

# A MODEL VETERAN

**T**here are some chapters in life so integral to your story that, no matter how long ago they were or how long they lasted, they stay with you forever. Many people try to recapture or preserve those memories, by joining alumni associations or by attending reunions, for example.

For **Robert Eberlein**, a Mishawaka, IN Branch 820 member, one such special chapter in his life was his military service, specifically when he served as a striker on the ammunition ship *USS Nitro AE-23* for 18 months during the Vietnam War. Long after he left the service and embarked on his three-decade career as a letter carrier, to keep up with alumni of



Robert Eberlein

the ship, Eberlein founded and then served as president and then vice president of an association for fellow crewmembers of the *USS Nitro AE-2* and *AE-23*.

For the names of the ships, “A” is for ammunition ship, while “E” stands for auxiliary. These two specific vessels would supply other ships of the fleet. “You cannot take an ammunition ship into combat because it’s basically a floating bomb,” Eberlein said. “You cannot take an oiler that’s the refiller to a battle, because once that’s empty, that’s basically an empty gas can.”

The auxiliary ships “repair, they refuel and they rearm the ‘glory ships’—the battleships, the submarines, the aircraft carriers,” Eberlein continued. “Those ships take the fight to the enemy, thus there are models of them.”

The *USS Nitro AE-2* was commissioned in 1921 and decommissioned in 1946 after World War II, while the *USS Nitro AE-23*—on which Eberlein served beginning in 1967—was commissioned in 1959, decommissioned in 1995, and scrapped in 2011.

About 10 years ago, he discovered that some association members had embarked on creating a model of the *Nitro AE-23*, but “they all quit” before construction had gotten underway, Eberlein said. “And so, I figured there has to be a reason why.”

“The only reason why I took an interest in those two ships is because I served aboard the *AE-23*,” Eberlein said. As the association learned more about model ships, he noted, the members realized, “As far as we know, there are no models of [a U.S. Navy] ammunition ship,” adding that they wanted “to honor the ships and to honor the men who served.”

The two ships took many hours to create over the course of a year. “They are not to scale, but to represent the actual ships, I had the help of another *AE-23* crew member and two other veterans to complete them,” the carrier said. “They’re a good representation of the originals. If you were to see it, you’d say, ‘OK, that’s what an ammunition ship looked like.’”

Both models are 26.5 inches long, 9.5 inches wide and 8 inches high, Eberlein said.

Eberlein initially contacted a fellow veteran who is a woodworker to describe what he wanted to do. They started with the base of it, the hull, for which they used a wooden model of a converted Liberty cargo ship from World War II, the same as the actual ship. The rest of the *AE-23* model was made from photographs from the pub-

lic domain and some blueprints that were found.

“We figured out why nobody finished it,” he said. “Because the superstructure—that’s where the men eat, sleep, and it’s where the ship’s offices are for the different departments—[for] that model, it took over 50 individual cuts. I think that’s where everybody got messed up at, because they thought when you take a block of wood and you cut it, it ends up what it’s supposed to be, but it didn’t.”

“So, what it basically amounted to was a mathematical nightmare,” he added.

He and his veteran woodworker pal took the better part of a day to measure all the saw blades and cut the block of wood to form the ship accurately, then Eberlein took it home, began assembling it, and painted the base blue. Another veteran who taught art at a local college helped artistically and made it look like there were propellers in the water. And one more veteran friend, who had served on the ship the year before Eberlein, helped make it look like there were moving “violent waves” on top of the blue painted base using clear bathroom caulk and large plastic spoons. “We just spread it out and start beating away on it,” Eberlein said.

After about six months, the model was complete, including a radar mast, smoke stack on the top, a helicopter pad, a set of flags and the fleet emblem. He then began taking it to the yearly association reunions.

Soon after, the group got blueprints and photographs of the *AE-2*, and they spent the next six months creating a model of that ship. “We took it to one of the last reunions where the last of our World War II veterans were. I believe there were three of them still alive

The model of the  
USS *Nitro* AE-23



A photo of  
Eberlein from  
when he served  
on the USS  
*Nitro* AE-23



at that time,” Eberlein said, adding that the WWII veterans enjoyed taking photos with the model.

Lately, the group has been putting some finishing touches on the models, like painting a non-skid coating that is used on the deck of ships to prevent slipping, and adding details such as handrails and bombs; Eberlein and another veteran are scheduled to be featured on a local TV news station on Veterans Day with the models.

Serving on the *Nitro* was far from Eberlein’s only military service. Afterward, he attended the Naval Hospital

Corps “A” School and worked at Naval Hospital Great Lakes north of Chicago in Illinois and then at Sausley Field in Pensacola, FL. After he was out of the military, he was hired by the Postal Service as a letter carrier. A decade after leaving the military, he joined the Navy Reserve and was reassigned to the Marines in South Bend, IN, as a Navy medic and then was assigned to Naval Hospital Twentynine Palms in California during Operation Desert Storm.

Eberlein, who retired from the Postal Service in 2004, keeps busy. “Now we have time to go out for community service,” he says of retirement, which includes serving as the director of communications for the local chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America and being a member of the Military Funerals Honor Guard in Mishawaka. Many years, as part of those veterans groups, he’ll speak at school or senior community events.

The two models were a project that Eberlein was proud to be part of. “You build this for the love of it,” he said.

“This is the only way to honor the two ships, and so the general public can see actually what the ships look like.”

In the future, Eberlein hopes that the two ship models can make their way to military museums where they will be cherished.

Though it’s been many years since he’s been “haze gray and underway”—Navy speak for duty at sea on surface ships—his military ties endure. He compares his pride in the Navy and his ship to someone’s college alma mater. “You’re proud of your school just like you’re proud of being a Navy veteran. I am proud to have served aboard the *Nitro*. I am proud to have served as a hospital corpsman,” he said.

Veterans support each other in whatever endeavors they want to undertake, Eberlein said, adding that the *Nitro* AE-23 crewmembers like to get together because of their connection to the vessel. “We ate, slept, and we lived aboard that ammunition ship. And it becomes part of you,” he said. “You can’t forget it.” **PR**