

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@yahoo.com](mailto:ron.nakamoto@yahoo.com).

## DON MATTSON



Did you know that I drove the lead sports car in the last Mille Miglia open-road motorsport endurance race? (*Editor's note: The Mille Miglia was an annual, open-road motorsport speed and endurance (1,617 km) race in Italy started in 1927. The race route went from Brescia to Rome and back.*)

Did you know I also organized, managed and played in the first night baseball game in Milan, Italy between two U.S. Army teams? It was memorable to witness several thousand Italian soldiers marching to their seats to watch. More later...

My grandparents were Swedish speaking and immigrated to the US from Finland in the early 1900's. My grandfather was a carpenter in San Francisco and my mother's dad came here to work in the mines of Colorado, eventually starting a bar and pool hall with a few "guest rooms". Both grandfathers died relatively young, leaving wives and children to make their own way. My father had an early interest in radio and went to work at Pacific Telephone at the age of 18 and retired 45 years later. He retired as a senior manager, responsible for all the telephone traffic and phone operators in Northern California.

I was born at the peak of the depression. When I was five my brother was born, and my folks bought a home and moved to the Parkside district of San Francisco. In those days, sand dunes surrounded our vista as paved streets just started to crisscross the neighborhood. Ice, coal and vegetables were delivered by horse and wagon. I went to West Portal School just above where the Twin Peaks tunnel was bored. Life was quite simple as we walked to school and played in the street. I have always enjoyed many sports and never met a ball that I did not like. In Junior High I competed in the broad jump and in high school won every dual meet for three years and eventually the City Championship with a jump of 22 feet. I spent several summers picking fruit, collecting eggs, feeding chickens and cows, and doing chores on my uncle's farm in Napa. Hard work on a farm kept this city boy sensibly grounded throughout his life.

At age 12 my next-door neighbor and I decided that we were both going to UC Berkeley and followed the Bears, the New York Yankees, and the SF Seals Baseball Teams. I played with chemistry sets and decided to major in Chemistry and minor in Math at Berkeley. I joined the Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) Fraternity (focuses on leadership development) and lived near campus all four years. Midway through, I realized that while I was a great lab technician, I did not enjoy the precision of the science, so I switched to Industrial Technology and Management and found my home. I played baseball as a freshman but eventually focused on Track and Field, earned my letters and went to the NCAA and AAU finals where I placed 7<sup>th</sup>. My best jump in college was 23 feet 11 inches.

Unemployment was at 13% when I graduated and with a military draft looming, I was accepted to the Navy Supply Officers School but was drafted into the Army before they could give me a deferment. I trained with the 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry in the cold at Fort Riley, Kansas and then went to Artillery Officer Candidate School (OCS) in the heat at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. With daily physical training over a full year, I was in the best physical condition of my life.

I landed in Vicenza, Italy as a Forward Observer for the Honest John Missiles which were the first deployed Atomic Weapons for the Southern European Task Force. Headquarters needed a Motor Officer, so I was assigned and moved to Verona, running a motor pool of 500 wheeled vehicles along with a 21-car taxi service for VIPs. As the Junior Officer, I routinely pulled all the extra duties like managing the teams in every sport, honor guard commander, scouting, charities etc. It was fun.



*Maneuvers – Germany,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division*

I developed a lifelong love for Italy and enjoyed many unique experiences like living with an Italian family and learning their language. I was always amazed at how my friend Vittorio was able to shape the truth. We were in Milano heading back home when we found the road at Brescia closed because it was the last section of the Mille Miglia. In Italian, he told the race officials that I was a doctor and a woman in childbirth was going to lose her baby if I could not get to the base hospital. The race officials told me to pull up behind a fancy Mercedes (I had a 1956 MGA). Eventually Vic told me that I had to drive really fast because in two and a half minutes the first car in the race would start. Fortunately, it was a “Fiat 500 Cinquecento”. It was a scary 60-mile, two lane, windy route. Every little town thought I was the first car and wanted to touch us while I was speeding through. Early the next morning, the race favorite, in a high-performance car, “A de Portago”, died when he had to swerve from hitting a small child. His car

flipped over and killed several others which ended the dangerous, high-speed, open road race in Italy forever.

