

Coast Guard shapes sailor's life

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An assignment as a storekeeper wasn't first - or even second - on M. Stephen "Steve" Caskey's Coast Guard "dream sheet," but the jobs he held during his four years of military service literally paved the way for his civilian career.

Born and raised in Lock Haven, Steve is the son of Wilda Caskey of Mill Hall and the late Clyde Caskey. A 1965 graduate of Lock Haven High School, he today is a successful accountant with his own business in the City.

But a career in accounting wasn't part of his original game plan.

Steve graduated from then Lock Haven State College in 1969 with a bachelor's degree in secondary education math. Only problem was, he learned very late in his college career that teaching just wasn't for him.

"I decided when I was student teaching that I never wanted to do that again," says Steve. "I graduated from college during the height of the Vietnam War, so it was either be drafted or join."

Steve's older brother, the late John Caskey, had been drafted into the Army and served in the Dominican Republic during the Vietnam War while Steve was in college. He had already been discharged by the time Steve enlisted.

"I went for a draft physical," says Steve, "but the Army held up my paperwork because they didn't like something on my thumb. I had already talked to the Coast Guard - I felt that was the way to go because I didn't want to walk through Vietnam, I didn't want to float around Vietnam, and I didn't want to fly over Vietnam - and they told me they'd grab my physical once the Army released it. Then I got my draft notice.. .and the physical still hadn't been released. The Coast Guard walked it through, so I became enlisted four days before I would have been drafted into the Army."

It was Sept. 7, 1969 when Steve reported to the Coast Guard's Training Center in Cape May, N.J., for eight weeks of basic training.

"Upon graduation, you fill out a 'dream sheet' listing the duty stations you'd like to be assigned to and the schools you want to attend. I was really fortunate," says Steve with tongue in cheek, "because I listed that I wanted to go to electronics school. My second choice was yeoman, and then my third choice was storekeeper. I ended up not getting to go to any school at the time. My first assignment was serving as a janitor at the permanent party barracks (housing for Coast Guard members who live on base) at Cape May."

"As soon as you got out of boot camp, the first thing you did was try to get facial hair," adds Steve with a laugh. "I've had variations ever since sometimes it's a mustache, other times it's a goatee but it's always at least the mustache. That's why (friend) Harry McKeague calls me 'Foo'. Probably one of the last photos taken of me with no mustache is the one 41 years ago from basic training it's the one that was used on the Hometown Hero banner. I was just an innocent little boy in that picture."

After a while, Steve made seaman, an E-3 rank.

"I requested a transfer to 'strike' (a way to get a rate without schooling) for storekeeper," says Steve. "While I was striking, a position came open in storekeeper school, so I requested and was granted a position in the school."

Storekeeper school was a three-month class held at the Coast Guard's installation at Governor's Island, N.Y.

"Depending on how you ranked in the school, you got the top selections, so I made sure I was the number one person," says Steve. "There happened to be an opening back at Cape May, so right back to Cape May I went. I was trying to stay close to Lock Haven and that was as close as I could get."

Besides his family, another reason Steve wanted to be close to home was to be able to see his girlfriend, Susie Yoder. The two had met when he was a senior and she was in tenth grade and had dated through high school, college, and most of his time in the Coast Guard. They married in March of 1972, while Steve was still serving.

"Susie had her own beauty shop, so she stayed in Lock Haven. I was sending money home so that when I did get out, we'd have some money to get a place to live and buy what we needed," says Steve.

Back in Cape May, Steve's first assignment was at a pay desk.

"I did payrolls. I was in the comptroller division," explains Steve. "I did payroll for about 300 people in the third district all of the people who weren't attached to training duty; people who were on cutters or at the air station."

"The payroll job wielded a lot of weight. I went to sick bay once but was told I couldn't see a doctor because I wasn't sick enough. I asked for the chief and the corpsman's names, saying that I'd need to know whose pay to send to Sears and Roebuck. They said, 'You lose my pay and I'll lose your shot card.' I replied, 'I can take those shots again. How long can you go without pay?' I got to see the doctor."

The Galley was another area where Steve enjoyed the perks of his job.

"Anytime I went to the galley, anything I wanted was given. If they were serving steaks, they'd ask how many I wanted. When I was in storekeeper school, the top five in the class got passes to the commissary school galley, so that meant we got double rations. When I'd come home on the weekends, I'd give my pass to another guy to use."

The pay desk position lasted through June of 1972. Steve remembers the date because of the Agnes Flood that devastated Lock Haven.

"I came home on emergency leave because of Agnes. When I went back to Cape May, I had a different job. I ended up on the schedule desk, where you actually scheduled invoices for payment."

