

This US Navy veteran's path to the American Legion and VFW, began along ancestral trails leading from Ukraine, Russia and Georgia

An interview-biography with Pacifican Greg Stepanenko

By Jean Bartlett ([www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com))

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Page 1 (privately sponsored)



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Written by Jean Bartlett

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"Why did I join the military right out of high school," Pacifican Greg Stepanenko, Balboa High School graduate, class of 1962, pondered. "Because I thought that's the least I can do for my country. That's kind of corny now. How many people think like that? When I was in boot camp they asked me, 'Where is your draft card?' Well, I wasn't 18 when I joined the Navy so I didn't have to have a draft card. Just a few years later, some kids would start burning their draft cards and in the late 1960s, when the Vietnam War draft lotteries started, some kids left the country. People have to assess what decision is best for them. But that's why I joined."

←Pacifica American Legion Post 238 and Pacifica VFW Post 10245 member Greg Stepanenko served aboard the USS Newport News (CA-148) during the Dominican Republic Crisis of 1965.

Greg has been a member of Pacifica VFW Post 10245 since 1996. He joined Pacifica American Legion Post 238 just before he retired from Ryder Fleet Management Solutions in March of 2011.

"There is a lot of satisfaction being with others who have served. It doesn't matter what branch of the military you served in. It's about camaraderie in both the VFW and the Legion, and it is about being there for your neighbors. That's why all of us joined and it keeps us busy and engaged."

In their hometown, members of Posts 238 and 10245 are counted on for their support of Pacifica fundraisers, assistance to local nonprofits and for help with hospitalized and homebound veterans. They are there to cook up and provide lunch for Pacifica's annual American Cancer Society Relay for Life event. Since 2003, Post 238 has hosted the Pacifica Resource Center's monthly Family Harvest Program

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Page 2 (privately sponsored)

at the Legion Hall. A few years back and side-by-side with several other Pacifica nonprofits, their joint fundraising efforts provided two trained police dogs for the Pacifica Police Department – that was \$20,000 of fundraising, per canine. Post 238 and its Auxiliary participate in Legion youth mentoring programs: Boys State, Girls State, the Oratorical Contest and the Americanism Essay Contest. Over the years they have also participated in baseball and marksmanship programs. In addition, the American Legion has supported three scout troops and sponsored local Eagle Scout projects. As requested, the Legion's Color Guard will present at a veteran's gravesite. Pre-pandemic the Legion provided an "April Pier Day" for hospitalized veterans. Participants and their health technicians were brought to the Pacifica Pier in a mobile medical van, supplied by the local VA hospital. Before the fishing began, the veterans were greeted and supplied with coffee and donuts. Next step, fishing poles were handed out. After some good-natured but dedicated angling, the participants then headed over to the Legion Hall where the Legion's Auxiliary served up the perfect spring cuisine – hamburgers and hot dogs. And all of this is the short list of what Pacifica's VFW and American Legion do for their grateful community. Each year, to honor these multi-decorated altruists, their Pacifica community puts them in charge of leading the annual "Discover Pacifica Parade."

"I'm happy to be a member of both organizations and I'm all in – whatever I can do to help."

\* \* \*

Born at Children's Hospital in San Francisco (now known as the California Campus of California Pacific Medical Center, except by natives), Gregory Stephen Stepanenko came into this world on November 9, 1944. He is the first child of Stephen Gregory Stepanenko and Nika Gregorievna (Kalinin) Stepanenko. His sister Ellen came along several years later.

"My father Stephen was Ukrainian. He was born on January 14, 1915, in Zvenigorodka, Ukraine. My mother Nika was Russian. She was born on December 17, 1920, in Grodekova, Russia. Both of my parents arrived in this country when they were each 8 years old."

Greg's father Stephen was the son of Gregory Jakob Stepanenko, who was born in January of 1879, in Zvenigorodka, Ukraine, just southeast of Kyiv. Gregory served as an officer in the Imperial Russian Army of Czar Nicholas II from 1901-1919. During his Army service, Gregory was sent to quell the discontent in Georgia. Through a long series of peace treaties with Persia and the Ottoman Empire, Georgia became part of the Russian Empire in 1870. While Georgians sought out Russian rule to provide security from external threats, after a time they found Russia's rule to be harsh, bordering on authoritarianism, and by the late 19th century there was a great deal of discontent with the Russian rule, nationwide. In the early 20th century, revolts and strikes became commonplace. This was undoubtedly the time that Gregory served in Georgia. But something happened there that brought an unexpected turn to the life of the Imperial Russian soldier. He met Helen Georgievna Djakeli.

