

PML Action Hero: Dick Chilingarian

By Janet Gregory

Published May 2013 in *Pine Mountain Lake News*

Life is a bold and daring adventure for Dick “Chili” Chilingarian. Chili is a very fitting name for someone with a spicy sense of humor and hot sense of adventure.

Chili’s first quest started in high school when he joined the Navy to “see the world” as the advertising touted. It was 2 years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Chili may have thought it was to help “change” the world for the better.

Chili was assigned to the USS San Diego CL53, a light cruiser. “Light cruiser” may evoke images of a small craft but this was a serious anti-aircraft (AA) ship armed with 16 (5 inch / 127 mm) 38 caliber AA guns and 16 Bofors 40 mm AA guns. That’s a lot of fire power!

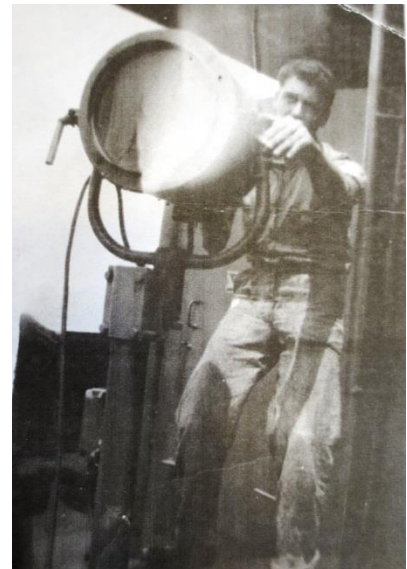
The USS San Diego is the second most decorated ship. Of the 21 major naval engagements in the Pacific theater, The San Diego was awarded 18 battle stars for its role and a proud boast of no loss of life. Chili participated in 14 of those engagements. It was “the unbeatable ship that nobody ever heard of” as one of Chili’s shipmates, Fred Whitmore wrote in his memoirs.

Chili worked on the bridge as a signalman. It was a critical role relaying messages for ship commanders at the front line. This was a world of visual communications, not electronics, voice and data. It was a “quiet” world of flags & lights positioned prominently to see and be seen, in communication and action.

The San Diego with Chili on board was the first major Allied warship to enter Tokyo Bay after the surrender of Japan. It was big enough to be impressive and provide a show of strength. The bombing of Hiroshima had occurred only 24 days prior and Allied Forces were not sure of Japan’s sincerity in the surrender. Unknown to Chili and the crew, USS San Diego was also considered small enough to lose if Japan was planning a surprise attack.

It was a tense time. The San Diego had been sitting about 100 miles off the coast of Japan for two weeks. Waiting. Wondering. The decision was made to send USS San Diego as the flagship. They proceeded warily toward Tokyo Bay, picking up two Japanese harbor pilots to help guide them in. There are mountains on both sides of the Bay and they could see white flags along each. They docked port side, tied up and waited out the night, not sure if they were sitting ducks or proud eagles.

Japan was honorable. The next day USS Missouri arrived and all the dignitaries were transferred to Japanese soil through The San Diego. With everything safe and secure USS San Diego pulled out allowing USS Missouri to dock for the signing of the surrender agreement the following day. The Missouri was selected because it was the namesake of President Truman’s home state. On Sept 2, 1945 General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral Chester Nimitz and eight Allies accepted and signed the surrender agreement. The USS San Diego was proud for its role and was on its way home.



Chili didn't recognize that he was part of history but the world was waiting for them when they pulled into San Francisco Bay under the Golden Gate Bridge. What a glorious sight that bridge was! They were home! Chili swore "I'll never go back out under that bridge again."

Four years in the Navy was enough. Chili was ready to embark on life's next chapter. He was born in San Francisco and decided to settle in the Bay Area after leaving the Navy. He landed a job as an apprentice printer and in six years earned his journeyman card.

Chili used the GI Bill to learn to fly and at age 25 he bought his first airplane, a Taylorcraft tail dragger, for a mere \$500! His second airplane was a Piper Cherokee that flew him & Ellie to Reno to get married. Airplane #3 was a Mooney, which Carol Simpson now owns. Ellie says she was "a nervous flier" and was happy to be on the ground but she took companion flying lessons and would go anywhere with Chili.



The joy of acceleration extended into automobiles. Chili owned numerous great cars including a Hudson, Jaguar, Triumphs and the rumor is true that his first visit to PML was in a Ferrari! His love of automobiles started with doing turn control at the local raceways, Laguna Seca & Sears Point (now Infineon). That evolved into getting behind the wheel and racing Triumphs, writing a column for the San Mateo Times on racing and later to selling sports cars. It is true that if you do what you love, it's not work!

A theme in his career was connecting people with things they needed or wanted. Chili was a talented sales professional, working in high end auto sales, insurance and the title business. He liked people and thought that he could sell anything. He met the love of his life, Ellie, while selling life insurance. Never did sell her that life insurance policy but did sell her on 42+ great years of marriage.

Airplanes, automobiles and Ellie were a great theme. They moved to Pine Mountain Lake in 1982 realizing the dream that you can actually live at an airport! Back then E45, Pine Mountain Lake Airport looked like a barren table top but they saw the beauty beyond. It has been 30 great years at Pine Mountain Lake. At first they thought the move was for retirement but soon found retirement to be elusive. They jumped back into the Title and escrow business. Chili and Ellie both got involved in numerous community activities and found retirement to be an enjoyably busy chapter in life. They love the Pine Mountain Lake community and the people. "The big plus is the people; they are a cut above the level of what you find elsewhere."

You can find Ellie working in the garden and Chili at "the Boys Club" most mornings. Part of PML today and part of World War II history is a PML Action Hero: Dick "Chili" Chilingarian.

