The AFCEA Educational Foundation focuses on people. In addition to covering the foundation’s current activities, periodically this column will feature people who have made the foundation what it is today.

The late Vice Adm. Samuel L. Gravely Jr., USN (Ret.), was a pioneer at AFCEA after being a pioneer in the U.S. Navy. The admiral launched the AFCEA Educational Foundation, working from 1983 to 1987 as the director of education and training, a role that kept him in touch with the military community and that he used to help prepare students for the challenges and opportunities they would face later in life. His own life was filled with plenty of challenges that he turned into opportunities.

In 1942, a young Sam Gravely enlisted in the Naval Reserve. The following year he entered the V-12 officer training program, one of the first black Americans to do so. He was commissioned as an ensign in December 1944.

Following shipboard duty on the patrol craft USS PC-1264 during World War II, the ensign was part of the postwar demobilization. In the late 1940s, he was recalled to active duty to serve one year as a Navy recruiter. Fate intervened in the form of the Korean War, and the active duty term lasted much longer than expected—until his retirement in 1980 as a three-star admiral.

In Adm. Gravely’s years as a junior officer, the Navy’s black officers were limited largely to the specialties of recruiting and communications. Adm. Gravely went well beyond those limitations and mastered the skills of electronic communications. His last active duty billet was as the director of the Defense Communications Agency, now known as the Defense Information Systems Agency. During his career, Adm. Gravely sought to prove himself in the Navy’s foremost arena—at sea.

Adm. Gravely did not ask for special favors—but he did seek the jobs for which his record qualified him. They came in quick succession in the 1960s—executive officer of the destroyer USS Theodore E. Chandler and commanding officer of the radar picket destroyer escort USS Falgout, the destroyer USS Taussig and the guided missile frigate USS Jouett. The latter two ships were involved in Vietnam War combat during his time as skipper. He was the first black officer to command a U.S. warship in the 20th century and the first ever under the Navy’s competitive officer assignment system. He was the service’s first black commander, captain, rear admiral, vice admiral and fleet commander.

During the course of his trailblazing, Adm. Gravely welcomed only grudgingly the publicity that his achievements brought. Still, the publicity gave him an opportunity that proved valuable beyond his own success. He became a role model for other black officers.

One of the many who followed in his footsteps was Rear Adm. Mack Gaston, USN (Ret.). When Adm. Gaston was an ensign in 1966, his ship was moored next to the Taussig. He rose early in the morning to catch a glimpse of the first black skipper. When Adm. Gravely reached the bridge of his ship, the ensign called over and introduced himself, and Adm. Gravely reached across to shake his hand. Adm. Gaston spoke at Adm. Gravely’s funeral in 2004. With emotion he recalled the handshake: “It was like being touched by God.”

Adm. Gravely would not have endorsed that description because he had a becoming sense of modesty. But he did touch many lives. Among those were people whom he came to know through his work at AFCEA. The admiral had three principal roles at the foundation: setting up continuing education courses for military and civilian students in communications and electronics, operating a career planning center that matched retiring military personnel with jobs in industry and running the AFCEA scholarship program. It was the last that gave him the most pleasure because it enhanced the education and training of cadets and midshipmen in ROTC programs around the country.

The Navy that Adm. Gravely served so well has done something to ensure that his legacy will extend well into the future. The guided missile destroyer DDG-107 will be commissioned as the USS Gravely. It is an appropriate tribute to a longtime destroyerman and consummate military professional.

Note: Paul Stillwell, former historian at the U.S. Naval Institute and well-known author, conducted an oral history with Adm. Gravely 20 years ago and contributed to this column. The oral history is available at the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C., and at the Naval Institute in Annapolis, Maryland.