Helen was born in Tiflis, Georgia, on May 6, 1882. Along with several brothers and a sister Mary, Helen was one of the children of Georgi Djakeli and Anna (Glonti) Djakeli. As it turns out, Helen was of noble birth. When she and Gregory fell for each other, her family did not approve at all. So what if he was an officer in Czar Nicholas II Imperial Russian Army – he was born a "peasant." Helen's choices were to choose her family or leave forever with her peasant. The couple married in Russia, where they began their lives as a married couple, and Helen's family never allowed her back in. Many years later, when Helen's father was on his deathbed, Helen's brother barred her from the family home and her father's funeral.

**\* \* \*WORLD WAR I BEGINS\* \* \***

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Page 3 (privately sponsored)

On Sunday, June 28, 1914, at 11 a.m., not even an hour after escaping an assassin's bomb, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne and his wife, Sophie, the Duchess of Hohenberg, were killed by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb student. On July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary, with German encouragement, declared war on Serbia. This officially began the First World War. Russia, an ally of Serbia, entered World War I on August 1, 1914, against Austria-Hungary. Between August 2 and August 7, 1914, Germany invaded Luxembourg and Belgium. France invaded Alsace. British forces arrived in France. Along with Serbia, Russia, Great Britain, Belgium and France, the Nations that also allied against Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire included: Italy, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Rhodesia, Romania, Greece, United States, Canada, India, Portugal, Montenegro and Poland.

During his WWI service, Lieutenant Gregory Jakob Stepanenko was awarded two St. George Cross medals for exceptional valor and courage in battle. Wounded by a bullet to his lower leg, in July of 1915, the lieutenant was evacuated to a Royal Prussian Military Hospital, Marienwerder, which was located in what was then, the German Province of West Prussia (now the area is Kwidzyn, Poland). Successfully treated, the Lieutenant would eventually be released outside of Munich. He would reunite with his wife and young son Stephen in Zvenigorodka, Ukraine.

WWI ended on November 11, 1918. Earlier, in February of 1917, the Russian Imperial Army swore loyalty to the Russian Provisional Government. Widespread protests and strikes led to the abdication of Czar Nicholas II on March 15, 1917, laying the groundwork to the Russian Revolution. Beginning in 1917, many members of the Imperial Army and other Russian émigrés fled from the Bolshevik regime to Harbin, China. Anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000 white émigrés made their way to Harbin, most coming by way of the Chinese Eastern Railway. In April of 1918, Nicholas II and the Imperial family were moved by the Bolshevik government to Yekaterinburg, on the eastern side of the Urals, a north-south mountain range in Eurasia, mostly running through Russia. In July of 1918, Nicholas and his family were executed by anti-Bolshevik forces.



"Because there was no real government in Russia because of the Revolution, my grandfather, grandmother and my father made their way to Harbin, China. My grandparents had also had a daughter. I don't know much about her other than her name was Sofiya, she was older than my father and she died in Russia.

"My grandfather had four brothers, some who were pro-Communists and some who were not. He just left everybody. My father remembered they slept on slabs of wood with straw, while they traveled by rail. The Russian government did not have representation in China, so my family's passport documents were created in Harbin, China."

←Gregory, Helen and Stephen Stepanenko, Harbin, China, 1923.

"They were there long enough for my grandfather to have a delicatessen in Harbin. He was saving money to make the trip to the United States. At first, he wasn't sure whether they should move to Canada or the United States. But he decided on the United States because he thought they had a better educational system."

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Page 4 (privately sponsored)

On June 13, 1923, Gregory, Helen and 8-year-old Stephen Stepanenko were granted visas from the American Consulate in Harbin, China, for their journey to the United States, via Japan. On August 8, 1923, the family boarded the ship, Rakuyo Maru, out of Yokohama, Japan. On September 1, 1923, they arrived in San Francisco.

"Right after my dad and his parents arrived in San Francisco, they moved to Westwood, CA (now a census-designated place, with a population of about 800 in Lassen County, near Susanville), where he worked as a lumber grader for Red River Logging Company."

The town of Westwood was essentially built by the Red River Lumber Company. It was, and still is, celebrated as the home of the mythical lumberjack Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe.

"My grandfather made enough money working for the lumber company so that in 1925, he brought his family back to San Francisco and with a down payment of \$952.45, he purchased a house in San Francisco's Bernal Heights neighborhood, 424 Anderson Street, total price, \$2,500, and the house came furnished. My grandfather went to work for the American Can Company on Third Street until he retired. My father went to Balboa High School until Commerce High School on Van Ness Avenue and Hayes Street became available. Following high school, my dad went to The Heald School of Engineering and Mining. My father had wanted to be a librarian, he loved to read, but my grandfather said, 'No, you are going to be an operating engineer.' And so my dad became an operating engineer and an electrician. Those went hand in hand."

