

This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at [ron.nakamoto\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:ron.nakamoto@yahoo.com).

## LARRY WRAY



You know me as your Branch Treasurer and can find me behind the receiving line table collecting membership dues or writing checks. Here is my story:

“I was adopted at birth, my natural parents having decided to go their separate ways. My adoptive mother owned a flower shop, and my stepdad was a college professor and rancher in Lawton, Oklahoma. Consequently, I had a very ecumenical education. By twelve, I could muck stalls and arrange flowers with equal alacrity.

“In high school I worked hard and took extra classes, which paid off in a statewide exam when I competed and won a Navy Reserve Officer Training Corp military scholarship. One day in February I was summoned to the principal’s office over the school intercom system. On my way to the office, all I could think of was that someone in

my family must have been in an auto accident or worse. When I got to the school office, the secretary handed me the telephone with a very serious look on her face. Expecting bad news, I was shocked when my congressman came on to tell me that he had used up his six allotted appointments to West Point, but he still had appointments to the Air Force and Naval Academy if I wanted one. I was speechless, so he went on to say that I had fifteen seconds to decide. Go Navy!

“My senior year, the Naval Academy Chapel Choir made a trip out west and I got my first view of California. It was March 1971 and we went to sing in the Easter service at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. Then it was on to Disneyland and a party on the beach. I was smitten and chose a destroyer home-ported in San Diego as my first duty assignment after graduation. The Vietnam War was in full swing, and it wasn’t long before I found myself on the naval gun line off the coast of South Vietnam. It was pretty uneventful although we were shot at a few times from the shore. It is harder than you think to hit a moving ship from the coast.

“When my ship got back to San Diego, the admiral in charge of personnel came on board and myself and a few other promising officers were to detach early and go to Department Head School in Newport, Rhode Island. I was selected and was to report in October 1973. Fate again intervened, in the person of Henry Kissinger. Henry made a deal with the Shah of Iran to sell him surplus destroyers. Part of the deal was an agreement to train Iranian naval officers in Newport, Rhode Island. I got bumped and sent to a training command in San Diego for three years. I still haven’t forgiven Henry.

“The rest of my five-year naval career was uneventful although I did manage to earn a Masters degree from USC and meet and marry my wife Jini. It was infatuation at first glance, at least for me. We met at happy hour at a restaurant on the water in San Diego. I wouldn’t have even been there except that my roommate chided me into coming along. The attraction was free food and of course, women. Once I screwed up my courage and started a conversation with my wife-to-be, my roommate decided to barge in. Fortunately, Jini brought along a friend who diverted my roommate. The following year, Jini and I were married and my roommate was best man. We have been happily married for some forty-two years and have three children and have three children and four grandchildren.



*Navy Lieutenant Larry with his bride Jini in 1977*

“Three months after we were married, I resigned from the Navy and went to work for General Dynamics in San Diego. I was hired because the company was desperate to find somebody who knew something about the Navy to work in their Advanced Systems Group on a new product the company hoped to be the future of the company. That product turned out to be the cruise missile. It was a revolutionary idea. If only the company could get the government to pay for design and development. They had already struck out with the Army, Air Force and Navy. Fortunately, a Navy liaison officer

in the bowels of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) listened to the pitch and agreed to provide \$200K to build and fly a prototype. However, the missile had to be redesigned so that it could come out of a torpedo tube since any funds he spent had to be Navy related.

“I spent the next several years on this missile project. We got just enough money to keep the project alive, but nothing more. That all changed in 1981 when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, which, of course, belonged to the British. The pesky Argentines then sunk the British flagship, HMS Sheffield, with an Exocet missile they had bought from France (some things never change). Margaret Thatcher had just come into power and retaliated with overwhelming force. The use of the Exocet cruise missile set off a firestorm in Washington where the military was called in by Congress to explain why billions were spent every year on defense, but nobody had come up with a simple missile that could sink a ship. The Navy let it be known forthwith that it had just such a missile in development for years. That obscure Navy captain at DARPA became an admiral overnight, and the Tomahawk Cruise Missile soon was on most Navy ships, even carriers. It was five years of hard work vindicated.

“As with the DARPA captain, my career at General Dynamics took off. By 1985, I was promoted to Director of Systems Engineering. My main challenge now was to convince NASA to accept the Centaur rocket for use in the Space Shuttle. A rocket was needed to get satellites from low earth orbit (200 miles up) where the Shuttle flies to geostationary (23,000 miles) orbit. I was at Cape Kennedy making a presentation to NASA on the benefits and risks of the Centaur rocket. At lunchtime, we went out to watch the Shuttle launch. It was the day the Challenger went down. It was the most horrific experience of my life, and it changed my future.

“Facing extreme criticism for the Challenger disaster, NASA figured the best way to get the press off their back was to make a big deal about dumping the “cryogenic bomb” that General Dynamics was peddling. This caused the company to sell the San Diego division to the Martin Corporation. The writing was on the wall and not wanting to move to Denver, I found new employment with Ford Aerospace in Palo Alto in 1987. My job at Ford Aerospace was rewarding and fun, but very demanding. I was hired to manage the satellite assembly, integration and test, a 7/24 operation. After six interesting, exhausting but fulfilling years I was offered an opportunity to work in Fort Wayne, Indiana or Cannes, France. I somehow managed to keep a straight face and mumbled something about consulting with my better half.

“So it was that I wound up in Cannes with my wife and three children in 1993. It was tough duty, but somebody had to do it. Merci beaucoup!! After returning from France, I spent five years in program management before being asked to take over satellite integration and test once again in 2000, following a series of setbacks in the factory.

“Two years later, in 2002, I was rewarded with a promotion to Vice President of Product Assurance. I spent the remainder of my career trying to solve the problems that had bedeviled me when I was responsible for building and testing satellites. We made a lot of headway and wound up with a third of the worldwide commercial satellite market. I retired in January 2014, following my 65th birthday after over 26 years with Ford Aerospace and its successor, Space Systems Loral. “To make a clean break (and keep the phone from ringing) my wife and I took a cruise ship to Australia the day after I retired. While on the thirty-four- day cruise, I got an email from a hitherto unknown half-brother. My natural parents had gone their separate ways, married others, and raised families. Meeting my half-brothers on my father’s side was a “closing the circle” experience. Suddenly, I had brothers and sisters. I was welcomed into their families like a long-lost sibling. For someone who had always wondered about his heritage, it was thrilling to learn that my father’s family first settled in Jamestown in 1624, and my mother’s family helped found Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1634. Life is ever more interesting. Not surprisingly, I have become interested in genealogy.

“I joined SIR in 2015 and have been the treasurer for Branch 35 since 2016. I enjoy the tennis group and the book reading group. It’s a great organization. I am in the giving back part of my life. I have found this to be very rewarding.

“You have to have something to retire to, not just from.”