

# MISSOURI STATE SOCIETY DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



*Proudly Honors*  
**PATRIOT OF THE MONTH  
SEPTEMBER 2025**

**MARK THOMAS DILDINE, SR.**  
**UNITED STATES NAVY**  
**AUGUST 1974 – JUNE 1976**  
**SEAMAN (E-3)**



*Sponsored by: John Sappington Chapter, NSDAR*

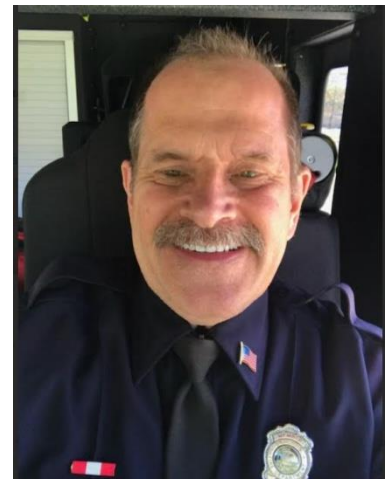


Mr. Dildine volunteered to serve in the Navy when he was 17 years old. He spent 12 weeks in Great Lakes, Illinois, and then went on to Norfolk, Virginia, to study destroyers and submarines, but was unclear about what he would eventually be doing. He was always one of the youngest amongst the crew, which was occasionally good and bad for going on shore leave. He remembers his first foreign port was Rhoda, Spain, and they had a cab ride for fifty cents, and the other fellas told him he was eating "monkey meat".

With time, his ship, the USS Belknap (CG 26), a newly reclassified guided missile cruiser, began a tour through the Mediterranean. However, this is where an event would happen that would affect the rest of his life. In November 1975, Mark was off duty while the ship with other vessels was on nighttime air drills near Sicily, Italy. Mark and his fellow shipmates heard a loud noise and saw other crew members running. When he came above deck, he found the ship engulfed in flames. The USS Belknap had accidentally slammed into the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy, severing a fuel line.

His memories of this event are very vivid and difficult. He had to help with fighting the fire, particularly to prevent other arms from exploding, and carry severely injured crew from the ship. The fire took all night into the morning hours to extinguish due to leaking fuel and trying to control the ammunition on board from exploding. The event killed eight men, seven on the cruiser and one on the carrier, and severely injured 48 more. Luckily, Mark was not physically injured, but it took an emotional toll. The remaining crew stayed on board and had Thanksgiving there, brought in by another vessel. The ship had not sunk due to its unique aluminum structure, but the Navy learned that the aluminum allowed for increased fire risk as compared to a steel structure, and it was no longer used to build ships after this.

Mr. Dildine completed his time and married, and eventually had four sons and one granddaughter. He worked in tree trimming and forestry for 17 years, but eventually studied to become a firefighter. He



is now retired from the St. Louis City Fire Department.



*Photo above shows USS Belknap before bombing and photos below show the destruction.*