\* \* \*



In 1925, while Greg's father's family had established themselves as San Franciscans, Greg's maternal grandfather, Gregori Andronik Kalinin, left his wife, his two sons and his daughter, Greg's mom Nika, behind in Shanghai, China, and came to San Francisco. His goal was to find work in the United States so he could get settled and bring his family over. Gregori and his family were also refugees.

Gregori was born on March 25, 1885, in Russia. He was one of his parents' 18 children but only three of their sons lived to adulthood and one daughter died during WWI at the age of 12. Of the three sons, Serge was sent to Siberia because of his political beliefs and eventually, he escaped to Australia. Son Alexei married Olga and lived in Yekaterinburg.

Gregori attended the University in Moscow. It was when he was at the university that Gregori decided to take his friend Michael Ohliguer's advice, and take Michael's sister, Alexandra, to the school dance. His date, Alexandra Philipevna Ohliguer, was the daughter of Phillip Adraham Ohliguer and Louisa Fredrica (Muller) Ohliguer.

←Gregori and Alexandra, Greg's maternal grandparents, Nevyansk, Russia, 1912.

Alexandra was born on May 26, 1891, in Yekaterinburg, Russia, and, as it turned out, she liked this friend of her brother's. Prior to their wedding on November 16, 1910, in Yekaterinburg, Gregori asked Alexandra to choose where she wanted to live. Gregori's father had a store in Yekaterinburg and one in Nevyansk.

"My grandmother chose Nevyansk because the mountains were about 20 miles from the Asian Border. The Neyva River flows through Nevyansk. Nevyansk is on the eastern slope of the Middle Urals and it is located on one side in Europe, and on the other side in Asia. As it turns out, the Nevyansk store location was also my mom's dad's choice."



Gregori and Alexandra had four children. Herman Gregori Kalinin was born on July 11, 1911, in Yekaterinburg. Eugene Gregori Kalinin was born on January 19, 1913, in Yekaterinburg. A sister, Veronica, came along next, but information on her is limited. She died in Russia. On December 17, 1920, Nika Gregorievna Kalinin, Greg's mom, was born in Grodekova, Russia.

"Grodekova is right near the Chinese border," Greg noted with a smile. "My dad used to call her 'Chinaman,' just to tease her."

←Gregori and Alexandra in Yekaterinburg, Russia, 1916.

"My mom's dad Gregori was a commodities broker and he and my grandmother were well-to-do. They had a maid, a cook and a coachman. When the Revolution started, they thought they would be coming back to their home and so they buried all their valuables. But they never went back and it was all lost. My mother and her family got to Shanghai, where my grandmother worked as a housemaid. They went from being wealthy to doing 'whatever I can do.' They were survivors.

"When my mother's dad arrived in the U.S. in 1925, he got a job as a house painter. As soon as he had enough money for someone to come over, he sent for his eldest son, Herman. Herman came over in 1926 when he was 15. Herman went to Jefferson High School in Daly City and he spoke English without an accent. It took several more years before my grandfather could send for his wife, my mother and his other son. The problem was not only did my grandfather have to pay for their ship passage, but he also had to pay the crooked consulate an additional fee to make it happen. They came over on March 30, 1929, when my mother was 8 and her brother Eugene was 16. They arrived aboard the Siberia Maru. My Uncle Gene spoke English with a Russian accent. My mother spoke Russian with an American accent! Do I speak Russian?"

"When I was a young child, the only language I spoke was Russian and my cousins would come over and say, 'Auntie Nika, there is something wrong with him because he doesn't sound right.' Because I was speaking Russian! My family taught me to speak English before I started kindergarten. I still know a few words in Russian but I can't really speak it."



While Greg's father Stephen was attending Commerce High School, completely unaware that someone named Nika existed, Greg's mother began her schooling in San Francisco at St. Dominic's School, followed by St. Rose Academy.

←Greg's dad, 2nd Lieut. Stephen Stepanenko, Junior ROTC, Commerce High School, 1931/1932.

"Following my father's graduation from Heald School of Engineering, he went to work as an electrician for Merchants Ice and Cold Storage Company in San Francisco. Following my mother's graduation from St. Rose Academy, she headed off to UC Berkeley to study math."

