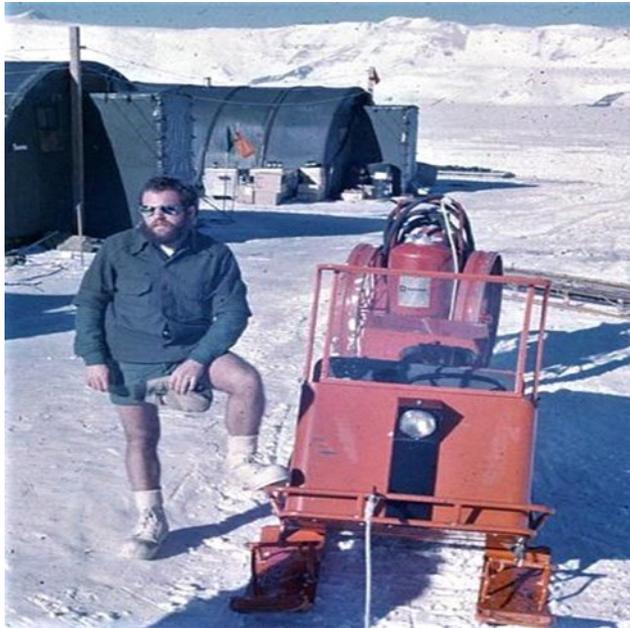


Stories of Honor

Navy veteran Earl Griffith helped save scientists in Antarctica

From the Read our 2021 Stories of Honor,
By CURT SYNNESS for the Independent Record Sept. 26, 2021



Navy AG3 Earl Griffith poses with a snow machine at MacGregor Glacier Antarctica, circa 1970

During Earl Griffith's first season as a Navy Aerographer's Mate at the former Hallett Station, Antarctica, 50 years ago, the facility hosted a couple of scientists who were studying penguins.

"Those two guys decided to take a little walk on the sea ice one day, not realizing that Antarctica has some of the strongest tides in the world," Griffith wrote in a recent email, recounting the incident from 1971. "I was working at the weather shack when the Chief walked by and asked, 'did you hear that?' Hear what? , says I. And then I heard a very faint 'Help!'"

It was a yell from the scientists, who were stranded out on the ice floe. But thanks to Griffith's quick thinking, skillful action (wearing in his trademark shorts) and a little luck, the two men lived to tell about it.



Helena Navy vet Earl Griffith served at Hallett Station, Antarctica, (bottom right) from 1971-73.
Photo from Antarctic Calm-S Network

Earl Griffith graduated from Great Falls Public High in 1963. He then enrolled at Montana State College (now Montana State University), graduating with a BS in Earth Science in 1968.

Griffith received his draft notice in August 1968, but “because I knew the head of the Great Falls draft board, my former boss at MPC, I managed to enlist in the Navy,” he recalled. “No running off to Mexico or Canada; take the oath and do your duty.”

But he “was tired of seeing all these kids from the inner cities go fight a war while the elite of that same country were attending (college) earning degrees in subjects of absolutely no value to their agrarian economy.”

Plus, the high seas were in his genes.

“My English born grandfather was in the British Navy for a short time. He had a very cool tattoo on his chest and stomach of a British ship of the line over the Union Jack, surrounded by a huge sea serpent,” Griffith, 76, related.

He took a delayed enlistment and went to San Diego's Naval Training Center in February 1969, during the midst of an epidemic of mononucleosis, pneumonia and meningitis.

He served as his boot camp Company commander, and afterwards stayed in a holding Company for college graduates waiting to get into OCS. Some of the 150-plus guys in the Company had been there for two years and they “essentially ran the NTC” as professionals doing engineering, assisting in the JAG corps, writing the station newspaper, etc.

Then he got sent to Naval Air Station Millington and arrived in Memphis at the height of the race riots there.

He shuffled about for a while, trying to get into OCS and attending various schools until a chance meeting with the Commandant of Naval Personnel at Naval Air Station, Jacksonville.

“I asked him point blank what an E-3 with a BS degree could do to get to the Ice,” he said. “And, so it was off to Antarctica after a test run at the Navy ... radar school at Patuxent River.”

Because he was striking for an aerographer's mate rating after electronics and radar schools, he wound up in VXE-6, the squadron that supported all Antarctic flight activities. Next, Griffith was transferred to Task Force 43, the Antarctic Command, where he took the test for Aerographer's Mate Third Class without the usual “A” school.

While waiting for the results, he was assigned to the McMurdo fire house, serving as the primary safety inspector of all the maintenance buildings at Mac, because of his degree.

After attaining AG3, he went to the weather shack and got sent to McGregor field camp to conduct weather observations.

“I had tea every morning at 0600 after my weather observation with James Kitching, the great paleontologist from South Africa,” he recounted. “Tough duty – report the weather every 3 hours from 0600 to 2400. Spent Christmas and New Year's 1970 there.”

At McGregor Glacier, a small glacier feeding the great Shackleton Glacier, Griffith rode an antiquated Polaris snowmobile and used a 300-pound Ansul fire extinguisher as a weight to check for crevasses.

Next, he received orders to Hallett and arrived there on Jan 11, 1971. Then came the pair of scientists' fateful cry for help from out on the sea.

“I grabbed the old 10X50 binocs and got on the roof of the weather shack and spotted these two guys trying

to get back to shore by jumping from one moving ice floe to another," he wrote. "They were damn lucky and made it to within 100 feet of the shore when the floe they were on ran aground."

Being the rescue lead with no boat of any kind available, Griffith had to figure out how to get "those characters" back on shore.

"Using small line tied to a larger line," he recounted, "I managed to get them a rope and tied it to the barrel setup we used to support the 4-inch fuel line transfer hose cam lock connections. We got them back to shore safely by having them ride the barrels."

He spent the next two summer seasons at Hallett, before they "mothballed" the station in February 1973.

Describing the station's dismantling, Griffith wrote how "everything went out by helo" to the breakers.

As the ground-man with the copper rod and chain to hit the helo cable hook, he "ground it so the guy with the sling loops didn't get his socks blown off from the static charge," he wrote.

"I was the caretaker of the American flag for the station for three seasons and was given the flag by Capt. Van Reeth when we shut down the station."

He was honorably discharged in March 1973 as an E-5. In the fall of 1975 he started his MS in Earth Science using the GI Bill, while supplementing his degree with courses in range science, environmental engineering, soils, and hydrogeology.

His civilian career included stints with the DNRC, as part of the Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission and as the Physical Sciences Coordinator for the Facility Siting Bureau; and managing the local Tetra Tech office. Since 2007, he has operated his own environmental consulting firm.

Griffith has chaired both the Lewis & Clark County Park Board in the 1990's and the combined City/County Park Board in the early 2000s, and served one term on the Helena School District board from 1996-99.

Although an admitted "nerd wannabe" in high school, Griffith said he "hit a home run" in 1976 when he married "the beautiful lady from Conrad." He and wife Dorothy parented two daughters and a son.

But back to those fabled shorts he wore on the ice, if you don't mind.

"The shorts at McGregor (were) my official Navy dungaree green," he explained, "and the ones at Hallett were more casual cutoff Levis."

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