While the schedule desk was a good assignment, Steve says he got off to a rough start with the job.

"The thing that irritated me was that the guy before me had sloughed off. He left me about two months of work, on a job I was just learning. He got a cushy job at the clothing locker, handing out clothes to the recruits."

Steve's last assignment with the Coast Guard was working for the Exchange officer.

"I kept records for the Exchange and the Commissary (a Coast Guard support organization that operates as a business, selling merchandise and a variety of services to military service members and their families). The Exchange Officer and I were the only two military personnel who worked there - everyone else was civilian," says Steve. "In addition, there was only one other man the rest of the personnel were female. With so many women, things could get very emotional at times, so I did most jobs outside the office!"

"That's why I'm a one-woman shop now, because I learned," adds Steve, referring to Barb Palovcsik, a long-time, lone assistant at his accounting office.

Steve was discharged from active duty on Sept. 4, 1973. When he returned from Cape May he served two more years of inactive duty... and he put to work all he had learned in the Coast Guard.

"I went to work for the Clinton County Redevelopment Authority as their accountant," says Steve. "They were overseeing the redevelopment activities for Castanea, Renovo and Lockport. I learned on-the-job there; I did payroll, bookkeeping and all of the federal requirements. HUD (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) was very involved in where the money went."

When the redevelopment initiative ended, Steve went back to school and formally earned a degree in accounting from Lycoming College. He graduated in 1982 and went to work for the Williamsport accounting firm of James S. Armstrong.

"I was there for two years, then Armstrong went into semi-retirement and offered me the Lock Haven portion of his business. That's when, in 1984, I became M. Stephen Caskey Accounting."

Steve recalls he had meager beginnings.

"I started after tax season in 1984. I had a one-room office in the Haffley Insurance building in Dunnstown and was there for four years."

In 1988, Steve moved to his current location, what had been a large home at 403 West Main Street. The building would serve as his office, with plenty of room for Susie's business and their home.

"Susie had a shop on Church Street and we were looking for a place where we could house both of our businesses. The home on West Main Street had been part of the Teah estate; it couldn't have been any better suited," he says, referring to being able to locate his office on one side of the first floor of the building, Susie's salon on the other half of the first floor, and their living quarters above.

Steve has continued to build his business over the years. He also lends his talent to many organizations in the community. He's a life member of Lock Haven's Hand-in-Hand Hose Fire Company and has served as the Company's treasurer for about 25 years. He is a member and serves as treasurer of the Clinton County Shrine Club. He's been a member of the Lock Haven Kiwanis Club for 25 years, and also belongs to the Lafayette Lodge Free and Accepted Masons, the Williamsport Consistory and the Jaffa Shrine.

Steve is a life member of the Millbrook Playhouse and had served on its board of directors and as board treasurer. Additional affiliations include the Masonic Temple Association (he served as treasurer there, as well), the Lock Haven Hospital board of directors, and the Lock Haven Fireman's Relief Association, where he also took on the role as treasurer.

Steve's involvement extends out of the area. He serves as a state director with the Pennsylvania Society of Public Accountants and as vice president of the west-central chapter of the PSPA.

This year will mark Steve's 45th high school class reunion (to be held in August), and he's part of the committee planning the event.

Steve and his family also support the Hometown Hero banner program. Steve, his brother John, and Steve's father-in-law, Bob Yoder, all appear on banners that hang along Bellefonte Avenue, and a banner for Steve's uncle, Bill Carpenter, flies on Lock Haven's levee Riverwalk.

"I think it's great it's a fabulous asset for the town," says Steve of the more than 500 Hometown Hero streetlight banners that recognize area veterans. "I know when I'm out walking, I'm always reading the banners. Some of the people you know, but you didn't know they served."

Looking back on his military service and how it shaped his life, Steve says, "Things are meant to be. I liked everything I did in the Coast Guard. All of the jobs were a little different, but they all kind of prepared me for where I am now. When I joined the Coast Guard, the full compliment was less than the New York City police department. Today, there are 42,000 men and women on active duty."

"When I talk to others about the military, I tell them the Coast Guard is still a small organization and you can make advancements rapidly. I was an E-6 (first class petty officer) in under four years. If somebody's looking to go into the service, I tell them to at least look at the Coast Guard."

"Today, I have more sea time on cruises than I had in the Coast Guard," he laughs. "I was on the ferry back and forth from Manhattan to Governor's Island and I did my small boat training in basic, but that was it. I really had a pretty nice tour of duty. The threat was always there; they'd say, 'If you don't straighten up, we'll send you to sea.' My reply was always, 'Fine. Put me on an icebreaker - I want to go someplace!'"