

Halverson sees the world on the USS New Jersey

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McFarland veteran Steve Halverson served in the U.S. Navy from 1986 to 1990.

Steve Halverson

U.S. Navy veteran Steve Halverson is no stranger to hard work.

During his time aboard the USS New Jersey, Halverson worked 18-hour days in the boiler room of the battleship.

“From people who were higher ranking than me, and older, I was told that they always wanted the people from the Midwest because they were the hardest workers,” Halverson said. “With me growing up on a farm...You’ve got to get up and go.”

A life-long McFarland resident, Halverson grew up on a farm in the McFarland area, and graduated from McFarland High School. He enlisted in the Navy in 1986 at age 20, and served until 1990.

Halverson worked as a boiler technician on the ship. He spent his days 38 feet below the waterline of the ship in blistering temperatures.

“When we crossed the Equator, down in the boiler room, it was approximately between 130 degrees and 140 degrees,” Halverson said. “That was the fresh air that was coming in. Your body just got acclimated to it.”

On the battleship, Halverson began his day at 5:30 a.m., and worked on watch from 6 a.m. to noon. After a quick lunch, he worked in the boiler room from 1 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. And after dinner, he worked another watch from 6 p.m. to midnight.

“When you were done you’d go up and take a shower shower and try to get a couple hours of sleep,” Halverson said.

“You do what you’ve got to do. There are no days off, when you’re out at sea,” he added.

The USS New Jersey, which Halverson served on for four years, is the most decorated battleship in Navy history.

According to the Home Port Alliance for the USS New Jersey, a nonprofit that maintains the ship’s museum and memorial, the battleship was launched in 1938. It served in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War and conflicts in the Middle East, until it was decommissioned in 1991.

Halverson recalls the battleship being more than 300 feet long, and scraping the sides of the Panama Canal as it sailed through the passageway during his service. The battleship, Halverson said, housed guns with 16-inch-diameter barrels that shot shells weighing the same amount as a Volkswagen Bug.

Aboard the battleship, Halverson saw the world.

“I’ve been three-quarters of the way around the globe,” Halverson said.

Halverson visited many West Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand. He's seen both the North and South poles, the Bering Strait, the Panama Canal. The only part of the globe he hasn't seen, Halverson said, is Europe.

At each port "I would sign up for tours. I would go and see the countryside, because I never knew when I would be back," Halverson said. The tours would "enhance our knowledge of the area that we were in."

In 1988, the USS New Jersey spent a month and a half touring Australia and New Zealand for Australia's bicentennial. Halverson said he appreciated the friendliness of people he met in Australia, and its resemblance to the states.

"It reminded me a lot of growing up here in Madison because Madison used to have a lot of old buildings, down in the university area," Halverson said. Due to its colonization by British prisoners, Australia has "all of this old history."

Toward the end of Halverson's service, the USS New Jersey patrolled the Persian Gulf for half a year as Desert Storm began.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without my military experience," Halverson said.

After leaving the Navy, Halverson went to work at Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, a federally-funded wood utilization research lab. A partner of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Products Laboratory works in wood preservation.

Halverson began his career in the boiler room, before becoming the head of the wood preservation treating plant at Forest Products.

"Because that deals with pressure and vacuum and steam, they were all skills I learned when I was in the Navy. I look at it as my four years of military were my college time," Halverson said.

Halverson still lives in McFarland, in the home he grew up in. He's been married to his wife Rhonda for 27 years, has four children and four grandchildren.

He's also been a member of McFarland American Legion Post 534 for 24 years.



“Once you’re in the military, you have this bond that is unbreakable,” Halverson said. “You have a closer relationship with your fellow shipmates...than you do almost with your own siblings, because you’re with them almost 24/7.”

“You meet a lot of friends from all walks of life,” he added.

Halverson is one of eleven veterans from the McFarland, Monona and Cottage Grove areas who will be featured in the 2021 edition of “We Shall Not Forget,” an annual salute to local veterans published each November.

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