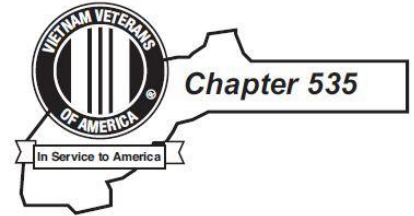




INCOMING

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
CHAPTER 535



Website: www.vva535.org

Volume 34 Issue 2

February 2024

**VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
CHAPTER 535
PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
January 2024**

Valentine's Day is but days ahead, February 14th. While the day is a celebration of love and affection, the historic significance is that it honors two early Saints named Valentinus.

Most of us will acknowledge a significant other with at least a Valentine Day card, and perhaps with flowers, a gift, or a dinner at a favorite restaurant.

But why should we limit our affection to February 14th? A wise person will acknowledge his or her spouse with regularity. The trigger of a given day on the calendar should not be part of the equation. Think about it.

Bart Ruud for
Ray James
President

VVA Chapter 535 Mission Statement

To foster camaraderie among members and assist those with disabling mental and physical injuries, to promote the welfare of our brethren

affected by the war, and to engender public understanding of the sacrifice, patriotism, and bravery of those who served, those who gave all, and those left behind.

Veterans Crisis Line

**DIAL 988 then PRESS 1
Or text 838255**

(Put these numbers into your phone)

Attention

If you do not drive and need a ride to a meeting or any VVA-535 function, please contact Bart Ruud or any local VVA-535 member and we will do our best to arrange transportation for you.

Table of Contents

- Pg. 1 - President's Message
- Pg. 1 - VVA 535 Mission Statement
- Pg. 2 - Upcoming events
- Pg. 2 - Officers and Directors
- Pg. 2 - Guest Speaker
- Pg. 3 - Matters of Interest
- Pg. 3 - POW Escape Plan from N. Vietnam
- Pg. 11 - RIP USS Oriskany
- Pg. 11 - Nuclear Ice Lair in Greenland
- Pg. 13 - The Most Controversial Gesture
- Pg. 15 - Writing Your Story

Pg. 16 - VVA Application

Pg. 17 - Calendars

Upcoming Events

NCCVC Meeting – February 1, 2024
VVA Chapter 535 Meeting – February 1, 2024
Nominations for 2024-25 officers 4/4/2024
CSC: April 5 - 7, 2024 – Visalia
Election of 2024-25 Officers & Directors 5/2/2024

Chapter 535 Officers

President Ray James
rjames1087@sbcglobal.net
1-530-273-1087

Vice-President Peter Hidalgo
peterhidalgo45@yahoo.com
1-530-912-1971

Treasurer
Ralph Remick 530-559-7716

Secretary
Bart Ruud 530-305-0493
bruud45@gmail.com

Directors

Doug Becker 530-272-3300
Dick Corn 530-277-8856
Keith Grueneberg 916-425-1121
Ric Sheridan..... 530-274-1413
Corbin Smith 916-833-7860
Enrique Vasquez 530-575-4416
Mel Williams 707-391-7692

Committee Chairs

Finance ...Ralph Remick & Kent Holley
Parade and Honor Guard Dick Corn
Membership AffairsRic Sheridan
Newsletter Interim Editor... Bart Ruud
Victorian Christmas ...Cancelled for 2022; 2023
Nominations Ralph Remick & Dick Corn
Veterans Assistance Ray James
NCCVC Dick Corn
Speakers Bureau Ray James
Web Master Ralph Remick
Quartermaster Dick Corn
Facebook Master Mike Laborico

Nevada County Fair Open
CA State Council Rep... Interim: Bart Ruud
Nevada County Veterans Services Officer

David West II
Nevada County Veterans Service Officer
988 McCourtney Road
Grass Valley, CA 95949
David.West@co.nevada.ca.us
(530) 265-1446 (Office)
(530) 913-5046 (Cell phone)
“Walk-In” opportunities are available M – F.

Placer County Veterans Services Officer

Richard “Steve” Johnson: 916-780-3290.
1000 Sunset Blvd., Suite 115, Rocklin, CA
Mon. – Fri., 8:00 – 12:00 and 1:00 – 5:00 p.m. The
Auburn office, at 11562 B Avenue, Auburn, CA 95603, is open every
Tuesday 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. The Carnelian Bay
office, at 5252 N Lake Blvd, Carnelian Bay, CA 96140, is now open every
3rd Monday (excluding Holidays) 9:30 a.m. -12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m.-
3:00 p.m.

County VSO Resource Closet Needs

Sleeping bags, duffel bags, small lightweight
tents, socks, briefs, bras, tee shirts (white/olive
drab), sweatshirts, sweatpants, jeans, shoes,
boots, hygiene supplies, grocery store gift cards,
gas cards, blankets.

