

Spinning the Yarns of Reflection

My message regarding the Corps is personal and unique to a time period in American history that is not likely to be repeated. At the height of our involvement in Vietnam (1968-69) I was finishing my degree in civil engineering. Over 500 US soldiers were being killed every week and many more suffered permanent physical and psychological damage. Furthermore the country was deeply divided (mostly between generations) about the legality and ethics of the war. Conscription was universal and every man (and woman) under the age of 30 was impacted in some way. I grew up on an island and for several years my draft board could not meet its quota. On three occasions I had to appeal the cancellation of my student deferment and the board made it clear that once I graduated I would be immediately drafted. Once that happened I knew that I would lose control over where I was sent and what I would be asked to do.

So I looked for other options. My family was not sufficiently connected to get a position in the National Guard, which were highly coveted at the time. I applied to the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service and the Environmental Services Science Administration (ESSA) where admission was more merit-based. With only two months left before my graduation ESSA (soon to become NOAA) accepted me. I notified my draft board, turned down two engineering jobs, was commissioned by a local notary public, and embarked on a very different course than the one I thought my life would take.

My training class was my first exposure to that broader world. The stories my classmates told of how they ended up in Norfolk were widely divergent, but most of us shared a Kennedy-inspired sense of doing something for our country. This sense of mission was a welcome escape from the assassinations, political turmoil and chaos surrounding us. On a personal note, I felt better about the prospect of making charts than trying to stay alive in the jungles of southeast Asia.

My subsequent assignments to field parties and survey ships were exhilarating. They exposed me to new people, new missions, new locations, new challenges and I gradually realized that my new course was way more interesting than anything I had anticipated before. I also benefitted from the extraordinary vision of ADM Harley Nygren who led the Corps as it expanded from the Coast and Geodetic Survey to all aspects of NOAA operations. The Corps provided me access to graduate education, accommodation for my growing family and a sense that I was part of a noble cause. In turn, I did my best wherever I was sent. Eventually, I came up for retirement, re-assignment and promotion - all at the same time. I also found myself in the uncomfortable position of disagreeing with the Director on several issues. Knowing that he was the boss, and I was not, led me to retire. I moved on and eventually so did the Corps.

I suspect that there are hundreds of variations of my story where the Corps has served a pivotal role in the lives of its members. In my case, I believe that it saved my life. But more than that it set me up for a full and rewarding career in service to our country, which was furthest from my mind when contemplating my future during my senior year in college. I believe there will come a day when government service (both uniformed and civilian) will regain the respect that it once enjoyed. I also expect that the Corps is where we'll find its core.