

Alumnus teaches college at sea in his retirement

by Sheryl Hanson - Friday, March 14, 2008

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/617/alumnus-teaches-college-at-sea-in-a-new-retirement-adventure/>

Richard M. Kimberly, MBA '76, is not your ordinary college professor. His classroom is in the middle of the Mediterranean on board the guided missile destroyer U.S.S. Cole, where he teaches courses in personal finance and human resources to U.S. Navy sailors and Marines on deployment.

This week, Kimberly is completing eight weeks of service on the Cole. It is his third voyage with the Navy's on-board college program, contracted through Central Texas College. He previously taught courses on the frigate Simpson in the North Atlantic and the carrier Nimitz in the Arabian Sea.

Like all professors who participate, Kimberly receives a small stipend for his Navy commitment. But the fringe benefits — port calls, beautiful sunsets and meaningful new friendships — are worth more than a paycheck, he said. Other professors, also contracted for eight-week courses, teach a variety of other subjects, including math, English, speech, social studies and history.

"Many sailors join the Navy for education benefits, and this is a way for them to accumulate credits," Kimberly said.

Kimberly's experience in the classroom includes 13 years as a business professor at Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City, Missouri, where he also was director of business and technology.

Later he taught two years at the Phoenix campus of Ottawa University of Ottawa, Kansas. In addition to his MBA from UW Oshkosh, Kimberly holds an Education Specialist degree from UW-Stout and a Ph.D. from Texas A&M.

His Navy job found him completely by accident. Kimberly's wife, Therese, MSE '79, was searching online for "semester at sea" programs for their son. Instead, she found information about the Navy's volunteer professor program and suggested her husband apply.

"A month later, I was on a frigate in the North Atlantic," he said.

Kimberly is the lone civilian on board the Cole — a ship where 17 sailors lost their lives on October 12, 2000 as the result of a terrorist attack. The explosion hit the main deck and deck 2 around the area of the mess decks.

"Most of those killed were eating, working in the kitchen or working in the fuel testing area," Kimberly said.

As a tribute to the fallen sailors, the buffet line now has 17 stars on the floor, Kimberly said. Plaques in the dining area also honor their names.

“This is the fifth cruise since the incident at Yemen,” he said. “The ship has very much returned to service.”

Currently, the ship is serving with a battle group that includes British and Spanish ships in a coordinated naval exercise.

The ship’s massive size offers its challenges for visiting professors. Seven decks and countless dead ends make finding a classroom an accomplishment in itself.

“The trick is to get lost and find your way back,” he said.

Another trick is to avoid the scuttles, the hinged openings that lead to other decks. They start just above the water line — designed so they can be closed if needed to keep the ship from sinking. Climbing them has its challenges.

“They are bad enough anytime, but with a load of books, they are unpleasant. I can pretty much avoid them except for teaching. My classroom is down one scuttled deck.”

Turbulent seas often make for difficult sleeping.

“It is very wavy. The Pacific is gentle compared to this. My mattress even slips and slides in the box with the moving ship. I don’t mind it though — I wanted to rock and roll and I got my wish.”

The ship does have its share of amenities, including e-mail. But once in a while, security protocols shut it down. Watching movies is a favorite pastime of the crew. Television shows are not available.

“That is indicative of a long, long trip for a news junkie,” he said, laughing. “Despite the advanced technology on this ship, we don’t get the commercial stations or the Internet.”

Sailors find other ways to relax on board, including a weekly “steel beach party.”

“No sand, just a gray steel deck! They are fun. We barbeque out.”

Kimberly enjoys staying physically fit and, with three gyms on board, he finds ample opportunities to keep in shape. He always joins the sailors for a 7 a.m. on-deck workout if the weather and waves cooperate.

Many days, his internal clock awakens him at 2 a.m. But the early hours on the ship are his favorites. Kimberly grabs some coffee, climbs two ladders and joins the night watch in the complete darkness of the pilothouse.

“It takes about 30 minutes to get my eyes in sync with the darkness,” he said. “The only lights are red and there are only a few of them. So I look at charts for a while—they are green light—and talk over whatever with whomever. Very pretty, very quiet, and very nice. I like it.”

During his time on the Cole, Kimberly met fellow Wisconsinite Alexis Regner of Spooner, who is a

commissioned officer in the Navy. She is well acquainted with UW Oshkosh — her parents met as students on campus. And her grandmother, Carol Regner, BS '72 and MBA '76, was a College of Business faculty member in the 1970s.

Kimberly himself has fond memories of campus, when the university was called Oshkosh State College. He plans to attend the Arizona alumni reception on April 3, after he returns to his home in Scottsdale.

“It’s been a very interesting chapter in my life, and it’s one that I will always treasure,” he said.

In addition to being a UW Oshkosh alumna, Therese (Foy) Kimberly has another connection to campus. She also taught in the UW Oshkosh Reading Study Center in the late 1970s and early 1980s.