These kinds of items will become components of
life packs to assist those in need that are seen by
staff at VSO David West’s office. Thank you for
your assistance with this project.

Guest Speaker: Video presentation by Ralph
Remick.

**Matters of Interest as outlined at the Meeting
of January 4, 2024**

Several routine Agenda items were bypassed as
means to provide Wendy Malone, representing
the Daughters of the American Revolution
adequate time to present 50th Vietnam War
anniversary pins and a commemorative flag to
the VVA 535 membership.

Tim Whalen, Veterans Outreach Program Specialist with the Citrus Heights, CA Vet Center, presented an overview of what services the Vet Center office offers Veterans and their families. See <http://www.vetcenter.va.gov> for details.

VVA 535 dedicated \$170 toward the 2024 Wreaths Across America 2 -for-1 sale.

How POWs Tried to Escape North Vietnam with the Help From Navy SEALs Operation Thunderhead would be America's Last Rescue Mission in the Vietnam War

By Carl Schuster, January 1, 2024



A U.S. Navy SEAL surfaces from a dive. SEALs and UDT divers were tasked with getting ashore and tasked with guiding the POWs to safety

At around noon on May 2, 1972, two SR-71 Blackbirds dropped to 75,000 feet and flew separate Mach 2.5 passes over Hanoi, delivering two sonic booms within 15 seconds of each other. Their mission was vital and their timing critical. A third SR-71 had orbited offshore as a spare in case something forced one of the others to abort. The planes' pilots and crew didn't know the mission's purpose, but executed it perfectly. The mission was repeated two days later.

The SR-71s had flown through the world's most densely defended air space to deliver a message

from America's National Command Authority to a group of U.S. prisoners-of-war (POWs) held inside North Vietnam's Hoa Lo Prison, better known as the "Hanoi Hilton." The message consisted of two dots for the letter "I" in Morse code, telling them to "initiate" their escape plan. Thus began the final stages of Operations Diamond and Thunderhead, the Vietnam War's last POW escape and rescue plan.



On May 2, 1972, two SR-71 Blackbirds flew over Hanoi and let off two sonic booms within 15 seconds of one another—a signal to American POWs held captive in the Hanoi Hilton to initiate their daring plan to escape. (Lockheed Martin Archives)

The United States had attempted POW rescues before, with the Son Tay Raid of Nov. 21, 1970, being the best known. But Operation Thunderhead was different. This time the plan originated within the POW camp itself. The primary authors of the plan were Captains John Dramesi and George C. McKnight of the U.S. Air Force and then-Lt. j.g. George T. Coker of the U.S. Navy. The men called their escape plan Operation Diamond.

All three had attempted to escape before, only to be recaptured within 36 hours. Coker and McKnight had escaped from a POW compound northwest of Hanoi in 1967, while Dramesi had made two previous attempts, the second one from the Hanoi Hilton. He had been moved there following his first escape attempt from a camp farther up the Red River. The men suffered weeks of torture as punishment for their

actions. In fact, Dramesi's partner in his second breakout, USAF Capt. Edwin L. Atterberry, died on May 18, 1969, ostensibly from an infection while under torture just eight days after their recapture.

THE ESCAPE PLAN

Undaunted, Dramesi refused to give up on escape. One challenge he faced was opposition from the majority of his fellow POWs. The prisoners had heard Dramesi's and Atterberry's screams as the guards beat them, and they knew that their comrades had managed to gain only a few hours of freedom. The POWs would not betray Dramesi but a standing order from the Senior Ranking Officer (SRO) in the Hilton's "Unity" compound, Lt. Col. Robinson "Robbie" Risner of the U.S. Air Force, required that no escape would be attempted without outside assistance. However, Risner approved the formation of a six-man escape planning committee led by Lt. Col. Hervey Stockman. Coker, Dramesi, and McKnight were joined by Maj. James H. Kasler and Capt. "Bud" Day, both USAF.

The POWs started work on their escape plan immediately, gathering all the information they could about guard patterns, the prison layout, and the surrounding community. One of the many things Dramesi had learned from his last attempt was that their "camp" was located a few miles east of the Red River, not north of it as they had believed when they went over the wall on May 8, 1969. Gathering food supplies was a challenge since the Vietnamese provided little to the prisoners, leaving little to spare.



Prisoner of war camp "Hanoi Hilton". (National Archives)

The greatest impediment to progress was the constant shuffling of the prisoners and senior officers. Day, Stockman, and Risner were transferred out of Unity by December 1970. Risner's replacement as SRO came in from the "Zoo," another section of the Hanoi Hilton, where he had vehemently opposed any attempt to escape. He and several others had been tortured and beaten after Dramesi's last escape attempt. Although Risner had allowed the planning to go forward, the new SRO kept changing conditions and requirements for his approval. Despite his skeptical response, the team continued planning with August 1971 as the "launch date."

