



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**A Gator Navy Reunion**

## A Gator Navy Reunion

**October 15-16, 2011**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This week Reporterette and I traveled to Deerfield, Illinois (north of Chicago), to attend an annual reunion of what is commonly called the Gator Navy. You may identify this part of America's armed fleet by the name of the Amphibious Forces.<sup>1</sup> This get-together was the first for me. I was eager to attend. I hoped to meet-up with old shipmates.

During the years of 1963-1965, I was a member of the Gator Navy and was stationed in Asia. Our ships and helicopters transported and transferred thousands of Marines and SEALs onto beaches and into jungles. We conducted training exercises in several Asian countries and executed combat missions in Vietnam.

The nickname "Gator" comes from the alligator, an aggressive creature that is agile in both water and land. An animal that swims with little detection, then suddenly---with the power of its legs and huge tail---launches itself onto a shore to kill and eat its prey. The alligator possesses a deadly set of teeth and jaws that it uses to finish-off an unwary quarry.

The alligator, with its ferocious countenance, was a symbol for us: the Gator Navy! We put the Marines and SEALs ashore, where they laid waste to their enemy. We sailors were the gator's tail and legs. The Marines and SEALs were the gator's teeth and jaws.

Of course, we used ships to land the men onto the beaches and fields of battle. In today's war theaters, warriors are often taken to the battlefields in large air transports. Even tanks and other heavy armament may be air-lifted. But for this week-end, if only retrospectively, the Marines were in the hands of the Gators.

This reunion is one of several annual assemblages of Gators held around the country. Whatever the location and time, it made no difference to me. I was to be among (admittedly) Gray Gators. For this group and your reporter, our heads are gray or bald, or both. But the stories recounted these two days were as colorful as our symbol. And the idea of colors, sometimes subject to the dangers of sailing on hostile enemy waters, rang true: "These colors never run":



<sup>1</sup> Many people use the singular "Force."

## **Marines and Gators**

Sailors and Marines honor a long-held partnership. Over the years, they have developed a mocking but joking relationship with each other:

- We sailors cast our wisdoms about the Marines: *Jarheads! Dumb as empty bottles.*
- The Marines cast theirs about us: *Swabees. Dumb as wet mops.*

Aside from these friendly put-downs, in the end, we knew we were in it together. Sociable antipathy aside, we had to stand side-by-side if we were to survive in battle. When push-came-to-shove, the Gators and the Marines fused to become an effective and deadly alligator.

## **Mutual Ridicule, Mutual Trust**

As I became more familiar with the Marines, the more I came to admire them. They were (and of course, still are) an elite---supremely competent---and proud unit. Some of my readers know I served (before an injury took me out of the program) in the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT), the forerunner to the SEALs. They, like the SEALs, were an elite fighting force. And as I grew more familiar with my Gator shipmates, I developed great respect for how we performed our unglamorous background role of supporting the Marines and the frogmen.

That's all we did. That was the reason for our existence. We Gators were not noble grunts, but we held our own under fire, and we performed our job of taking care of the *Semper Fi* warriors. While my time in the Amphibs around Vietnam was relatively safe, in other wars, many Gators lost their lives trying to protect their precious cargo: the Marines.

## **The Skuzz Buckets of the U.S. Navy**

After receiving orders to report to an amphibious navy post in Asia, I asked the men at the Coronado, California, Navy personnel office about my new assignment. I asked others that week about my belonging to the Amphibious Forces. All said to me, in one fashion or another: The Amphibs are the skuzz buckets of the U.S. Navy.

I was told I was going to ride some of the oldest and least-comfortable ships in the Navy's inventory. Most of them were early-WWII. None of them had air-conditioning, and we would be sailing in the tropical South China Sea, not in wooden ships, but steel-hulled frying pans.

All true. I was assigned to five different ships during my almost three-year deployment. My first ship was the *USS Estes*, an aging hulk. As I walked around the decks of the *Estes* during my first few days aboard, I joked with a new shipmate that the *Estes'* keel was laid not too long after Noah built his ark. He responded, "Yeah, we've heard that one before."

## **The AGC**

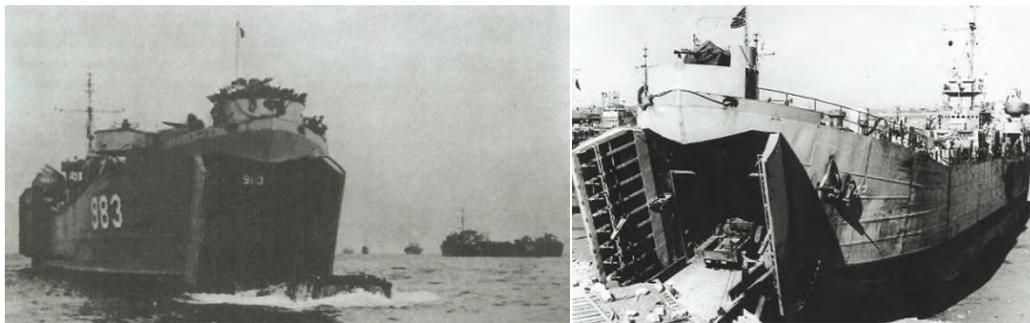
The *USS Estes* was an amphibious force command ship. It was the central headquarters, with immense communications gear, for coordinating a Marine assault or a SEAL raid on a beach, or on a place inland (with helicopters). It was designated as an AGC, which has no inherent meaning that I know of.

