

George Everding

Career sailor gave future admiral helpful push

By Harry Levins

POST-DISPATCH SENIOR WRITER

St. Louisan George Everding, a career Navy man who gave a young sailor the nudge that eventually pushed that sailor to the Navy's top job, died Thursday (Dec. 14, 2006) of infirmities at the Barnes-Jewish Extended Care Center in Clayton. He was 86.

In recent years, before old age slowed him down, Mr. Everding spent long hours as a volunteer at the USO at Lambert Field and at Feed My People, the food bank.

But he was best known for steering a young sailor named Mike Boorda to officer candidate school in 1961. And 33 years later, in 1994, Boorda — by that time an admiral — became chief of naval operations, that service's No. 1 job.

Mr. Everding had retired from the Navy as a lieutenant commander in 1971, but Boorda insisted on calling him "senior chief" — the rank Mr. Everding held when the two crossed paths in 1961 at a naval air station in California.

Mr. Everding had won a commission as a naval aviator in 1941 and spent the war training other aviators. But in the big postwar cutback, the Navy gave him a stark choice — become an enlisted man or become a civilian. Mr. Everding chose to stay in uniform.

By 1961, he was a senior chief petty officer and the leading chief, or top noncommissioned officer, of VA-144, an attack plane squadron. Among his sailors was a sharp young clerk — Boorda, then 22. But Boorda was on the verge of quitting the Navy.

"So I took the kid to my quarters for dinner," Mr. Everding later recalled. And in his stern chief petty officer's voice, Mr. Everding all but ordered the young sailor to apply for officer candidate school. Boorda did, and Mr. Everding lost track of him.

The next year, the Navy needed aviation maintenance officers and restored Mr. Everding's commission. After his retirement, he returned to his native St. Louis and worked here for the federal government as a defense contract inspector.

In 1987, while watching Johnny Carson's TV show, Mr. Everding heard the comic mention an admiral named Boorda heading a carrier group. "I just about fell off the chair," he later recalled. Mr. Everding wrote to the admiral, starting his letter: "If you're the Mike Boorda who was an enlisted man in VA-144, read on."

So the two hooked up again. And when Boorda was sworn in as the chief of naval operations, he invited Mr. Everding to the ceremony.

Indeed, Boorda invited Mr. Everding to many a subsequent ceremony, such as the commissioning of a minesweeper in 1994. Boorda told the crowd that Mr. Everding "is, as much any other person other than my wife, Bettie, the reason I am here today as chief of naval operations."

After another ceremony in

1994, aboard the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy, columnist George Wilson of the Army Times described the relationship this way:

"I just wanted to see how my little sailor was doing," retired Chief Everding said as he gripped Boorda's hand. Tears rolled down the old chief's cheeks. Boorda's eyes filled and spilled over too. The chief hugged his former charge, put his mouth to the new CNO's ear and whispered: 'Now Boorda, don't screw up.'"

Before long, Mr. Everding found himself fielding letters and phone calls from high-ranking naval officers "who wanted a word with the CNO." Boorda's suicide while still in the top slot in May 1996 jarred Mr. Everding, who had also lost his wife, Laurine, to cancer.

Mr. Everding's naval career started at Lambert Field, where he joined the Naval Reserve as an enlisted sailor in 1939. After the war, Mr. Everding spent much of his career as a chief petty officer at Lambert, which housed a Naval Air Station until it closed in January 1958.

Mr. Everding later recalled that instead of walking the plank quietly, the Lambert sailors blew their welfare fund on a party that old-timers still talk about.

Surviving are a son, George Everding Jr., and a brother, Anthony L. Everding, both of St. Louis; a sister, Dorothy Guise of Houston; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. A daughter, Andean Wells, died in 1988.

Funeral arrangements were pending at Kutis Funeral Home, 2906 Gravois Avenue.

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