To stand out less after their escape, the three prisoners developed a dye to darken their skin and made civilian-looking clothing by knitting and hand-sewing threads from the blankets and sweaters the guards provided, and by scrounging rags and other discarded materials from around the compound. They also made a map of the compound and surrounding area, along with a compass and simple time piece. All the materials except a tactical radio were ready by June.

LEAGUE OF WIVES

However, the SRO rejected their plan, stating the escape had to have a 90% probability of success as well as approval from higher up in

the chain of command. Communicating their plan to higher U.S. authorities seemed impossible. Letters were allowed out on an almost random basis and the prison authorities reviewed them closely. Prisoners were punished severely if the “censors” found anything suspicious in the letters.



The League of Wives of Vietnam Prisoners of War worked tirelessly to advocate for their husbands held captive in Vietnam. One POW managed to leak information about the upcoming escape plan in a letter home, which was delivered by the League of Wives to Defense Secretary Melvin Laird. An operation to rescue the escaping POWs was afterward undertaken by the U.S. government. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

Nonetheless, one of the committee members took the chance and incorporated a carefully worded message in a letter home. The League of Wives of Vietnam Prisoners of War delivered it to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in late February/early March 1972. The details were slim by necessity but the letter stated a group of POWs were going to escape from the Hanoi Hilton in June 1972 by stealing a boat and making their way to the Gulf of Tonkin via the Red River. It sought official U.S. approval and support of their plan. The number of POWs was not mentioned and the tentative dates were the first two weeks of June. It also wasn't made clear if the stolen craft would signal with a yellow or red flag. It wasn't much information to go on and little is known about whom Laird contacted first. However, it is clear that he had either delegated the authorization decision to Adm.

Thomas Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, by March 31, 1972, or ordered him to launch the rescue.

Moorer wanted to move the planning outside of Washington, D.C. He was very concerned about leaks, which had become a major problem over the previous two years. He directed that all early communications were by courier or face-to-face meetings. Neither known nor suspected leakers were informed. Moorer sent an intelligence officer, Lt. Cdr. Earle Smith, to inform Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet Adm. Bernard Clarey at his headquarters in Pearl Harbor and Vice Adm. James Holloway, Commander of the 7th Fleet, aboard his flagship the USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) in Yokosuka, Japan. Lt. Cdr. Edwin L. Towers was appointed officer-in-charge of Operation Thunderhead and given 48 hours to develop the plan.

ENTER SPECIAL FORCES

The forces Towers was given included the nuclear-powered cruiser USS *Long Beach* (CGN-9), the Frigate USS *Harold E. Holt* (FF-1074), and Det 110 HC-7, a Combat Search and Rescue Detachment from the USS *Midway* (CVA-41). Its SH-3 helicopters had infrared sensors, precision navigation systems, and carried a 7.62mm minigun and two M-60 machine guns. Towers knew he needed Special Forces and a means of delivering them. Operations security remained paramount.



This detailed map shows the location of the Hanoi Hilton within North Vietnam. The POWs gathered materials to help disguise themselves as locals after the planned escape from the prison. (National Archives)

The cover story given to the ships' captains and helicopter detachment commander was that they would be recovering North Vietnamese defectors. Seventh Fleet planned to launch air strikes and naval gunfire attacks on coastal radar stations and sites to draw Hanoi's attention. Moorer classified the operation as "top secret" and all communications had the added "special category" caveat to further restrict distribution. Only those directly involved in Operation Thunderhead were given access to the reports.

THE SEALS' MISSION

Towers had little to go on but was aware of SEAL Team 1's Alpha platoon stationed at White Beach, Okinawa, and the USS *Grayback's* (APSS/LPSS-574) involvement in special operations. The *Grayback* picked up a squad from Alpha platoon on April 10 and transported them to Subic Bay in the Philippines by the 13th. Towers flew there to brief the submarine's skipper, Cdr. John Chamberlain, USN, and then the SEALs and Underwater Demolition Team (UDT) led by Lt. Melvin Spencer "Spence" Dry and Lt. jg. John Lutz, respectively.

Towers told the skipper, UDT, and SEAL leaders that the coming mission was to attack the North Vietnamese radar site that had directed coastal artillery fire against the guided missile destroyer USS *Buchanan* (DDG-14) earlier that month. The SEALs were to go ashore in Z-birds (high speed inflatable boats powered by an outboard engine).



This map shows the area where Operation Thunderhead took place along with key locations relating to events that unfolded. (Map by HISTORYNET)

UDT Detachment 11 (UDT 11) was not included in the early briefings, being told only they "might be needed." The UDT trained on the "new" Mark VII Mod 6 Swimmer Delivery Vehicles (SDVs), or "Six Boats," while the SEALs conducted night infiltration, demolition, and small unit tactics. The 2-ton SDVs required two UDT operators and carried two fully equipped SEALs or UDT personnel for delivery. The submersibles were roomier than the earlier models and had an onboard air supply the crew and passengers would use while in transit to their release area.

