

## Tim Thickstun NROTC '72

### MY NROTC SENIOR CRUISE

I was a student at OSU and in the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps program from 1969 to 1972.

The summer of 1971 was the start of my NROTC Senior Cruise at the end of my junior year at OSU. I was flown with 24 other midshipmen from various colleges across the Pacific Ocean to Manila and then on to Subic Bay in the Philippines. At Subic we would meet the ships that we were to serve aboard for our summer cruise.

This is the cruise where the Midshipman is treated as a junior officer and finally does junior officer type duties; things such as boat captain, underway watch officer, tasting the food in the crew's mess, etc.

When we arrived at Subic Bay, most of the other midshipmen went to their assigned ships right away, but a few of us had to wait for our ships to come into port. Mine was USS Thomaston, LSD 28 (landing ship dock) and it didn't arrive for 4 days. Thomaston was a big ship and was designed to carry a lot of Marines and land them on hostile beaches. The rest of the Navy called her a "Gator Freighter" and part of the Amphibious Fleet.



USS Thomaston (LSD-28) "Gator Freighter"

We had initially been told that we would just wait for two days for the ship, so some of us spent all our pre-cruise money on things like expensive watches (I bought a Zodiac which I still use as my backup watch).

The bad part about the extra free time was that we now had no ready cash. Being treated like an officer meant that we could not eat at the chow hall without paying. Officers pay for their own meals, enlisted get their meals for free. This meant 2 days without food as the ship was late.

The Navy, in its wisdom, had Officer's Clubs where officers of most any age could go to drink – and, in the Far East, gamble. I found that the slot machines at the O' Club were loose enough that I was able to win enough to buy meals for three days.

My ship finally arrived and we immediately sailed to the City of Zamboanga, Mindanao Island, in the Philippines. (Yes, the same Zamboanga mentioned in the World War II song "The Monkeys have no Tails in Zamboanga".

Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga,  
Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga,  
Oh, the monkeys have no tails,  
They were bitten off by whales,

Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga.

Chorus:

Oh, we won't go back to Subic anymore,  
Oh, we won't go back to Subic anymore,  
Oh, we won't go back to Subic,  
Where they mix our wine with tubig,  
Oh, we won't go back to Subic anymore.

(Tubig is the Filipino word for water. There are several more verses. The song was also in some WWII movies and even sung by Beaver Cleaver in one of the Leave it To Beaver shows)

Zamboanga was a beautiful Spanish style city founded in 1635 and located just ½ degree from the equator, and is the furthest south city in the Philippines. Zamboanga means “Place of Flowers”. Zamboanga is a big exporter of copra. Copra, for those who aren’t familiar with it, is the dried meat of the coconut palm and is made into coconut oil. The coconuts have to be broken open, busted apart, and then sun dried before it can have the oils extracted. The “milk” is spilled out. “Dried in the sun” means rotting in the heat. Copra was everywhere rotting in huge piles on the piers, it smelled so bad I held my nose to run past it to keep from vomiting. We were told not to drink the water as most Philippine cities still had open sewers running down the middle of their paved streets. It didn’t smell much like a “Place of Flowers”.

My two fellow midshipmen and I headed out exploring. We walked past the Western Mindanao University where, from one of the buildings, students saw us and suddenly boiled out for a closer look. Their instructor ran over to us and asked us if we were Americans. We said yes and were told that they are a class on American culture. He asked if his students could ask us some questions as none of them had ever met an American. We agreed and were surprised by some of the questions. They asked about cowboys and gangsters and the movie Love Story which had just reached the island. It was interesting to us to see what they thought Americans were like. It was a lot of fun and as informative for us as it was for them.

It was hot there near the equator so we proceeded to an ice cream parlor to get something to drink. The two midshipmen with me both ordered Coke and I ordered ice cream. They thought I was crazy as they knew the ice cream was made locally. I pointed out that their Coke was bottled locally. They ended up getting sick that night and I didn’t; the local water used to make Coke was probably not boiled while the cream used to make ice cream is cooked as a custard prior to being put in the ice cream machines.

The next night I was out on the town all by myself. Imagine, a college kid from Ohio loose in Zamboanga without adult supervision! I wandered down the dirty streets looking for something to do until I saw a bunch of Marines in an ice cream shop eating huge plates of fried rice and drinking whiskey. I went in and asked them where they got the fried rice and was told that they got it from the clerk at the parlor and asked me to join them. I sat down to a plate of fried rice and a glass of whiskey. The whiskey bottle was soon empty so I offered to buy more at the whiskey stand in the next alley over. Yes, it was the type of town that has “whiskey stands” on the street. I was not in Columbus any more.