When the United States entered the Second World War following the Japanese Imperial Navy's attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, Greg's dad left Merchants Ice and Cold Storage Company, and went to work for Dalmo Victor in Belmont.

"My father wasn't allowed to serve in the military during the Second World War because he was cross-eyed. That made him 4-F. There was a simple exercise he could have done as a child to straighten it, but they didn't know about it. Dalmo Victor was a military contractor during the War and my father got a job with them because he wanted to be a part of the War effort. Dalmo Victor was making radar antennas for early-warning radar systems. My dad worked for them until the War ended. He then worked briefly for Golden State Dairy until he went back to Merchants Ice and Cold Storage. He stayed there until he retired as Chief Engineer." (Greg's dad became a citizen of the United States on July 12, 1937.)

"He never got his eyes fixed. I hated them because when I was in trouble, I didn't know if he was looking at me or not! He wore corrective glasses and his driver's license was from sunrise to sunset."



It was when Stephen was working at Dalmo Victor that he met Gregori and Alexandra Kalinin's daughter, Nika.

←In this January 1940, taken in San Francisco, the three Kalinin children, from the top down, grin for the camera: Herman, Nika and Eugene.

"My parents met on a blind date. They went to a movie with some friends. My mom wasn't all that thrilled with my dad because my dad had lost his hair when he was 21. I just wanted to have hair on my head when I was 21 and not be completely bald like my dad! My mom wasn't immediately attracted, but my dad liked my mom from the start and he was very persistent.

"While my father was unable to serve in the Second World War, my Uncle Gene did serve. He was in the Navy and he was in the Battle of the Coral Sea (May 4-8, 1942). He never talked much about it and the only time he talked about it even a little was on Russian Easter, when there was plenty of vodka. It was a major naval engagement and it halted the Japanese advance in the Pacific. There were also many

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Page 7 (privately sponsored)

casualties. People still don't talk much about what they see in a war, but back then, they talked even less. That's one of the great things the VFW and Legion can give someone, a place to talk."

On November 21, 1943, Stephen Gregory Stepanenko married Nika Gregorievna Kalinin in San Francisco.

"I grew up in San Francisco. We lived first at 424 Anderson Street with my grandfather. Then we moved to 65 Maynard Street in the Excelsior neighborhood. When I was in sixth grade, my parents bought a home at 122 Seville Street in the Outer Mission. I went to James Denman Middle School for a semester in the Excelsior and then they opened Luther Burbank Middle School and I went there. Then I went to Balboa High School."



**Greg's parents, Stephen and Nika, Nov. 21, 1943.**



**Greg with his father's parents, Gregory and Helen, 1948.**

Greg started playing the flute from sixth grade on through high school. He played in his high school's orchestra.

"My parents asked me, 'Do you want to play an instrument?' In my earliest school years, I had played this little plastic thing, a tonette. I liked it and I did pretty well at it. So, flute it was. I took a lesson, \$3.00 a pop, once a week. My sister took piano lessons. My mom could play the piano and her mom was incredible on the piano. Whenever her dad had a party, he would sit down like a showman and play chords. But my grandma was really good."

Greg's mom worked when he and his sister were growing up. She could really cook, but with her working, her mom created the majority of the family meals.

"My favorites that my grandmother made were piroshkies. A piroshki is an enriched yeasted dough turned into a boat-shaped bun and filled with any of these things, meat and rice, potatoes and onions, and so many other choices – you can either bake them or fry them. I loved pelmeni, which is kind of like tortellini, and I would watch my grandmother sit there and make these dumplings filled with minced meat by the hundreds. On Russian Easter, which falls typically 13 days after Western Easter, my mom would have a massive table full of all kinds of Russian stuff that my mom and grandmother would make. All day long people would come in and go out, and we would have three, full sit-downs and the men would each come with a quart of vodka and give it to my dad. It went right into the freezer and they would sit there and drink it. As a kid, I would sit and listen to them. That's when my Uncle Gene would tell his stories.

"While my mom left UC Berkeley before she graduated, she was still so good at math. She worked for F.W. Woolworth Company (a retail chain known for its five-and-ten-cent stores), and she was a bookkeeper. She ended up retiring as the head bookkeeper for the West Coast Warehouse for F.W. Woolworth. When they did inventory, they had to balance to the penny and she wouldn't let anyone go home until it balanced. She showed my wife Joan how to do a general journal, and Joan, who does bookkeeping, still does it that way. It works!"



**Greg and his dog, Happy, circa 1954.**

Greg did Cub Scouting as a kid and worked his way up. His mom was the Den Mother.