Pleased with the progress, Towers notified 7th Fleet they would be ready in time and departed for Yokosuka. There he briefed Holloway. Towers was to embark on the *Long Beach* and take station 50 nautical miles off the North Vietnamese coast by May 19. He was ordered to

transmit a daily top secret SPECAT situation report to the Commander Seventh Fleet, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. HC-7's Det 110 began its surveillance patrols off the Red River Delta on May 19, and would continue them until June 19.

TO NORTH VIETNAM

The *Grayback* departed Subic 18 days after the SR-71s delivered their first "midnight message." Once at sea, the SEALs and UDT personnel were told the direct-action mission was a ruse. Their "real mission" was to rendezvous with North Vietnamese defectors and protect them until they could be picked up by helicopter. The SDVs were to deliver two SEALs to an island in the Red River mouth to monitor for small craft carrying a red or yellow flag. A second team was to be inserted two days later and the first team withdrawn back to the *Grayback*.

The SEALs were to use their best judgment in identifying the defectors' craft. Once they had the "defectors in hand" they were to signal Towers for helicopter pick up. They were not told the real mission even though they were at sea with no outside contact. The embarked intelligence officer had been told that if a SEAL was captured, there was a risk any un-rescued POWs would be executed or "worse."



The USS *Grayback* was used to transport the SEAL and UDT personnel to the area of the rescue operation. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

The SEALs adjusted accordingly. Dry walked his people and the UDT personnel through the plan as the submarine made its way to station. They worked daily and watched a lot of movies but Dry was not certain about the intelligence material. The SEALs had operated in the area and were familiar with the tide and currents at and near the surface. This would be their first time using SDVs and other than a brief walk-through in Subic, his people had never used them. He trusted the UDT operators but he would have liked to have trained with them before the submarine got underway.

Meanwhile, POWs Dramesi, Coker, and Mc-Knight finalized plans for their escape. They expected heavy rains in June and noticed power outages often accompanied the storms. They would wait for power failure and then move to the river and either swim or steal a boat as the situation required. The Red River in that area consisted of a complex series of tributaries, streams, and dikes. The three men intended to follow the right branch of any fork in the river that they encountered to reduce the SEALs' search area. They found little enthusiasm among their fellow prisoners, but no direct opposition. Whatever the other POWs thought about the escape, they would do nothing to impede it. Communicating was a challenge with the North Vietnamese watching almost their every move. Also, the Vietnamese often moved the senior officers around to complicate communication efforts. The guards hoped they were inhibiting the American leaders' ability to command their subordinates in the camp. The SRO in Dramesi's cell block rejected the plan in late May but offered to take it to the next most senior SRO. That meeting took several days to arrange.

TROUBLE UNDERWATER

As the escape team awaited a final decision, the *Grayback* stalked silently beneath the Seventh Fleet and arrived on station about four nautical miles from the Red River mouth late in the evening on June 3. The sub settled on the bottom of the Gulf in approximately 80 feet of water. Later that evening, Dry decided to conduct a reconnaissance of the island. Departing the *Grayback* at 2 a.m., he and newly promoted Warrant Officer Philip L. "Moki" Martin boarded the "Six Boat" piloted by Lt. jg. John Lutz and Petty Officer 1st Class Thomas Edwards.

They had launched at "slack tide," the period between the end of waters receding from low tide and the beginning of high tide. The intention was to have the incoming tide negate the river current. However, North Vietnam's heavy rains and the minus tide—a low tide much lower than normal—had combined to create a nearly 4 knot current. The SDVs maximum speed was five knots. Making less than 50 yards a minute, the SDV's batteries burned out more than 1,000 yards from shore.

Recognizing that the currents rendered the plan impractical, Dry decided to contact Towers for helicopter pick up. He transmitted "Briarpatch Tango," the code words for Thunderhead personnel in trouble. Towers immediately sent an SH-3. Dry needed to return to the *Grayback* and inform the skipper and his team of the current. Dry and Martin helped the UDT swim the SDV farther out to scuttle it in deeper water but they lacked the means to do. Towers dispatched a helicopter from the *Long Beach* that sank the SDV with a minigun and returned the four men to the cruiser.

They had no way to contact the *Grayback* until the scheduled broadcast time later that evening. Dry briefed Towers and the captain of the *Long Beach* on what he had discovered. Towers agreed that they needed to get word to the *Grayback* right away. Unfortunately,

communications technology of the time limited their options. It would take nearly a day.

That day passed with *Grayback* being unaware of Dry's difficulties. Dry's Deputy Lt. Robert Conger went ahead with the plan, embarking on an SDV for the island. After he departed, the *Grayback* received a signal that Dry needed to return to the submarine. Chamberlain moved away from the launch point and agreed to rendezvous the helicopter using an infrared spotlight mounted on the submarine's periscope.

