

Captain Paul Jacobs, United States Navy (Retired)

October 7, 1936 – December 8, 2020

Paul Jacobs was born in Malden, Massachusetts, a small, strong-willed community remembered as the first colonial town to publicly declare its intention to break with Britain. That decisive mentality may have rubbed off on a young boy's future endeavors. While still a child, Jacobs moved with his family to his grandparents' farm in Maine. Many years later, he would recall his grandfather plowing the boulder-strewn New England ground as he dutifully followed closely behind, depositing seeds in the furrows.

The family lived on the farm until they took up residence in the coastal community of Petit Manan Point when Paul was 10. It was a simple but rigorous life that seesawed between boyhood adventure and hard work. Without a doubt, that environment nurtured self-reliance, discipline, and personal responsibility--all characteristics Paul Jacobs would exhibit in his adult life.

After graduating from tiny Milbridge High School in a class of 13, Jacobs entered the Maine Maritime Academy in nearby Castine with the intention of becoming a marine engineer, his father's profession. Shortly thereafter, when the senior Jacobs joined the faculty, Professor George Jacobs would show no favoritism toward his son. In fact, "He was harder on me than on the other midshipmen," the younger Jacobs recalled.

Jacobs graduated in 1958 and went on active duty as an ensign in the Naval Reserve with orders to report aboard USS *Onslow* (AVP-48), a seaplane tender. His knowledge and skills as an engineering officer did not go unnoticed or unrewarded. The ship's commanding officer noted in his fitness report that Jacobs's initiative and competence set him apart.

When the newly promoted Lt.(j.g.) Jacobs drew his next assignment aboard the destroyer USS *Harry E. Hubbard* (DD-748), he became the ship's engineer officer, a highly unusual honor for a junior officer. Aspiring to command his own ship, he knew that a Reserve Officer could never captain a ship in peacetime so he applied for a regular commission and was accepted into the U.S. Navy.

Besides, or even despite, his new title, Paul Jacobs was determined to learn every aspect of the destroyer. He crawled through her bilges and committed to memory every pipe and gauge in *Hubbard's* engine room. Before long, he could light off her boilers and fire her guns with equal skill. He could also ease the ship into a pier while fighting a headwind or cross-current. Ship-handling and seamanship were second nature since his Maine Maritime Academy days.

Jacobs's performance in this assignment and excelling in his next duty station ashore cleared the way for his first sea command, USS *Meadowlark* (MSC-196), a 144-foot coastal minesweeper. As commanding officer, he enhanced his growing reputation as a "can-do" skipper. By the time he relinquished command in December 1965, the Navy had awarded the minesweeper her third and fourth Battle Efficiency awards.

Due for another shore assignment, he advanced his naval education by earning a bachelor of science degree at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Graduation brought him a new sea command in 1967, captain of USS *Esteem* (MSO-438). This ship was an ocean-going minesweeper whose services were needed in Southeast Asia.

Following two Vietnam combat tours aboard *Esteem*, Jacobs drew another shore posting, this time at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, to take the prestigious Command and Staff junior course. Paul Jacobs was obviously being groomed for greater responsibility.

That more imposing duty was commanding a destroyer, what he envisioned as the pinnacle of a Navy career. “Tin cans,” as these rough-riding, men-of-war have affectionately been called over the years, may be small in size but are renowned for their fighting ability. Laden with guns, depth charges, and torpedoes, destroyers are equally adept at hunting and killing submarines, providing gunfire support, or protecting a carrier task force from hostile aircraft.

But before assuming command of his own tin can, Jacobs would first have to play understudy as executive officer of USS *Floyd B. Parks* (DD-884), a World War II-era destroyer. With its array of 5-inch guns, twin steam turbines, and four boilers, *Parks* offered him admission to a marine engineer’s paradise.

As executive officer, Jacobs ran the ship’s everyday operations. Not going by the book was one of Jacobs’s most observable traits. No one better adhered to the principle that “it’s better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.” In a rule-conscious, hidebound Navy, this philosophy often meant the difference between failure and accomplishing the mission.

After departing *Parks*, Jacobs was back in Vietnam as Plans Officer serving with the 7th Fleet’s commander of Task Force 75. This assignment earned him not only the praise of the senior staff but also the Meritorious Service Medal.

His next shore assignment was at the Naval War College to take the Command and Staff senior course. Upon graduation, he was a newly promoted commander and itching to go to sea. Rather than the destroyer he had coveted, however, his new command would be the 3-year-old destroyer escort, USS *Kirk* (DE-1087). It was aboard this 438-foot warship that Paul Jacobs would gain his greatest triumph and earn a lasting reputation for leadership under unimaginable circumstances.

In the last days of April 1975, as the Vietnam War was reaching its tragic conclusion, a task force of U.S. Navy ships cruised off the South Vietnamese coast. USS *Kirk* was part of that flotilla, joining in Operation Frequent Wind, which began on April 29. Navy and Marine Corps helicopters flew into Saigon and began evacuating U.S. Embassy personnel, military advisors, CIA personnel, and South Vietnamese who had aided the U.S. during the war. Quite unexpectedly, swarms of choppers from the South Vietnamese Army and South Vietnamese Air Force followed the American helicopters out to sea. Most were crammed with men, women, and children seeking refuge aboard any U.S. Navy ship on which they could land.

Rather than seeking permission from his superiors, Jacobs instantly and decisively offered USS *Kirk* as a safe haven to 12 of those refugee-packed Vietnamese helicopters. As the choppers landed on the flight deck and discharged its passengers, *Kirk*'s sailors, and even with their skipper lending a helping hand, pushed each helicopter over the side to make room for more incoming ones.

The ship's officers and sailors--trained as warriors--then transformed a man-of-war, which had been designed to destroy Soviet submarines, into a humanitarian assistance ship. These terrified Vietnamese refugees who had lost everything, including their country, found comfort, sustenance, and medical care aboard *Kirk*. Desperation and anguish gave way to reassurance as crewmembers fed their unexpected guests, dispensed medical care, diapered infants, set up awnings to protect the evacuees from a blazing sun, and provided hope to a dispirited people.

Had *Kirk* accomplished just that one operation, the ship would have gone down in the annals of U.S. Navy history. But fate had yet another mission for this unlikely warship. For reasons still not fully understood more than four decades later, Task Force 76's commander

ordered Paul Jacobs and his crew to return to Vietnam and lead the remnants of the South Vietnamese Navy to safety in the Philippines. Today, many of the estimated 30,000 Vietnamese refugees, who were crammed aboard those ships, remember Jacobs and his crew not only as rescuers, but for leading them to freedom and a new life.

Paul Jacobs retired from the Navy in 1984 as a captain after serving as the U.S. Navy's director of Undersea Surveillance. During his Navy career, Captain Jacobs earned the Bronze Star Medal, four Meritorious Service Medals, the Navy Commendation Medal, and many Vietnam service medals. Captain Paul Jacobs: a job well-done.

Following his Navy retirement, Jacobs was president/CEO of Veteran Resources Corporation in Fairfax, Virginia, until he moved to Somerset, California, in 2018.

He is survived by a daughter, Kathy Tibbets, and sons Skip, Mark, and Tyler.