"My mom worked full-time but she still found time to support and supervise our group of Cub Scouts, and she was good at it. My father was an introvert. He loved to read and kind of keep to himself. But that changed when I was a Boy Scout. I was in Troop 38 and my dad came to a Boy Scout ceremony where they gave out awards. This fellow standing next to my dad also had a son in Troop 38. My dad and this



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Page 9 (privately sponsored)

gentleman, Mr. Bruni, were talking and Mr. Bruni says to my dad, 'Let's start our own troop. You be Scout Master and I'll be Assistant Scout Master.' It was Troop 181. They picked that number because it remained the same, forwards, backwards or upside down!

"My dad, this quiet guy, became a Scout Master because of me and he was all in. We had tons of kids and we went to summer camps and on hikes all the time. We hiked from Stinson Beach to Mt. Tamalpais, and we hiked lots of trails and loops on Mt. Tamalpais.

"Like a lot of kids back in that day, I delivered newspapers. I had two paper routes. I had the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin* and the *Scripps-Howard's San Francisco News*. Then they merged and they became the *News-Call Bulletin*. I had two routes in the morning. I delivered papers to 200 homes. You had to learn where everyone wanted their paper – in the mailbox, on the front porch, or on a certain spot in the driveway. At Christmas you knocked on doors with a nice card and collected tips."

Greg and his neighborhood buddies used to get tickets from the back of the Christopher Dairy milk cartons to go to Seals Stadium and watch the San Francisco Seals play. Interesting to note, Christopher Dairy Farms at 555 Fulton, was owned by San Francisco's 34th mayor, George Christopher.

"My gang and I would get a quart of soft drink and be out in the parking lot sometimes during batting practice. Balls would come over and we'd keep the balls and then go watch the game. And we used to go everywhere on the bus. We'd go out to the City-owned public swimming pool in North Beach and then head back home. I could really swim. My dad swam like a rock but my mom knew how to swim."

Greg had a lineup of scout aquatic merit badges which included: lifesaving, swimming, rowing and canoeing.

"When I was 15/16 I was on the staff at Camp Royaneh, which is a premier scouting camp near the town of Cazadero in Sonoma County. I really looked forward to that camp. We were scouts on the staff, and we were doing this for free but we were the bigshots. We were in charge of the swimming in general, the lifeguards and teaching the boys how to swim. We had to wake up early and go to the pump room and get the chlorine and make sure all the pH levels were right. We had to clean the pool and do all the maintenance work for it. They had a military-type mess hall where everybody ate. We would saunter in late and we were the bigshots with the younger scouts. 'Can I sit here?' 'Yes, please sit here!' We ate all that up. It was a two-week camp and I happened to be there when my dad's troop was there. I played the bigshot with my dad's troop and I loved that!"

Greg remained involved in scouting throughout his childhood.

"At a certain age, you were no longer in the Boy Scouts. If you wanted to continue, you went into the Explorers. When I was in high school, the San Francisco Police Department created an Explorer Post and I was in that. First we met at the old Police Academy in Golden Gate Park and then they built 850 Bryant Street, where everything is now, and we had our meetings there."

Membership in an Explorer Post is for qualified teens ages 14-21. Kids 18-20 are encouraged to be additionally attending college. The purpose is to aid the local police department with serving and protecting the public. Another goal is to help promote better relations between the police and young people. There is extensive training, riding with Patrol Officers is required as is helping with needed community services.

"We'd be in training and all of a sudden, someone would come in that was arrested. When he left the room we would be asked to describe what he was wearing – was he wearing a jacket, was he wearing a

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Page 10 (privately sponsored)

shirt, what color were his pants? It was, in a way, a police officer recruiting tool. We had our own identification cards."

When Greg was in high school he joined Balboa's Junior ROTC. He did that in his sophomore and junior years and became a Company Commander. In JROTC, a Company Commander is responsible for the training, discipline, efficiency, welfare and administration of the company. They are the link between the cadets and the Army Instructor and are essentially responsible for everything the company does or fails to do.

"In the last half year I was with JROTC, there was a falling out between my Sergeant and myself. So I left and took physical education instead."

Greg did not do the popular D.A. (duck's ass or duck's tail) haircut. He wore a flattop. But he did listen to lots of rock 'n' roll, which shocked his father.

"When I was a baby, my dad and mom would have friends over and they would listen to classical music. They loved classical music. If I started crying, they would turn the volume up and drown me out. So I liked classical music until I fell in love with rock 'n' roll and my dad couldn't understand what happened to me!"

Following high school, Greg wanted to earn some income before he entered the military. He went to work for Woolworth's Warehouse for six months.