TRAGEDY FOR THE SEALS

Dry and Martin briefed the helicopter crew on the "casting procedure" by which they would land in the water and descend onto the submarine operating at periscope depth. Martin emphasized to them that they had to descend below 20 feet and that the combined helicopter and wind speed had to be 20 knots or less. The pilots had never done anything like it before. The wind and seas were higher than normal as well and the sky was overcast. Visibility was almost nil.

Shortly after the helicopter departed *Long Beach*, *Grayback* sent an emergency message reporting that a North Vietnamese patrol boat had departed base and was en route to the rendezvous area. Chamberlain ordered the cruiser to abort the delivery. It wasn't received in time. The helicopter reached the rendezvous area and all onboard struggled to find the *Grayback's* beacon. Night-vision equipment was bulky and proved nearly useless but the cockpit crew tried their best.

Twice, the helicopter dipped its tail into the sea, nearly swamping. Neither pilot could spot the infrared beacon. Martin couldn't see the prop wash that would signal they were low enough to drop. Twice the helicopter approached a red

light, only to discover it was a Vietnamese fishing boat. The pilots were getting antsy. They were flying less than six nautical miles offshore, well within North Vietnamese waters. Fuel was running low. The pilot was running out of options. If he didn't find the sub beacon within the next few minutes, he would have to abort and return to *Long Beach*.



Spence Dry (top center, holding paper) briefs his SEAL Alpha platoon on the deck of the USS Grayback in April 1972. (National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum)

Then, spotting what they thought was the *Grayback's* infrared light, the helicopter crew turned towards it and lowered to drop the four men. Unfortunately, the pilot gave the drop signal when the helicopter was above 20 feet and being pushed by a 20-knot tailwind. Dry was killed on impact with the water. Edwards and Lutz were seriously injured. Martin was uninjured but shaken.

A nautical mile away, the second SDV had malfunctioned. It wouldn't go forward and wouldn't surface. So Lt. jgs. Conger and Tom McGrath, Petty Officer Sam Birky, and Seaman Steve McConnell had to abandon it submerged and swim to the surface. It was their infrared distress light that the helicopter had spotted, placing Dry and the others close by. Conger, McGrath, and McConnell encountered Martin and Lutz at about 4 a.m. They were less than 2,000 yards from shore and could hear what they believed were North Vietnamese patrol

boats in the distance. Dry's body floated by at around 5 a.m. but Birky was still missing.

Conger was able to contact the *Long Beach* shortly before sunrise and a helicopter arrived shortly after 7 a.m. It found and picked up Birky along the way. The crews of both SDVs were returned to *Long Beach*. Dry, Edwards, and Lutz were evacuated to the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63), which had a morgue and better medical facilities.

LESSONS LEARNED

The *Grayback's* crew knew something had gone wrong with the SDVs but had no information on what or why. The intelligence officer called the senior remaining SEAL, Petty Officer First Class Rick Hetzell, to the wardroom (the officer eating and meeting area). He ordered him to gather a team and prepare for surface insertion using the submarine's Z-bird. He also wanted him to use the silenced outboard to ensure a covert insertion and tried to put one of the submarine's Chief Petty Officers in charge of the mission. The "discussion" went back and forth but the chief finally realized he was not value added and opted out.

Upon learning the rescue team survivors were aboard *Long Beach*, Chamberlain offered to transfer them by Z-bird. He and the SEALs hoped to continue the mission but Typhoon Ora intervened. The *Grayback* returned to Subic transiting on the surface to save time, only to be engaged briefly by USS *Harold E. Holt*, whose crew mistook her for an unidentified hostile contact. The helicopters continued their searches until June 19 without ever spotting any POWs in stolen boats.



The Mark VII SDVs' shortcomings were addressed by the Mark VIII SEAL Delivery Vehicle, shown here, which was introduced in 1982. (National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum)

The Thunderhead team didn't know it, but the SRO had ordered Dramesi and his mates to stand down. He felt the war was coming to an end and he didn't want the POWs to suffer the physical abuse and potential fatalities that might follow an escape attempt, even if it succeeded. Operation Homecoming finally started bringing the POWs home on February 13, 1973.

Lt. Melvin S. Dry was the last American SEAL to die in the Vietnam War. Because of its highly classified and compartmentalized nature, Operation Thunderhead remained all but unknown and its participants unrecognized until 2008. Dry was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star with a V for Valor while Moki Martin received the Navy-Marine Corps Medal with a V for Valor. It was America's last POW rescue attempt and it would have failed even if the SEALs had made it ashore successfully, since the POWs never escaped from the Hanoi Hilton. Despite that, the mission reflected America's national commitment to bringing "everyone home."