It was only a dollar fifty so I splurged on two bottles. After drinking some more, we all piled into the jeep they had rented and headed out to a night club. We hit a bump and one of the Marines fell out onto the road. We didn’t turn round to get him since he was obviously a party-poop. The Marines I was with did not constitute “adult supervision” either.

By this time, I was starting to feel the alcohol, so, when we drove past the pier I jumped out and went back to the ship. The next morning when I got up and went to the “head” (Navy for bathroom), there were the Marines from last night scrubbing the deck in the head. They said the Shore Patrol got them right after I had left. Lucky break for me.

Later on, after we left Zamboanga we sailed across the South China Sea to the Gulf of Tonkin. When we passed through Vietnamese waters we were technically in the combat zone as the war was still in full swing in 1971. Being in “Combat” gave us that month’s pay tax free, free postage for our mail, and awarded us the Vietnam Campaign Ribbon. I suspect that the Captain “detoured” a little to pass through the edge of the combat zone. Getting the ribbon made me an official

Vietnam Veteran while still a college student. It made my classmates jealous when they saw it on my uniform back at NROTC. They may have gone to Europe or Hawaii but I “Went to War” and was now officially macho.

After Vietnam, we did port visits in Hong Kong, Sasebo, Japan and finally in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Lots of adventures in all those ports! The final port was Kaohsiung, where all the midshipmen were put on a bus to take us to the local civilian airport to fly to Taipei where we would spend the night, then to Clark Air Base in Angeles City, Philippines (Home of the Volcano Mount Pinatubo). We would spend the night there and then fly home.

We were left on the bus in Kaohsiung to await the bus driver and watched as our ship left port. After about a half an hour of waiting we were getting antsy as we had plane tickets for a flight not long after. One of the Midshipmen said he would go in the building and check on the driver. He came back and said there were guys in there playing cards but none of them spoke English. That was my cue! I stood up and said I just had finished a course at Ohio State in Chinese 101 and I would go in and find the driver.

I went in and in perfect Chinese, asked the guys playing cards “Who is the bus driver?” One of them raised his hand and I said “We must go to the airport now.” He got up and we left for the airport. You could see the road signs to the airport and as he turned toward the city I said “Where are you going?” He said “To get airplane tickets.” I said “We have tickets, go to the airport now.”

When we arrived at the airport, I thought that my days as an interpreter were finished but it was a small airport and no one spoke English.

I had a close group of followers as I struggled through my basic Chinese to get us on the plane. The plane was a DC3 and we all sat in the back when we boarded. The stewardess informed us (in Chinese of course) that the back is for first class passengers. We all moved up front and sat in the smallest airplane seats I’ve ever seen, even smaller than today’s seats!

After takeoff she asked if I wanted some air. I said yes and she took a stick and pushed open a hatch over my head to the outside. She brought a cart down the aisle and said in Chinese “Do you want tea and egg roll or coffee and cookies?” After I interpreted and told her everyone’s order I relaxed until we got to Taipei.

It took us quite a few days to fly back to our homes and the beginning of a new quarter at college. Once there, I proceeded to the NROTC building to take my paperwork authorization to the NROTC staff awards officer to get permission to wear the Vietnam service ribbon. The officer who had awards duty was the Marine Corps Major in charge of all the Marine option students. In proper Marine style I banged sharply three times on his door. “ENTER” he barked. I marched in, stood stiffly at attention and he asked what I wanted. I held out my papers and said “Sir, request permission to wear the Vietnam Service Ribbon, Sir.”

He said “You went to Vietnam on your summer cruise! You lucky son of a b...(gun)! Did you get to see combat?” I said “Sir, no sir. We just sailed through Vietnamese waters for tax purposes, I never even saw any land.”

He glared at me and started turning all sorts of colors, I didn’t know anyone could turn that many shades. After taking a few deep breaths he signed my authorization, threw it back at me and yelled “get the hell out of my office midshipman.”

“Sir, yes sir” I replied, and somewhat intimidated I executed an about face and tripped over his waste basket. Now I was flat on the floor of his office. He leaned up from his desk, looked down at me and says “Good thing you didn’t get on shore you would have been dead meat!” “Sir, yes sir”, I replied as I scrambled to my feet and out of his office.

I had a lot more adventures in Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan that I will recount later. My Chinese came in handy in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

On this trip I visited FOUR countries! And all of them Islands! And I enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you, Navy.