"Originally, I wanted to join the Marines, but my dad said, 'If you want to eat out of a can and sleep out of a foxhole, be my guest. But if you want three squares, warm food and a warm place to sleep, join the Navy.' Of course my Uncle Gene was in the Navy so all of these things made the Navy my choice.

"I joined the Navy in October of 1962. When I joined I had three choices of what I wanted to do. I chose engineman, machinist mate or radioman. You have a battery assessment (that's ten multiple-choice subtests designed to assess your job placement and training by measuring your skills and natural aptitude in math, science, language and technical knowledge) when you first join the Navy and I scored very high on the Morse code because I had to learn the Morse code when I was in the Boy Scouts. So, I became a radioman which did interest me.

"First I went to boot camp and training at The Naval Training Center San Diego (NTC San Diego). Radio school was six months, also in San Diego. I learned radio procedure at the time, teletype was the big thing. I learned how to type and I learned Morse code again. We had two

classes a day, an hour and a half each class, and all they taught us was Morse code. I still remember Morse code. I'll never forget it.

"When school was over, my orders came in. My first set of orders was for the communication station in the Panama Canal Zone. I thought this was great because I could get a ship out of the West Coast and I

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Page 11 (privately sponsored)

could get to Japan. That would be a WestPac cruise." (WestPac cruise refers to a deployment to the Western Pacific Ocean.)

"The same day my orders came in they were cancelled. So I was without orders for two weeks, which meant cleaning barracks and other mundane things. My new orders came in and I was to proceed to the Naval Communication Station in Asmara, Ethiopia. Where the heck is Ethiopia? I had no idea!"

Asmara was under British administration from 1941 until Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia in 1952 and it was the site of Kagnev Station, a U.S. telecommunications base from 1942 to 1977. The mission of the Naval Communication Station in Asmara included: providing communications to and from ships and forces afloat; providing ships and forces afloat with a point of entry into the Naval Communication System and the Defense Communication System, both worldwide in scope; and providing specific communication services to ships and forces afloat in the general geographical area East and South of Suez. Additionally, the station provided logistical support and technical assistance to Navy ships visiting the Port of Massawa, located on the Red Sea approximately seventy miles east of Asmara.

"I was stationed there for 18 months and what an interesting time I had getting to Ethiopia.

"When I left San Diego, I had to report to the receiving station in Norfolk, Virginia. From there I was supposed to pick up transportation to Ethiopia. Well, I caught a flight on a C-130, a four-engine prop plane that flew over the Atlantic. Halfway through the flight, they posted a sailor at the window watching the engines. Apparently, there was something wrong with one of the engines. The plane was full of cargo and we were sitting along the side of the plane on these webbed seats. We stopped at the Azores and refueled. Then I wound up being in the municipality of La Roda, Spain, for a week and a half. Then I caught another hop to Naples, Italy. I was in Naples and the barracks were actually on the city streets of Naples - literally, you walk out the door and you are in Naples. So the officer in charge wanted to see my passport. I said, 'I don't have a passport.' He said, 'Well, how did you get here?' And I said, 'By military hop and on military bases you don't need a passport.' 'Well,' he stated, 'you need one now. Let me have your birth certificate.' 'I don't have my birth certificate with me because I showed it to you when I joined the Navy.' Bottom line, I needed a certified birth certificate. I wrote home. 'Mom, can you get me a certified birth certificate?'

"The mail was slow but I finally got that, and then I got my passport at the American Consulate in Naples. Then I was told I had to go to Rome to get a visa to go to Ethiopia. By that time, there were another two guys that met up with me that were also going to the same station in Ethiopia. So the three of us took a train from Naples to Rome in civilian clothes and reported to the Consulate. We had to wait a couple of days to get those visas. The Navy furnished us with a hotel where we stayed. We did some sightseeing: the Colosseum and the Pantheon. Altogether I was in Italy a month or a month and a half. From Rome, we flew Ethiopian Airlines and we stopped in Athens. Then we went on to Ethiopia. When we landed, I thought oh, wow, a modern airport just like SFO. Great! Then we get on this Navy bus and they took us to the Post. I thought oh my God, these are pages right out of National Geographic. It is one thing to see it in a magazine but to see it in reality. I was stunned by it as well as educated.