U.S. Air Force captain John Dramesi was one of the leaders of the 1972 plan to escape the Hanoi Hilton. He is shown here after his eventual March 1973 release with the handcrafted American flag he made in captivity. (Historynet Archives)

A thorough investigation followed and most of its lessons learned resonate to this day. Towers did an outstanding job in the planning and execution of Operation Thunderhead but excessive secrecy, the justification for which ended when the *Grayback* left port, reduced if not eliminated his ability to modify plans in the face of equipment and operational setbacks. The transport delivering Special Operations Forces (SOF) needed to be integral to the SOF unit to ensure mutual familiarity and commitment. The helicopter pilots did their best but were conducting a sensitive and dangerous evolution for the first time in their careers and under very difficult circumstances in enemy territorial waters.

Also, hopefully leaders now recognize that prisoners in remote undeveloped countries have little capability to escape on their own. It is best to go to them once they are located. And there were the equipment failures as well. The Mark VII SDVs shortcomings were addressed by the introduction of the Mark VIII SEAL Delivery Vehicles in 1982.

Capt. Carl O. Schuster, U.S. Navy (Ret.), is a career naval officer who served on many U.S. and allied warships before serving at U.S. Pacific

Command's Joint Intelligence Center. He serves on the advisory board of Vietnam magazine.

This story appeared in the 2024 Winter issue of Vietnam magazine.

USS Oriskany Serves as an Artificial Reef

USS Oriskany was laid down 1 May 1944. Oriskany's post-service history also differs considerably from that of her sister ships. Decommissioned in 1976, she was sold for scrap in 1995, but was repossessed in 1997 because nothing was being done. In 2004, the Navy decided to sink her to create an artificial reef off the coast of Florida in the Gulf of Mexico. After much environmental review and remediation to remove toxic substances, the ship was carefully sunk in May 2006. She settled in an upright position at a depth accessible to recreational divers. As of 2023, Oriskany is the largest vessel ever sunk to make a reef.



Inside the US Army's failed nuclear ice lair in Cold War Greenland

By Claire Barrett. Observation Post. Dec 13, 2023



U.S. soldiers supplying Camp Century. (U.S. Army)

As Soviet ICBM tests and the launch of Sputnik in the 1950s added intensity to the Cold War, the United States turned its attention to the ice sheets of Greenland for an edge.

Meant to be a “city under the ice,” Camp Century was designed to be a series of “twenty-one horizontal tunnels spidering through the snow,” according to the University of Vermont. Designers boasted that, once complete, it would be three times the size of Denmark — replete with a movie theater, hot showers, a chapel, a library, chemistry labs, and, most importantly, a portable nuclear reactor.

Destined to house nearly 200 residents, the top-secret missile base in northwestern Greenland, far north of the Arctic Circle, was publicly touted as a “remote research community” under the auspices of the Army Polar Research and Development Center.

In reality, it was “a top-secret plan to convert part of the Arctic into a launchpad for nuclear missiles,” according to the [Washington Post](#).

Dubbed “Project Iceworm,” the city nestled under layer after layer of ice was to be positioned less than 3,000 miles from Moscow. During the Cold War, the frigid location offered the U.S. Army a more covert and convenient

cover for its medium-range ballistic missiles, or MRBMs.

The project was to take advantage of the strategic location of Greenland — midway between the two superpowers — so as to avoid using long-range Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, located stateside, professor Nikolaj Petersen of Denmark's Aarhus University wrote in a 2007 article for the [Scandinavian Journal of History](#).

In 1958, the U.S. received tacit approval from Denmark — which has maintained control of the world's largest island since the 1814 Treaty of Kiel — after being approached with the plans for Iceworm by U.S. ambassador Val Petersen.

According to Petersen's account, Danish Prime Minister H. C. Hansen replied, "You did not submit any concrete plan as to such possible storing, nor did you ask questions as to the attitude of the Danish Government to this item. I do no[t] think that your remarks give rise to any comments from my side."

The U.S. deemed this a green light, with construction slated to begin in June 1959. Despite temperatures as low as -70°F, winds as high as 125 miles per hour and an annual snowfall of more than four feet, the audacious project was completed the following October, according to the [Atomic Heritage Foundation](#).

"The missile force is hidden and elusive," a [1960 planning document](#) noted. "It is deployed into an extensive cut-and-cover tunnel network in which men and missiles are protected from weather and, to a degree, from enemy attack. The deployment is invulnerable to all but massive attacks and even then most of the force can be launched. Concealment and variability of the deployment pattern are exploited to prevent the enemy from targeting the critical elements of the force."



U.S. soldiers within the icy catacombs of Camp Century, an Arctic military base in Greenland. (U.S. Army)

The audacious \$2.71 billion plan didn't account for one thing, however: Mother Nature.

It became increasingly clear, in short order, that building an atomic city under shifting ice sheets was tenuous at best. The project was scrapped entirely by 1967, and the massive underground structure collapsed shortly after.

