

J. Edward Snyder, Jr., RADM, USN (Ret.)

J. Edward Snyder, Jr., RADM, USN (Ret.), Commanding Officer of USS New Jersey (BB-62) during the Vietnam War from 1967-69, passed away peacefully at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland on November 4, 2007 at 1300 hours. He is survived by his wife Mary Louise Snyder, his son J.



Edward Snyder III, his daughter Anne Gibson Snyder and his grandson Jesse Edward Stovall. He was 83 and died of pancreatic cancer. A private internment will be held at Arlington National Cemetery where he will rest with America's honored dead.

A popular message of hope and faith for cancer victims exemplifies how the Admiral faced his last battle. Title, "What Cancer Cannot Do", it reads, "Cancer cannot invade the soul, suppress memories, kill friendship, destroy peace, conquer the spirit, shatter hope, cripple love, corrode faith, steal eternal life or silence courage." The Admiral faced every one of these challenges with dignity, grace, class and courage and won them, as those who spoke with him over the past month will readily attest. He never complained and even kept much of his illness to himself rather than burden his family or friends.

J. Edward Snyder, Jr. was born October 23, 1924 in Grand Forks, North Dakota, the son of a Methodist Minister. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1944 (64th in a class of 914) and his first assignment was as signals officer on the battleship USS Pennsylvania. He served aboard destroyers and cruisers and served 52 months of consecutive sea duty before receiving his first shore billet, participating in many of the historic battles of World War II. Many decades later as CO of the New Jersey, he would recall that first assignment and describe himself as an "Enswine" with that self-deprecating humor that became his hallmark over his long life and even at the end. When asked how he was doing in the hospital during his final illness, he responded, "Well I guess I must not be doing too well or they wouldn't have me in the hospital!" He said it with an obvious twinkle in his voice and impish relish that exemplified his direct, no-nonsense attitude while still having fun with people.

His Naval career was as remarkable as the man himself. In addition to his sea duty, he was a nuclear weapons supervisor at Los Alamos New Mexico Scientific Weapons Laboratory and a Polaris Missile Reentry Systems Officer with Lockheed. He attended the Naval Postgraduate school in Monterey, California, earned a Master's degree in Nuclear Physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and graduated from the Naval War College. Before becoming CO of the New Jersey, he was a specialist in oceanography and underwater engineering in the office of the secretary of the Navy. It was a field in which he would close his Naval Career when he was appointed Oceanographer of the Navy when elevated to flag rank.

Captain Snyder's attitude toward his men was evident to his New Jersey crew. With all his awesome responsibility, he always took time and made an effort to show his appreciation to his crew, especially the enlisted men. His loyalty to his ship and crew were legend. During the Vietnam deployment, he wrote detailed "Familygrams" describing our activities and adventures and had them printed up and distributed to the crew to send home to their families as an explanation of why it was important for them to be away from their homes and loved ones. He never failed to pay constant tribute to his crew and thank their families for

their sacrifices in giving up their men for so long to answer the call to duty and serve the cause of freedom, reflecting the ship's motto, "Firepower for Freedom."

Rather than remain in officer's country, the bridge or isolated in his quarters, he frequently roamed the ship and ate chow in the mess hall with the crew (going through the mess line like an ordinary seaman). He sat down to eat with the crew and asked about their lives and their families. It was not just polite conversation. An offhand comment by one crewman about the condition of the clothes returned by the ship's laundry seemed to be ignored but shortly after he returned to his cabin the Supply Officer was paged to the Captain to explain.

When famed comedian Bob Hope came aboard the New Jersey off the Vietnam Coast on Christmas Day 1969 to perform for the crew, Captain Snyder showed the personal human touch that characterized him by taking the time to send a telegram after the show to Bob's wife Dolores thanking her for sharing her husband on Christmas day to entertain his crew. But perhaps the most touching and largely unobserved example of his dedication to his men came when he suffered a hernia and rather than leave the ship and his crew to fly to Japan for treatment, he had the ship's surgeon perform the procedure aboard ship. He had a standing policy of celebrating crewmen's birthdays once a month by having the baker prepare a sheet cake with the name of every man who had a birthday that month written in frosting. Then just before noon chow, he ordered head-of-line privileges and a steak dinner for each birthday boy and joined them at a reserved table in the mess hall. Afterward he would personally cut the cake, giving each man the piece with his name on it and have the ship's photographer record the event, making sure every man got a copy of the photo which he would gladly sign if asked.

After a hernia operation you are in considerable pain for several days afterward and the LAST thing you should do is climb over the watertight hatches separating the ship compartments. When it came time to celebrate the men's birthdays, the Captain appeared at the mess hall as usual to honor his crew and celebrate after having climbed down man ladders and dozens of hatches from his quarters forward all the way aft to the mess deck and then back again. The pain and discomfort had to be excruciating as he slowly climbed over each hatch and up and down each ladder. Few men were aware of this gesture of a Captain for his men but it is just one of many reasons why J. Edward Snyder is as much an example of loyalty, dedication, leadership and service as the ship he had the honor to command.

Captain Snyder had little patience with officious bureaucrats and brass hats. His primary concern was always the welfare of men in uniform. During the Vietnam deployment he repeatedly arranged for small groups of Soldiers and Marines from combat troops ashore to visit the New Jersey for a few days. They got to enjoy a brief respite from the rigors and danger of combat and what to them were unimaginable luxuries—hot showers and meals daily and clean sheets in soft beds to sleep in. When a DOD PR hack got wind or what the Captain was doing he sent a sarcastic message criticizing the program and demanding Captain Snyder obtain official permission for such "public relations stunts."

The Captain fired off a quick response explaining his purpose was not PR but because "No one—including myself—has Mark I eyeball experience" with the conditions endured by ground forces and it was his desire to not only provide a respite to war weary troops but encourage the comradeship of those men and his crew so that when he sounded GQ early in the morning to aid forces ashore they would understand the crucial importance of Naval Gunfire Support in saving lives. That was a message the ground forces visiting New Jersey endlessly communicated to the crew often asserting they would not be alive except for the intervention of the New Jersey. Captain Snyder concluded his message by observing that he had no idea what was going on in " 'Disneyland East' [the Pentagon] and could care less." He signed off by noting that he informed DOD of his program (citing the date-time group of the message) and ending with a terse, "Nothing heard!"

When he relinquished command in August 1969, shortly after it was announced the ship would be decommissioned rather than redeployed back to Vietnam to support the troops we left behind, Captain Snyder observed in his change of command speech, “The New Jersey’s guns have been stilled the only way they could have been—from within.” You could see the admirals on the dais squirming at this slap at what years later was revealed to be a calculated political rather than a sound military decision. It was the kind of straight talk that characterized J. Edward Snyder, Jr., and the absolutely last thing he cared about was that attitude ensured he would never rise higher than Rear Admiral.

But his crew loved and adored him (which was returned by him without equivocation) and they would gladly, as the saying goes, follow him straight into the gates of hell itself. For them, the memory of “the skipper” (as he was always affectionately remembered) is and will remain the brightest star in the firmament of their memories.

Godspeed, fair winds and a following sea, Admiral.