"We lived on an Army Post. The Navy had four and a half of the barracks in the Army Post. We used all the Army facilities - the chow hall, the medical - but we had our own receiving and transmitting sites. We would take a bus and go out to the receiving station. They had an Armed Forces radio station and they took requests. You'd call and they'd ask, 'What unit are you with?' 'I'm with the Navy.' Well, they wouldn't play it. They were hardnose. So we told them, 'Hey, you either play our songs or we are going to take your transmitter off the air.' The Army guys laughed about that, 'Yeah, right!' We got on the teletype and typed to our transmitting site, which was right next to the Army radio transmitter and they said, 'Yeah, no

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Page 12 (privately sponsored)

problem.' Then they walked over to the Army radio transmitter, punched two buttons and the radio station popped off the air. The next thing you know, our songs were being played. Service rivalry all the time!

"I did get to be buddies with some of the guys in the Army. An Army friend of mine and I bought a jeep together. Oh, I had lots of transportation. A Navy guy and I were partners on a motorcycle, and we were also partners on a 1950 Ford. I could get to wherever I wanted to go. One time I was on the motorcycle and I was riding out in what I thought would just be country. I go over the hill and suddenly I am riding through this village, a village that was all huts and the people didn't have any shoes. I didn't stop. I kept moving along. But again, I learned something about how many people live and it made me appreciate what I had. I still think about that.

"Ethiopia was land-based, shore duty. After Ethiopia, my next duty station was aboard a Navy Cruiser out of Norfolk, the USS Newport News (CA-148). I had a 30-day leave in between and on the plane home, we had a 24-hour layover in Athens, so I saw the Parthenon. I actually had to spend more money than I had to get a ticket to fly home. 'Hey, Mom, I'm short a few bucks!'

"Once I got aboard my next duty station, I immediately went through a couple of pairs of shoes because on a ship you have a hatch, and you have to step over the hatch to keep on going. Well, I was used to just walking on a flat surface, so I would scrape my shoe against the lip and wrinkle my shoes until I got used to it. I couldn't wear those shoes for inspection and had to buy another pair and do all this polish. I learned."



**The USS Newport News (CA-148).** (Public domain photo.)

In April of 1965, the Dominican Civil War erupted. Also known as the April Revolution, the Civil War took place between April 24, 1965, and September 3, 1965, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. It began when civilian and military supporters of the overthrown democratically elected president Juan Bosch ousted the militarily installed president Donald Reid Cabral from office. U.S. military leaders deployed troops to support anti-Bosch forces to both prevent a communist takeover and to protect American lives and property. On April 29, 1965, Newport News sortied from Norfolk to Santo Domingo, where she was flagship for Commander Joint Task Force 122. Included among Greg's specific duties was "jamming the radio station which rebels had gotten hold of." Newport News remained on station off Santo Domingo until command was shifted to the Army ashore in the Dominican Republic, leaving in May.

By the time Greg returned to Norfolk, he decided he would not stay in the Navy when his enlistment was up. "I decided I would not make a career out of it. It just didn't suit me."

"While I was stationed in Norfolk, a fellow I was stationed with had gotten married. His wife was one of seven Broich sisters who were from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Jerry said to me, 'Hey, I'm going to see my wife in Pennsylvania this weekend and she's got some sisters. Why don't you just ride along with me, so I have someone to talk to.' That's a four/five-hour drive to Lancaster from Norfolk. I told him, 'I don't want to go. I'll be imposing on them.' And he said, 'Oh, they'll love to have you.' So I decided to go.

"We went to a movie with Jerry and his wife Peggy, Joan, the sister I was supposedly being set up with, and Peggy and Joan's younger sister, Lynne. I spent most of the time talking to Lynne because Joan thought I was just another one of Jerry's weirdo buddies. But I liked Joan from the start. So each time Jerry headed to Lancaster, I went with him. If Jerry had duty, he gave me the keys to his car, 'go and visit,' he told me. I persisted and by then Joan had decided I was okay!

"I proposed to Joan in Lancaster. She worked for Hamilton Watch in Lancaster. I picked her up for lunch, took her to McDonald's, big spender, and I proposed to her there and she said, 'Yes!'

"I got out of the Navy, March 2, 1966, before Joan and I married. I stayed with Joan's parents for a month and then I headed home to find employment. Joan had a Nash Rambler and I got her to trade that in and I bought a 1955 Chevrolet Convertible and drove that out here. Joan put a lot of stuff in the trunk so we'd have pots and pans, and other useful things for our future home. I lived with my parents until Joan and I married. I got a job with a Standard Station pumping gas. Then my sister's friend's father was a Chevron Dealer and he needed someone, so I got a job there. Joan and I were married on September 3, 1966, in Lancaster, and I want to state for the record, I knew she was the 'one' immediately.