Despite this rather large military gaffe, the project wasn't entirely a waste. During the building of Camp Century, U.S. glacier scientist Chester Langway drilled "a 4,560-foot-deep vertical core down through the ice," according to an account in the [University of Vermont Today](#). "Each section of ice that came up was packaged and stored, frozen. When the drill finally hit dirt, the scientists worked it down for twelve more feet through mud and rock. Then they stopped."

For decades, this layer of ice and rock from Greenland's core remained untouched, stored in cookie jars at the bottom of a freezer in Denmark.

Then in 2017, it was rediscovered by Jørgen Peder Steffensen, a professor and curator of the ice core repository at the University of Copenhagen, and glaciologist Dorthe Dahl-

Jensen, who were going through the university's extensive collections of ice cores in preparation for a move to a new freezer.

"Some were oddly labeled 'Camp Century sub-ice,'" Steffensen told UVM Today. "I never thought about what was in those two boxes.

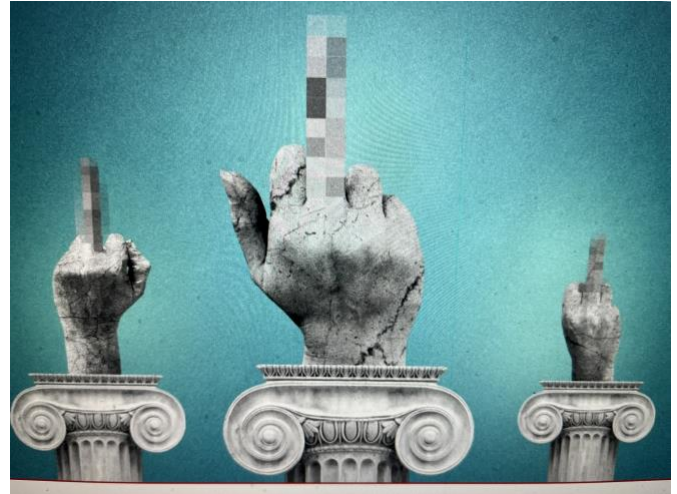
"Well, when you see a lot of cookie jars, you think: who the hell put this in here?" he continued. "No, I didn't know what to make of it. But once we got it out, we picked it up to see these dirty lumps, and I said: what is this now? And all of a sudden it dawned on us: Oh s--t, this is the sediment underneath it. The 'sub-ice' is because it's below the ice. Whoa."

In October 2019 the overlooked bits of dirt finally had their time in the sun as more than 30 scientists from around the world gathered in Vermont to study what the silty ice and frozen sediment might tell us.

The convention discovered that the sediment contained "fossilized leaf and twig fragments, proving that plants had once grown under one of the coldest regions on earth," according to the Washington Post story.

While the U.S. didn't get to act out its Bond villain lair fantasies, it did, at the very least, further scientific understandings of the world around us — and below us.

Observation Post is the Military Times one-stop shop for all things off-duty. Stories may reflect author observations.



The middle finger is the human hand's most controversial digit. Thank the ancient Greeks for that.

Scottie Andrew. CNN. January 22, 2024

If you've ever "flipped the bird," you have something in common with ancient Greeks.

It was around 2,500 years ago that the naughty Greeks developed a phallic gesture to offend, taunt and literally poke each other. While throwing up a middle finger today clearly communicates a resounding "f**k you," in classical society, historians say a middle finger was more of a ribald sexual reference.

The middle finger has since become a frequently used emoji, an unintentional guest during a Super Bowl halftime show, a surprise live sign-off on the BBC and a crude gesture wielded by angry motorists. Here's how it became the human hand's most obscene digit.

The middle finger originated as a phallic gesture.

The cheeky Greeks "probably relied on the use of the middle finger to represent an erect penis," wrote Max Nelson, who teaches courses on classical civilizations at the University of

Windsor in Ontario, Canada, in a 2017 piece on the gesture's origins.

Proudly displaying a middle finger was usually a joke, an insult or a sexual proposition, Nelson and other classical researchers posit. A few sources from ancient Greece reference middle fingers being used to prod or poke people's persons, from nostrils to, well, nethers. The Greek playwright Aristophanes was also purportedly a fan of the gesture, referring to "the long finger" in several of his plays.

In his comedy "The Clouds," written in 419 B.C., a caricature of Socrates attempts to instruct the debtor Strepsiades about poetic meter. Strepsiades makes a crude joke about using a different finger to create rhythm. Translators of the text usually conclude that Strepsiades gesticulates with his middle finger (or, in some translations, reveals his privates) to refer to masturbation, said Nelson. Whatever the intent, the Socrates character responds with disgust.

The gesture eventually made its way to ancient Rome, where locals likely called it "digitus impudicus" – the indecent digit. The Roman historian Suetonius reported that the emperor Caligula forced his subjects to kiss his middle finger – per anthropologist and leading middle-finger historian Desmond Morris, this was a demeaning gesture that represented the ruler's member.