During my stay in the Western Pacific, I was first a communications officer, and later a beach logistics officer. For the second assignment, I worked frequently with LSTs.

### **The LST**

Many of the Marines whom we Gators would land on the beaches were housed in ancient ships called attack transports with a designation of APA. But the heavy gear---the stuff that would sustain the Marines ashore---was loaded onboard a ship designated as the LST, initials that fit the ship name: Landing Ship, Tank.

Here are two photos of this ship. The LST that was deployed in the Western Pacific during my time there was about 350 feet in length. As the photos show, the LST crew was responsible for disembarking tanks and other large armaments, not to mention tons of supplies.



### **LSTs<sup>2</sup>**

#### **The Gator Family at the Reunion**

I did not meet any of my old shipmates. Almost all the attendees were former LST sailors, the ships that did the work, while we fancy AGC personnel onboard the command ship issued orders. Also, I was only one of a few sailors at this reunion who had sailed in the Pacific. Most of the men had assignments on the east coast Atlantic, with excursions to the Med and Africa.

It did not matter. Sea stories on Atlantic waters are little different from sea stories on Pacific waters. But our war stories did vary. Mine were about Vietnam. Theirs was about an unusual Africa adventure (with little published about it, from what I can gather).

Regardless of the geography or ship, most of us---on this fine weekend---convinced ourselves once again, that we, so many years ago, were the Bull Halseys of the seas. After all, what is the purpose of a reunion anyway? It's to serve-up happiness. If the happiness comes about with a sea story now and then, so much the better. Certainly, so much the better for the listener of the tale.

Most of the men at this reunion knew each other well. I suspect they knew each others' histories on their respective LSTs. I doubt much in the way of new tales emerged.

Not for me. I was a newcomer. As such, these men (and their mates) welcomed me for... new sea stories?...different diversions? ...I don't think so. They wished to greet a new member of their association. Sailorette and I were warmly accepted by this close family.

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<sup>2</sup> "Navy Assault Crafts," Wikipedia.

### **More Sea Stories**

Some of the men in the group shared stories about the modern U.S. Navy. One making the rounds was the presence of females in the ship's company. The favorite story on Friday night, which I heard three times, was told as follows:

In the past, when danger raised its head, a *deep-male voice* would boom out over the ship's PA system:

**GENERAL QUARTERS! GENERAL QUARTERS!**

But with women on the bridge, a **soprano voice of the lady** would gently proclaim:

GENERAL QUARTERS. GENERAL QUARTERS.

It's one of those jokes that must be told, not written. It was funny. Even our wives thought so.

### **Remembrances**

On Saturday night, we, Gators and Gatoettes, met one last time. At this dinner, a small table had been set-up to the side of the room, as shown in the figure on the next page. Later in the evening, Bob, a new friend, and the man who invited me to this reunion, walked to the front of the room. He asked for our attention, and had this to say about the table:<sup>3</sup>

As you entered the banquet hall this evening, you may have noticed a small table in a place of honor. It is set for one. There are Flags of each of our Armed Services, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and a POW/MIA Flag, symbolizing the fact that members of our profession of arms are missing from our midst. We call them "Our Brothers and Sisters." They are unable to be with us this evening, so we remember them.

This Table set for one is small -- Symbolizing the frailty of one woman or man, one prisoner alone against their oppressors.

The Tablecloth is white -- Symbolizing the purity of their intentions to respond to their country's call to arms.

The single Red Rose -- displayed in a vase reminds us of the families and loved ones of our comrades-in-arms, who keep the faith remembering them, or awaiting their return.

The Red Ribbon -- tied so prominently on the vase is reminiscent of the red ribbon worn upon the lapel and breasts of thousands who bear witness to their unyielding determination to demand a proper accounting of our missing.

The Candle, the candle is lit -- Symbolizing the upward reach of their unconquerable spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> Bob obtained most of these words from Internet sites. He modified them for this reunion. He does not know the originator of this eulogy. He does not know if it is copyrighted. If any reader does know of the author, please let me know, and I will provide proper attribution.

A Slice of Lemon -- is on the bread plate to remind us of their bitter fate.

There is Salt upon the bread plate -- Symbolic of the families tears as they wait and remember.

The Glass is inverted -- they cannot toast with us this night.

The Chair is empty – They are not here.

Remember -- All of us who served with them, called them comrades, depended upon them – until we meet again – Remember!

And now, please stand and join together in a moment of silence.

At that time, as all stood, taps were played.