I returned to Berkeley after my discharge from the Army and graduated from the MBA program with emphasis in Industrial Management in 1958. I began a 10-year career with Eitel-McCullough, a vacuum and microwave tube company. I started in R&D and rapidly moved through several positions, eventually into production operations. My brother and I had intended to eventually start a technology business but unfortunately, he died before we could make it happen. Seeking something more challenging I joined Memorex in manufacturing management and after a few years became Division Manager of the Disk Pack Division. We became the most profitable division in the company. I was lured away to Verbatim as VP Manufacturing and helped create the highest volume floppy and mini disk manufacturer in that business. My entrepreneurial juices led me to start Media Technology, specializing in making hard and thin film disks. With a lot of hard work and rapid growth we eventually sold the company and I looked for another opportunity. I joined Optical Data Corp in Beaverton, Oregon as CEO developing a writable and erasable optical disk using infrared absorbing dyes and a two-beam reader/writer/eraser. We had the company all but sold to Tandy Corp. (Radio Shack) but unfortunately discovered a fatal flaw in that there were no infrared absorbing dyes that would not soon fade when exposed to natural light. We sold the technology to a chemical company. After eight years in Oregon we moved back home, and I started a consulting business in "Interim and Turnaround Management". Over the next several years I had assignments in the Bay Area, Colorado, Florida, Southern California, Monterrey Mexico, USSR, and France, many lasting a year or more.

One of my assignments was with InVision Technology in the Bay area. The company made Computed Tomography (CT) machines that scanned luggage for explosive materials. I managed manufacturing operations and designed and moved the factory to Newark, CA. In 2000, the company president called and asked me to join them as COO and take over all business operations. Barbara was tired of all my travels, so I accepted. I had to immediately lay off half of the employees as business was quite slow and airports were slow to adopt this very expensive equipment that provided passenger safety and improved security. "9/11" fundamentally changed that business case. Safety and security were now affordable.

The military had a saying "hurry up and wait", working with the government was the same. After months of waiting, TSA placed their order in February and wanted their order completed before December. I immediately moved the company to a seven-day, 24-hour operation, with intense hiring, training, outsourcing, supply chain fortification and development, etc. We met the challenge and for me it was my most satisfying job with everyone highly motivated and pulling together as a team.

Obviously, it was a rewarding experience with the company leading all NASDAQ companies in growth for two years with sales over \$435 million with over 1,000 employees. We sold the company to GE in December 2004 and I retired. After taking a five-month, ten country trip

around the world, I accepted a position as Chairman of the Board of Laser Card, the maker of a highly secure, optical storage card used in personal ID Cards including the INS Green Card. We pushed hard for a US ID Card but was ahead of the times. We sold the company in 2011 and I was able to focus on my golf game. I played softball for 25 years and golf on and off since I was 12. My lowest index was an 11 and my best round was at a ProAm where I shot a 79 with 12 pars and a birdie.

I met my wife Barbara in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade when she sat in front of me in homeroom. We were in many classes together through high school but did not date until we were in college. Only a few of us from HS went to Cal and we soon became a twosome. We rekindled our relationship after Army duty and were married when I started to work in 1958. Barbara was an elementary school teacher, teaching at Dudley Stone elementary school in the Haight-Ashbury area of SF. We have two daughters, Karen and Judy. Karen, a lawyer, married, with two children and worked for a US Senator in DC for 12 years. She is the Legal Counsel for the Community Colleges in Oregon and now resides in San Diego. Judy, married, two children and worked at Adobe and InVision Technologies, in QA and Project Management. My wife and I now live in a 1,000 square foot cottage we recently built on our property with our daughter and her family living in the home I oversaw building in Los Altos Hills. Talk about the ideal babysitter setup. We have travelled to Europe and Asia extensively, some along with job assignments and later as a decompression period between consulting assignments. We have also visited the Hawaiian Islands as a family most every year since 1965.

My father-in-law was a SIR member and I was able to meet other men with similar interests and a wide variety of work experiences. I was pleased to see these biographies started and how they have opened many doors for rich conversation. I'll end by mentioning as Big Sir in 2009, I initiated and implemented the member photo directory that helps us associate faces with names. I challenge you with what you have done (or can do) to help this organization.



*Living the good life on the beaches of Waikiki*

Sports jock, Army officer, baseball manager, sports car racer, CEO, highly compensated consultant, husband, father, grandfather, Big Sir, and now a laid-back retiree. I've worked hard, travelled extensively and say to you **Andiamo via!** (Let's get going!)