Morris has said that the middle finger we know today – the digit hoisted high in the air, other fingers bending to its will – represents a penis and testicles.

"It is saying, this is a phallus that you're offering to people, which is a very primeval display," Morris told BBC in 2012.

It's not clear, though, whether the ancient Greeks and Romans extended their middle fingers vertically in the air. Nelson wrote that while ancient people did likely use their middle fingers to make obscene gestures, they may

have pointed them horizontally or in other directions – a bit different from the typical "finger" we know today.

"In the end then it is perhaps best to keep 'the finger' to ourselves," Nelson wrote.

'Flipping the bird' is perhaps even more offensive today.

The middle finger's popularity faltered, but did not entirely disappear, during the Middle Ages, likely due to the growing influence of the Catholic Church and its disapproval of sexual gestures, researchers have concluded. Morris has said that the middle finger landed in the US with Italian immigrants in the late 19th century.

The "finger" didn't become the "bird" until the 1960s, writer Brian Palmer reported for Slate. Birds had apparently been synonymous with taunting long before the mid-20th century. When the middle finger's popularity grew once more, it became known as a wordless version of the goose-like honks and hisses of displeasure preferred by Brits and other Europeans.

It's since become a beloved gesture for anti-authority rebels. Johnny Cash flashed a defiant middle finger during a 1969 performance at San Quentin State Prison in California after a photographer reportedly asked him what he thought of the prison warden. (It wasn't Cash's first performance at a Golden State prison.)

Anti-establishment artists from Joe Strummer of The Clash to Tupac Shakur have pointed a middle finger at the ruling class in their work — and, in famous photos, literally.

But the "bird" is also a sign of someone reaching their breaking point.

Today, "flipping the bird" is considered so vulgar (it does represent the f-bomb, after all) that it's frequently blurred in media and even sent the BBC into a tailspin when one of its

presenters unknowingly pointed it towards viewers during a live broadcast.

And in 2012, a middle finger sent “Paper Planes” performer M.I.A. to arbitration. The singer appeared during Madonna’s Super Bowl Halftime Show and flexed her middle finger toward the camera, prompting the NFL and NBC to apologize. The NFL asked for \$16.6 million in damages from M.I.A., claiming she breached her contract and sullied the league’s reputation. M.I.A. settled over two years later, though she never apologized.

In defense of her performance, she and Madonna were wearing leather studded skirts similar to the garments Roman gladiators assumedly wore into battle. Maybe M.I.A. was just keeping it classical.

Writing Your Story for INCOMING

(Ongoing repeat solicitation)

Ideas for your story:

- Think about what you appreciated about the Vietnam experience. There is surely a means to segue into that with very little reflection on the negative aspects of war.
- What did you appreciate about the Vietnamese people during your deployment?
- Can you steer away from the bad stuff and reflect on the best experience you had in the Nam?
- Surely you had a close buddy and you supported each other. Maybe there is a story in that.
- What really got you through the day-to-day anxieties and fears? There might be a positive recollection in that regard.
- How did your experience instill in you a sense of patriotism that you possibly express every day of your life.

So far we have heard from Ruud, Epps, Chaix,

Hamer, Chuck Holmes, current Marine LCpl. Jesse Hernandez, Kent Hawley, Mike Laborico and Dave Johnson. (Thank you!)

No writer needs to dwell on the negatives of war. Each of us who was there lived the negatives, and all of us are better people for having served, especially when we look at how we matured as a result of our experiences. Each of us has derived a sense of being and an energy that is different from what it might have been had we not been sent across the pond.

Do share with us, in your own words, something of that chapter of your life. And, thank you for your service.

Forward your story to Bart Ruud at bruud45@gmail.com or hand deliver to Bart.

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Revised: January 2022

JANUARY

2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 New Year's Day	2	3	4 NCCVC VVA-535 Board & General Meeting	5 CSC Visalia	6 CSC Visalia
7 CSC Visalia	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15 Martin Luther King, Jr. Day	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

February

2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 NCCVC VVA-535 Board & General Meeting	2 Groundhog Day	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14 Ash Wednesday Valentine's Day	15	16	17
18	19 President's Day	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29		

March

2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7 VVA-535 Board & General Meeting	8	9
10 Daylight Savings Time begins	11	12	13	14	15	16
17 St. Patrick's Day	18	19 First Day of Spring	20	21	22	23
24 Palm Sunday	25 Medal of Honor Day	26	27	28	29 Good Friday National Vietnam War Veterans Day	30
31 Easter Sunday						

April

2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 April Fool's Day	2	3	4 NCCVC VVA-535 Board & General Meeting	5 CSC Visalia	6 CSC Visalia
7 CSC Visalia	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			