"I drove with my parents out to the wedding. They had bought a brand new Chevelle Convertible. After Joan and I married, my parents drove back and Joan and I flew to California. I went to work the next day – no honeymoon until we had some money in the bank.

"But here's a sweet story. As I mentioned, I proposed to Joan at McDonald's in Lancaster. That McDonald's ended up becoming a jewelry store when the first McDonald's moved into another space a little further down. For our 50th wedding anniversary, I called that jeweler, in our former McDonald's restaurant, and said 'I would like to have something made. I would like to have the State of Pennsylvania with Golden Arches on it and a diamond where Lancaster would be. I gave that to Joan to celebrate our wonderful 50 years together – and that number is climbing!'"

The couple first lived in one of the Country Club Apartments in Westlake (a district in Daly City).

"We lived in a one-bedroom apartment and I worked for Standard Oil Company of California. Our first daughter Christy was born at that apartment. Whenever I made a gas delivery to the Chevron Station right there in Westlake, I'd call Joan, Joan put Christy in the stroller and walked to this hamburger joint we liked. We just had the one car. But we didn't mind.

"The apartment got to be too small for us and someone at work had an apartment building in Pacifica with a vacancy, and that's when we first discovered Pacifica. It was 1969 and our apartment was on Adobe Drive. In 1971, my grandfather gave us \$1,000 to put down on the home we still live in now and I love living in Pacifica. It's like being out in the country but it's close to everything. My grandfather told me in the old country he would have given me a piece of land. My grandfather went through so much in his life and he never lost his kindness."

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Page 14 (privately sponsored)

Greg and Joan's three daughters: Christy, Julie and Stephanie all went to Linda Mar Elementary, followed by Terra Nova High School. Greg's sister Ellen and her husband William Kirrane also moved to Pacifica.

"My sister used to work for Pacifica Parks, Beach and Recreation as did my brother-in-law."

"In August of 1978, I went to work for Ryder Truck Rental. I was a heavy-duty truck mechanic. I did everything and anything on a truck. I became a foreman, a journeyman diesel mechanic, a salaried foreman, a branch maintenance supervisor, and then I went to work for Ryder Transportation Services as a branch maintenance manager in San Francisco, then a branch maintenance supervisor in San Jose, then a Technician IV – responsible for diagnosing and repairing medium to heavy-duty trucks and trailers, and I did preventative maintenance inspections and repairs. Over the years I quit Ryder twice, but I retired out of Ryder Fleet Management Solutions in May of 2011 as a journeyman diesel mechanic. I went back to being a mechanic on the floor because it was an 8-hour job instead of 12 or more. I liked being a mechanic. I liked the hands-on work. That was true about me even when I was a kid.

"I remember one time when my uncle came over, I was 7, and I was out front and I had torn the vacuum cleaner apart. He said to my parents, 'Do you know what Greg is doing?' 'Oh yeah,' my mom said. 'He is going to try and fix it.' I told my mom, 'If you order this and this it will work.' They did and it worked."

Greg and Joan have nine grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.



**Greg and Joan on their 50th anniversary, Pacifica, CA, September 3, 2016.**

"Joan and I had three daughters, and each daughter had three children – giving us five grandsons and four granddaughters. Did I introduce them to Russian foods? Of course! This past weekend there was a bridal shower for my grandson and his fiancée, and she loves crepes. There is a Russian food called blini. It's a thin, tiny pancake. I made them for the bridal shower. I learned to how to do this from my grandmother.

"After I make them, I roll each one on a fork (like a blintz), put those on a serving platter and then each person unrolls a blini and puts what they want on it: syrup or jam, or sour cream, or... There are so many choices. I used to make the piroshkies but Joan makes those now and she does a great job. I still fry them! But it's not just my side of the family's kitchen specialties that we taught our children and grandchildren

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Page 15 (privately sponsored)

how to make; there is also Joan's family. Her background is Pennsylvania Dutch and her chicken pot pie, just to name one, is sensational."

The hardest moment for the Stepanenkos came in September of 2017 with the death of their eldest daughter Christy. It's Christy's son Stephen and his wife Alexandra that made Greg and Joan first-time great-grandparents.

"With my children, my grandchildren, my great-granddaughter and any other greats, one of my goals, besides just enjoying everyone, is to teach them to be honest, to have situational awareness, to weigh their options and most especially, don't follow the regular road. Don't follow the trend. Take the offshoot. See what else is available. Try to find a way to do what you love doing – and be a good volunteer."



**Greg at home in Pacifica, March 18, 2025. (Jean Bartlett photo.)**



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author. Jean's writing has been recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "connecting community and preserving local history."

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