

A 'Welcome Home' for Vietnam War Vets

Last year, a Navy Vietnam War veteran got the chance to be a part of a turnaround cruise conducted by the crew of the USS Constitution

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For Vietnam War veteran Jack Gardner, stepping aboard the USS Constitution, the Navy's oldest commissioned ship, was a "bucket list item." The Navy veteran's dream became a reality on June 17, 2022, after he was invited aboard for the 50-year commemoration of the end of the Vietnam War.

In spring 2021, Gardner, who served from 1970 to 1974, said he learned about the USS Constitution's turnaround cruise from a fellow Vietnam War veteran. At the time, Gardner, who left the Navy as a quartermaster 2nd class, was volunteering for a Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Special Olympics track meet.

"In the middle of our conversation, he told me the story about a recent experience he had during a turnaround cruise aboard the Constitution in Boston Harbor," Gardner said. "I thought I would never be able to pull that off."

The Vietnam War veteran explained to Gardner that he knew someone who could help him be a part of a one-day venture with the crew of the Constitution.

IT WAS 'BREATHTAKING'

Gardner, a Life member of VFW Post 5489 in Mashpee, Massachusetts, reached out to the retired captain who told him she would extend an invitation to him and his wife, Susan. The Gardners stepped aboard the ship, dubbed "Old Ironsides," on June 17.

"I remember saluting the ship's ensign, then asking permission to 'come aboard,' just like I was taught in boot camp and practiced for four years," said Gardner, who served aboard the USS Santa Barbara (AE-28). "I remember looking at the ship and thinking how breathtaking

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she was. It was everything I thought it would be.”

After entering the ship’s quarterdeck, Gardner said the captain and crew, dressed in early 19th-century naval uniforms, welcomed him and his wife aboard for the trip underway.

THANKS, FROM A ‘GRATEFUL NATION’

The crew of the Constitution, Gardner said, provided every Vietnam War veteran with a lapel pin from the United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration. The lapel pin, which commemorated the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, featured a bald eagle on the front. On the back of the pin, it read: “A Grateful Nation Thanks and Honors You.”

Gardner said it was an “honor and a privilege” to be a part of the Boston Harbor cruise. He added that the ship’s captain, Cmdr. Billie Farrell, declared that all 300 visitors aboard the ship were honorary crew members for the day.

“This was my very own ‘welcome home,’ ” Gardner said. “But, I wasn’t aboard the USS Constitution that day to represent myself. I was there to represent all who fought in the Vietnam War and the more than 58,200 service members who died.”

This article is featured in the 2023 January issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiwa](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.