclear depthcharge bunker at the Annex without a hitch. Rebel ended up dying for real on a golf course he loved in 1983. Called "Rebel" due to his Southern roots, you couldn't find a better neighbor. ■